

**Centre for International Corporate Governance Research  
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**

**Sponsor:**

**Victorian Department of the Premier and Cabinet**

**Beyond Fragmented Government: Governance in the Public Sector**

**15-17 August, 2005**

**Victoria University City Campus,**

**12th Floor, 300 Flinders Street. Melbourne, Australia**

**Paper:**

**Skills and Knowledge Grid for the Domains, Sources and Methods for Ethical  
Decision-making in a Multi-cultural Pluralist World.**

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**Date: Monday, 15 August 2005**

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Methods for Ethical Decision-making in a Multi-cultural  
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The ethical and moral view, often put today either formally or procedurally, is "your view is as good as mine". This is total subjectivism and is associated with what may be called radical individualism.

Now, I think this view is endemic in our society. So if we want corporate governance to be accountable and responsible in organisations somehow we have to take such pervasive expressions of morality and ethics into account.

Today, I think there is however an earnest searching for certainty - a new quest for authority - amidst so much uncertainty and indeed greater consciousness of various world potential catastrophies. An underlying but crucial issue is just what is authority? In what process, values, world views can we find confidence?

We see some extreme manifestations of this quest today in forms of fundamentalism - whether political or religious. The new word 'extremism' has come to denote unacceptable forms of such values and general beliefs. These are quests for certainty amidst a loss of uncertainty and they can be understood to earnestly address the question: how can we(I) live with such ambiguity?

I was really interested in what Professor Geert Hofstede said in a Faculty seminar here recently about the degree of what he has termed 'uncertainty avoidance' being experienced

differently in different cultures of the world today. We do well in Australia to be aware of our distinctiveness of this dimension when compared with the cultures of other countries - especially those on our doorstep in South East Asia. This dimension of culture is a measure of how people try to cope with the prevalent residual anxiety that is there in any human society and how the culture of society's try to contain it.

Today a form of this addressing of residual societal anxiety is expressed in a clear religious resurgence. This reflects a quest for norms and beliefs or perspectives about what we can rely on with confidence. It is about what constitutes 'truth'.

This new religion factor is alive and well. Not for forty or so years has religions been so avidly discussed in our own society. It is significantly in the print and television media every day. New Acts of Parliament are framed about religious intolerance. This represents a reversal of the relegation of religion to just the local community or the private domain - which is where it's been 'contained' for some time. But in the last few years it's almost as if it has broken out of the bottle again. The rest of the world may never have forgotten the importance of religion in society, but maybe Australian and similar "western societies" had. Now religion now has high visibility in international and national politics: it's linked to security ... even our own personal and national security.

At the same time, the basic tenants of what constitutes 'education' are again being re-visited in this State but also nationally. Basic questions about the purpose and role of education in society are being reviewed. Is it about skills training, knowledge transfer, or citizenship? What sort of values should be learned and applied? How can religions be

handled in the publicly-assessed curriculum of state-sponsored education without favouring one religious tradition over another and so apparently compromising the underpinning values of a democratic, pluralist and multicultural society?

But moreover, the religion factor is beginning to impact also on notions of 'The State' and on government, and on commerce. However, I think the debate has not yet reached the board rooms and corporate governance yet - but it should and must given the endemic ground-swell going on in society at large. But how can it do this one may ask?

For instance, some law firms are well-known for being aligned to a particular religious tradition (say form of Christianity) while others are aligned to another religious tradition. Religion does have to do with basic trust and authority - and so it is not surprising if subtly it may play a part in recruitment and selection even if it is illegal. This may not affect their practice of the law as regards their clients, but it probably does subtly affect their recruitment and promotions policies still. Such issues are of course not announced much - certainly not formally and openly. People tend to trust those who share common perspectives of the world. Religion is one aspect of such common beliefs and assumptions - too often denied in its importance.

