

**VIRTUES & VALUES:
IDENTIFYING THE MORAL PRINCIPLES OF OUR CULTURE**

**Lunch for Vice-Chancellors and Senior Staff
The Weld Club
Perth WA**

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Thank you very much for your welcome. It's good to be back in Perth and I am grateful to Ron, and to the Mannkal Foundation, for bringing me over from Sydney. It is a great pleasure to be with you at the Weld Club this afternoon.

The CP&CS program which I run at the CIS is concerned, in broad terms, with defending and upholding Australia's civil society.

By 'civil society' I mean to refer to the extensive networks of non-state associations with which we are all familiar – sports clubs, churches (and other faith communities), and other voluntary organisations – which bind citizens to one another in connections based on shared interests, needs and ideals.

The program, and the focus of my work, is concerned with defending and strengthening the culture of our society on which the institutions of civil society are built. Culture matters.

And yet today many are concerned that something has gone wrong with our culture and that the norms and principles that prevailed until fairly recently – even until just a few years ago – have been upended.

The paucity of public discourse; the unwillingness to tolerate those with whom we disagree; and the shrill cries about harm and hate all testify to this change.

What I want to propose is that this change in our culture has been marked by two features that are related. I also want to propose that the roots of this change lie, to a great extent, in the way we make moral choices and decisions.

Therefore, when it comes to **identifying the moral principles** of our culture, I think we need to look closely at **how** we make those choices and decisions if we are to understand what it is that has occurred.

The **first** feature of cultural change is that we have seen a move away from the communal — and, with it, a diminishing civic readiness to live with *difference* — towards the individual, and a concomitant demand that threats posed by difference must be eradicated so that any behaviour deemed to harm individual dignity be proscribed by law.

The **second** feature of cultural shift is related to this emphasis on the sensitivities of the individual. Emphasis on the primacy of the individual away from the communal is evident in eclipse of the moral language of **virtue** by the language of **values**.

It is this drift from virtues to values that I believe lies at the heart of our sense of moral and cultural drift; and I will come back to this and argue that values language cannot successfully serve as a language of morals.

But if I am so concerned about cultural drift, I need to clarify what I mean by the term **culture**. The word readily bandied about and yet has a complex range of meanings.

By **culture** I mean simply to refer to the broad social and moral context within which a society functions.

Culture is what literary critic Terry Eagleton refers to as “the invisible colour of everyday life, the taken-for-granted texture of workaday existence.”

In this, Eagleton echoes Edmund Burke, the 18th century parliamentarian and thinker, for whom culture was more fundamental than law or politics: “culture is the sediment in which power settles and takes root.”

For Burke, culture is the sphere of life within which all other forms of activity – including the making of moral choices – are pursued. Others, such as the Australian historian, John Hirst, have described the set of shared goals essential for a diverse, plural society as “bedrock principles” which allow us either to resolve difference or to live with differences which cannot be resolved.

Whether we think of culture as ‘sediment’ or as ‘bedrock principles’, there is an important sense in which it is something that must be *shared* if it is to serve this foundational role.

Furthermore, we can see that there is a *moral* component to culture in that it describes the moral demands that inform and shape human behaviour.

The question, however, is: to what extent are we still able to talk about a *shared* culture; and to what extent can we talk about the existence of a set of bedrock principles upon which our common life is founded and on which it depends?

One of the factors giving rise to this concern about culture is that our sense of a shared moral responsibility has weakened.

As the individual has come to take precedence over the communal, so the very way in which we make moral decisions has changed. And it is to this question of moral choosing that I now wish to turn.

How I make a decision, how I choose, depends not only on what kind of person I am and on how I came to be that kind of person; it also depends on the cultural context in which I live and function and which shapes my **moral imagination**.

One of the factors shaping an individual’s moral imagination is the weight given to the **reasons** we consider valid for doing or not doing something.

Indeed, when the reason we are given for obeying a rule appears to us to be shallow or flawed, we are less inclined to want to obey the rule and may even consider disobeying the rule. How do we determine the **value** of a reason?

The word **value** hints at one approach adopted by some ethicists to this question. They argue that reasons cohere for an individual if they accord with that individual’s **values**. Of course, values, by their very nature, are intensely personal. Your values are not the same as my values.

We may value things *in common*, but that is just the coincidence of our subjective estimations of what we consider to be important – or, *of value*.

In the end, values are morally neutral and it is quite open for you to say to me, 'Well, that's all very well but my values are as good as anyone else's values.' And you would be entitled to say so.

The point, of course, is that values are assumed to refer to something that is objectively real or factual, they actually assert only a subjective, aesthetic assessment of worth, and the expression of personal preference.

This personal preference is unverifiable by facts and is without any basis in tradition or social consensus.

Is this a problem? In my view, it is. Given that values only assert a subjective assessment of worth, they are **relative**. They are simply the expression of personal preference which have little, if any, basis in tradition or social consensus.