At a broader world society level, I am interested in the observations made some time ago when visiting this country by the well-known sometime Professor of Religious Education and editor of the British Journal of Religious Education Dr John Hull. He made the observation of the 17 or 18 thorough-going democracies in the world society most were associated with a Christian or Jewish founding cultural background and one might add 'ethic'. Now if true this is something worthy of reflection. It maybe like a subtle enabling or mandating of

something that's possible in terms of the way we function as a society and in corporate governance with regard to authority.

Now, whether Professor Hull is right or wrong, there are various models in our world society today for a resolution for the relationship between religion and the state (and therefore also of corporate governance. Some are explicitly driven by religions while others seek to contain and quarantine it. But lurking in the background are basic questions of what constitutes 'authority' and how this can be addressed and expressed in both *law* and in the *corporate governance* of institutions in a democratic, pluralist and multi-cultural State.

So if we visit the received field of western ethics, for example, what resources do we find for answering the question of what constitutes authority for ethical and moral decision-making? To briefly summarise -

- *consequentialism* (what I term 'outcomes ethics'<sup>1</sup>) is very influential today in public and private sector decision-making. Also called utilitarianism it is concerned with the outcomes that result from any decision and the created values and conditions that arise from these decisions. The critical issue is the calculus for getting there - why one route or pathway is better than another and why one outcome is judged better than another. Such analyses are particularly concerned with the extrinsic values that are created as a result of such processes, and the consequentialist approach relies strongly on the elevation of reason to try capture important information, analyse it and get the best results. So this broad approach is the belief in the application of human reason itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Elliott, R.H and Tuohy, M. (2005, in press). *Ethics and Morality in a Multicultural Society*. Melbourne: Thomson Learning.

- *deontology*, as elaborated by Immanuel Kant and others, I term 'Ought Ethics'<sup>2</sup>. It concerns the intrinsic values that can drive decision-making - both secular and religious. This can be regarded as including divine command theories which have obviously been around in many different forms through various religious traditions - values mandated by 'the gods'. But it also includes such secular intrinsic values such as contained in the Australian Public Service ethics and value statements that are held to drive public sector ethics. Although not sourced in any particular religious tradition on closer analysis they must come from 'somewhere', even if that somewhere is merely the social consensus that supports them.
- Thirdly, Aristotle's *virtue ethics*, revived some time ago by Alistair McIntyre and others, is about what may be termed 'character ethics'<sup>3</sup>. The belief underpinning this is alive and well in the selection and recruitment industry that supports our institutions. This belief holds - "select the right people and then you've solved most of the problem". This is an assumption that personality and character actually is what drives good decision-making process and results.

Now, when one looks at the sort of decisions that people make in any one day, including in the Boardroom, you'll find that this kind of analysis of ethics received in the West cuts across all of most of them. Seldom are they purely of one or the other kind of approach to doing ethics. There's often a mixture ... and maybe it can be reasonably be argued that there should be. But from the point of view of *logical analysis* using reason such approaches do have a certain cogency. But the question is are these approaches to ethics,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

received in western thinking, sufficient for today? I suggest that they are not. And that's really the discussion I'd like to promote and have here. So to place these approaches in their proper context within what I have called a *Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making*<sup>4</sup> I locate these as just one area for ethical review. There are, I suggest, three others.

If you look at *rational decision-making models* - and I here present just one version of it - you can define a number of steps that one might go through in applying such a process to make any decision. (Refer to the presentation slide.) This then can constitute a second area of a Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making. Often steps eight, nine and ten don't happen, I observe: but it's good evaluation when they do. These final steps are like saying and thinking "okay, having gone through this decision-making process what can we learn from it?" "Were the consequences of this decision and action actually what we expected or not?" And since often they're not "what can we learn from that?" Now that's good evaluation, isn't it? Would that it were also applied in Board rooms and in corporate governance processes more often!

But, then one needs to go on I suggest to define a third area of the Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making. This domain is necessarily at the individual level and just how ethical and moral decision-making functions within the individual. To adequately review this area we should consider the persons involved, their roles in the context of their relationships, to the interpersonal relationships that exist between people, situational factors and so on. It's this quite micro level of analysis that's very powerful in organisations I find. It

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<sup>4</sup> Op cit. Chapter 6.

is a key driver of decision-making but often it is shrouded in mystery because it is not well articulated.

I call this third area the *Components of Ethical Thinking* area in the Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making. Looking at the second component - general beliefs - and third component - assumptions and theories - this domain of the grid is about the point of view of the individual: "what sort of general theories does the person have of the world? ... and in organisational contexts especially about leadership?" The latter are called in the literature the *implicit theories of leadership, management and good corporate governance*. An important related question is "How can those implicit leadership, management and corporate governance theories be tuned up to be actually made scientifically more acceptable and more accurate in actually predicting outcome effects for followers and associates, groups and organisations?"

Lastly in my proposed Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making I return to where I began - the place of religion in society. How do we in society develop values and our assumptions about the role of authority in our culture? "What counts as authoritative?" "How do we actually get consensus about the values of an organisation being also actually values to which a deep personal commitment can be made by an organisation's members?" This is more than just getting words off a page: it actually means a digestion and an application of values and associated assumptions in general beliefs held the degree to which they are shared. Surely leadership and management have to be involved in the day-to-day working out of these, otherwise they remain 'words on a shelf'.

So, there is a link here with the components of ethical thinking in the grid. We have to describe accurately the

circumstances of the situations that are involved. Often I suggest this domain of the grid is not taken care of enough in corporate and organisational life I suggest.

Now, in our multicultural society, people come at this fourth Religion and Social Traditions domain - and the general beliefs involved in the Components of Ethical Thinking - from many different points of view. It's been my privilege to actually work with a group of authors and contributors in recent months who have come from nine different religious traditions ... and others ... in order to think about how can we develop a framework that is actually impartial to the different traditions that they come from without a neo Christianising or neo Westernising of them? And we've had represented Islam, Hindism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Aboriginal Religion. All these people involved have been involved in these discussions and I just want to share with you some of the key themes that came out of these. (Refer to slide for key themes and topic in ethical discourse for religious and social traditions.)

I think that there's still a lot of naivety about the understanding of religion as a phenomenon in our society. So this fourth domain of the grid draws attention to this. As I have said at the outset, previously religion has been relegated to the private sector and it's now breaking out again in discussion about morality and ethics. But there's been a long history of discussion and description about the exploration of religious traditions in a responsible way, based on good, sound, observation and classification. The approach that I think has a lot of merit is the phenomenological approach ... which is to be distinguished from a comparative religion approach. The latter often means that the other religions or traditions are being compared with, and come off second or third best, with Christianity. Other religious and social / philosophical traditions are not

actually authentically treated in their own way just for their own sake: they tend to be seen through another lens. There are various religious traditions that constantly, even in this country, frequently get offended by this tendency. You might call it the Christianising of Judaism or the westernising of Islam. These religious traditions have to be able to speak for themselves, and we have to learn skills of listening in a way that often we're not too good at, I think.

So, these religious and philosophical traditions themselves will shape human culture. They are in a sense sub-cultures within our society. I define religious traditions as symbol systems, which disclose and express patterns of meaning and purpose and values for individuals, groups and organisations.<sup>5</sup> There are many definitions of religion, but it's important to try and define it in a way that is open to all traditions, and indeed even a blurred line between some so-called secular belief systems - they wouldn't claim to be religions, but they actually function like religions in our society. So that's why I call them symbol-systems, to open up this dialogue. I also advance that organisational cultures function like religious belief systems and can be analysed phenomenologically in the same manner.