Values, then, are *emotional* statements about beliefs, feelings, or attitudes. Values cannot be normative because it is impossible to erect any shared meaning on the foundation of something that is personal and subjective.

As such, the language of values threatens to leave us with nothing about which we can agree.

If I value *x* and you value *y*, who's to determine the moral worth of choosing one over the other? Values language leaves us with no meaningful agreement about the nature of reality, nor about how that reality shapes morality, nor about settled patterns of behaviour.

A number of critics are concerned about the prominence and prevalence of values language. They attribute it, in part, to this cultural shift to which I referred earlier which is away from the communal towards the sensitivities of the individual.

This shift is evident in the way we have seen the language of values gradually eclipse the moral language of **virtue**.

This displacement of the language of ‘virtues’ by the language of ‘values’ as a moral language happened as morality became increasingly relativised and subjectified in the 20th century.

What do I mean by **virtue**? I am referring to a stable character trait which is desirable or praiseworthy and which leads to a certain kind of outcome. Thus, a person who exhibits the character trait – or virtue – of generosity will respond consistently in generous ways in a range of situations.

Whether referring to the classical virtues of the Ancients, or the theological virtues of the Christian era, the concept of virtue has functioned as the bedrock for the good life of individuals and the well-being of the state.

So, whereas values are personal and subjective, virtues are *objective moral* norms that are both *shared* and *personal*.

They are *shared* because there is general agreement about what the virtues are and what they represent; and they are *personal* because once an individual knows what the virtues are, they can make a personal evaluation of about how they stand in relation to any particular virtue.

The language of virtues requires that we conform to what is obligatory and shared and good. By contrast, the language of values leaves us with nothing about which we can agree.

This is compounded by the fact that arguments about acceptable standards of civil behaviour are fuelled by emotion — that is, by *feelings* about one’s own status and that of others.

If we allow emotion – or **emotivism** – to drive our ethical decision-making, we risk undermining any sense of reciprocal obligation. This is because judgments based on emotion are nothing more than expressions of a preference or a feeling. Emotivism, in turn, undermines, a sense of shared belonging.

All this has serious implications for our ability to come to a common agreement about *reasons* for certain actions and behaviour.

For if a reason for deciding is based on values, and we each place a different value against that reason, how do we make a decision about the 'right thing to do'?

Without a sense of shared belonging, there can be none of the moral obligation essential for the effective recognition and upholding of rights.

Of course, claims about ethics made using the language of morality purport to go beyond the expression of personal preference and to appeal to a standard that transcends personal preference and experience.

However, a statement that merely expresses a personal choice – even if passed off as a statement of objective truth binding on all members of society - can have no inherent moral force, despite protestations to the contrary by the proponents of values.

With the displacement of virtues by values, it is not just common standards of behaviour that quickly erode. Without a broad consensus about the way things are done or the rules to be followed, the very language we use in civil and moral discourse begins to fragment and, soon enough, loses its meaning.

And if that is the case, the notion of **culture** as a series of transmissible bedrock principles may no longer be viable. Any weakening of those bedrock principles is bound to affect the sphere of practices and behaviours and relationships that comprise **civil society**.

This, in turn, is bound to have a profound impact on our long-term capacity to bind into a cohesive whole the variegated communities and individuals that, together, have forged Australia into a prosperous, integrated, and multicultural society.

In *Culture and Anarchy*, the 19th century essayist, Matthew Arnold, argued that the true value of culture lay in its being an indispensable aid to the fullest realisation of the human spirit. For Arnold, culture was the pursuit of perfection and the means of getting to know the best in all matters that have contributed to human flourishing.

In seeking to **identify the moral principles** of our culture, I have argued that the fracturing of our culture can be accounted for, in large part, by the crisis of moral authority that confronts our society.

The crisis has been generated by the eclipse of virtue by values which has, in turn, led to a distorted view of morality that is informed by emotion rather than by principles of reason.

In other words, the communal norms of morality expressed by virtue have been displaced by a new primacy afforded to feelings.

The fissures in our culture can be closed only by a reinstatement of a moral authority that appeals to norms that transcend the felt concerns and experiences of the individual, and instead locates them in the wider frame of a common human nature so that all may flourish. Yet this is no easy task.

Of course, the language of morality in the West is regarded by many with suspicion. Appeals to moral authority are frequently met with scepticism, at best, and derision, at worst — dismissed as ideology and ‘hate-filled’ bigotry.

However, we must take a stand against this scepticism. We must refuse to accept equation of emotional claims with moral claims; and we must call for a reorientation from the personal to the communal.

And we must strive for a renewed understanding of culture as that which expresses a shared, common vision for our human and social flourishing — an understanding passed on in our traditions to future generations.

The moral, social, and political health of our society — indeed, of our culture — depends upon it.

Cardinal virtues (*celebrated by Aristotle*): wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage.

Supplemented by prudence, magnanimity, munificence, liberality, and gentleness.

Theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.