Religious traditions in this phenomenological approach can be said to have eight aspects.<sup>6</sup> (Refer to slide.) Often the complexity of how the interactions between these eight aspects take place is underestimated: people often reduce religion to just beliefs domain, when in fact that's not enough to account for the social phenomenon that really exists in the religious tradition. All these eight aspects are ways of accurately describing religion. They provide a means of establishing the cues and appropriate formal questions to look at the structure and texture of such social

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<sup>5</sup> Op cit. Chapter 12.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

traditions and their impact on insiders and outsiders alike. Together the eight aspects promote understanding, enable method and provide an analysis about the structure and texture of religion. Thereby these eight aspects also promote dialogue about distinctiveness ... and differences ... given the important place such social phenomena have in supporting and shaping human culture itself.

In my discussions with this group of authors and contributors - this multi-religious group I would call it - we came up with some critical issues for ethics and mortality. Trying to impartially define what these issues were was a quite important and a systematic question we asked. We would ask - "was that issue or question key for, say, Judaism but not for Buddhism?" So we were exploring how we can present descriptors of ethics for religious traditions in a way that is genuinely attempting to be impartial without making particular religious participants in the discussion problematic.

So these are the large questions (refer to slide) which a lot of traditions seek to answer. "What's the meaning of existence, origins and purpose of human life?" "What's the understanding of human nature expressed in this tradition?" And of course there are differences. The simplistic response that often happens in Australian society is to try and reduce these complex questions down to very simple ones. "Oh, they're all really basically the same, aren't they?" If only they'd all get together and work it out!" How often do you hear that kind of a comment? I think such analyses are both problematic and quite endemic in our society today.

Other questions are - "What is the understanding of good and evil?" "Where does it come from?" All the religious traditions seem to be able to relate to such questions but they come up with different answers.

And, what's the relationship between the individual and the community in terms of this religion domain of the skills and knowledge grid analysis? The balance points will vary across traditions. Some will emphasise the community; others will emphasise the individual.

Additionally, "what's the place of reason in this religious tradition?" "How is reasoning encouraged as something that we can actually give an authority to?" "What counts as truth?" "What are the criteria that are accepted for determining 'truth'?" And, "what is authority itself?" Then again, "what is the stance with regard to other world views, including other religious world views, which are often a stereotype needing to be challenged?"

Other themes or issues of significance for ethics and morality are: "what's the orientation of the religious tradition to Society?" "Is it closed with regard to society as some stereotypes might suggest?" The answer is often 'no', but they do vary from tradition to tradition. Then we may ask: "what are some of the core values and principles in the tradition?" "How can we express them?" So this group of authors and contributors has addressed these topics to try and share their understanding of them between themselves and with others. <sup>7</sup>

Now, these are all huge questions, of course, but I think they should be on our radar screen if we are really wanting to genuinely practice multicultural, pluralist decision-making in our society ... and to do so without prejudice to the various sub-cultures within it.

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<sup>7</sup> Op cit. Chapter 13.

So to conclude, I want to focus on this overarching model which I have called the *Skills and Knowledge Grid for Ethical and Moral Decision-making*. I suggest it is an attempt to systematically chart the territory for decision-making.

I've suggested that the major western ethical approaches that we've inherited, which have much merit, may be inadequate to address the complexities of religious phenomenon in our world society. Too often these have been relegated to the private domain in western thinking as if they are not actually part of the arena of ethical decision-making people engage with, either in public or in private life. This is a mistake.

Then we looked at a rational decision-making model ... acknowledged that there will be other variations of that - especially in approaches to corporate governance.

Then I proposed a psychological domain which is often overlooked: the components of ethical thinking. That is, what are the beliefs that a person has ... or their own personal values ... and how do these interact with others in their culture and in particular situations. Indeed also with their line management and their colleagues at work?

And, finally, I've proposed at least one framework for trying to fairly and accurately presenting an understanding of religious traditions as characterised by the eight aspects, and how ethics can be seen as at the centre of these whilst also being shaped by the other seven aspects. I have suggested that today we ought not be too simplistic about religion and its role in society and decision-making.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to your comments and questions about this framework and skills and knowledge grid. I do see this as a respectful dialogue based on mutual acknowledgement.

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2005

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