

# *Ethical Culture – Is It Enough?*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, July 31, 2005  
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Thank you for that introduction, Meg [Chapman]. Good morning! We're going to try that again in a minute because I think you can do better.

Thank you for having me here. The New York Society for Ethical Culture is special to me. Not only because it's the founding society and therefore represents Ethical Culture itself to many of us, but because, as a longtime member of the Washington Ethical Society, I came to Humanism via Ethical Culture and would not hold the position I do were it not for a member of your Society.

Jean Kotkin, who donated that lovely breakfront that stands behind me, was a member of the board of directors of the American Humanist Association and chaired the search committee that hired me as executive director in 1999. So it's always exciting for me to visit, and an honor to be invited to share my thoughts on Ethical Culture with you.

Okay, again—Good morning! Much better.

Whenever I hear the laundry list that Meg just recited of the components of what passes as my career I think I sound like a guy that can't keep a job. But, true to Humanist form, I look at it differently.

I see it as a progressive career of personal growth where each stage has prepared me for the next—whether I planned it that way or not. That's the way life works, sometimes, and it's taught me a lot about change, which I'll come back to.

The overarching aim of Ethical Culture is to make the world a better place. And the question I pose, and propose to answer this morning is, is that enough? Is Ethical Culture enough, and, if so, why? Is liberal Humanist religion, a religion of ethical relationships, enough to help us make sense of the world in which we live, to motivate us toward and help us live ethical lives of personal fulfillment, and to make changes in our selves and accept change in others and in our lives? Can we, as Ethical Culturists, really make the world a better place?

Religion. Humanist religion. A religion of ethical relationships. Is everybody comfortable with that word, religion? I'm hearing both yeses and nos. Well, I'm not entirely comfortable with it because defining it is like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. Religion is one of those words fraught meaning—conveying different things to different people at different times in different contexts.

There is, however, a generally accepted understanding of religion in our society, one I doubt many if any among us agrees with. Ethical Culture Leaders addressed this conundrum as far back as 1895 when they said Ethical Culture could be seen as a religion when religion is defined as a “passionate devotion to a supreme cause.” A passionate devotion to a supreme cause—a supreme cause, or an ideal of general and enduring value. Now that I like and can live with. It's a definition pretty much everyone can accept, even those who disagree with us on the supreme cause or purpose of life.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

Anyway, my point is not necessarily to define religion but to give it context and to stress that Ethical Culture is passionately devoted to a supreme cause, that of making the world a better place. And Ethical Culturists do pursue an ideal of general and enduring value, that of eliciting the best from others.

Rather than service and devotion to a supreme being, we Ethical Culturists are devoted to a supreme way of being found in our service to each other.

How many here were born into Ethical Culture or raised as Ethical Culturists? Hold up your hands. No one! That underlines that Ethical Culture is a lifestance of choice rather than the acceptance of unquestioned tradition.

And a lot of things are brought into play in that choice, not the least of which is values, something there's been a lot of talk about lately. Traditional values or, as I prefer it, the value of tradition; the value of choice; and the value of change. To those who value tradition above all else, and cling to its postulates with a fierce certainty, change, or, more specifically, progress, is threatening. For without the tried-and-true, without a dependable and extendable past, they grow fearful and the future looms menacingly rather than invitingly.

It's easy to get stuck in that place, to resist change and perpetuate sameness simply because it's comfortable. But change has become an undeniable and unavoidable part of modern life—a part that involves letting go of the old and embracing the new. If we don't let the go of the past, if we try to cling to it as it fades in favor and effectiveness, we grow frustrated and become angry. We can see that happening today.

And if we don't embrace the new, we easily fall prey to guilt, feeling that we benefit from something unearned. While it is a mark of maturity to graciously and gratefully accept the fruits of our advancements and accomplishments, it's difficult for those who feel undeserving—for those disempowered by ridged beliefs and insensitive authorities; those who have been left feeling inadequate; those who have been robbed of the courage to seek higher ground. We can see that, too, happening today.

Like most of you, Ethical Culture is not the lifestance I was born and raised with. I was raised with one of the old time religions. Remember the song, *Give Me That Old Time Religion*? "Give me that old time religion, it's good enough for me."

Well, for a while, a short while, it was true and the old-time religion of my birth was good enough for me. But that changed at a very young age, and today I wonder if the song works as well if we were to sing "Give me that new-time religion, it's good enough for us?" Is it? Is this new-time religion, is this Ethical Culture of ours, enough?

Let me cut through the palpable suspense I can feel building in the room and answer that central question right now. Yes. At least it's enough for me. But the answer is not up to me, it's up to you. And if Ethical Culture is to be enough to fulfill its promise, it's up to us.

I stand in awe of the legacy of Felix Adler, the heritage of the New York Society, and the potential of Ethical Culture. But I also think Ethical Culture stands at a crossroads, facing challenges it has never faced before. In the founding and formative years, it was we who challenged tradition. Today it is tradition that challenges us. And to be enough, Ethical Culture must be able to meet that challenge.

The late nineteenth century, the era when Adler advanced his bold new ideas, was a time of considerable change and of a stiffening resistance to it. There was a lot swirling

around then. It was a time that saw the coming together of liberal religion, freethought, advancing science, modern philosophy, and a whole lot more. From this sprang such things as expanded human and civil rights, gentler social sensibilities, greater personal freedoms, the birth of Ethical Culture, and the coalescence and eventual articulation of Humanism.

It was a time when liberal religion itself was indistinguishable from social consciousness and social action—a true watershed period in our cultural development. A time when many of the concepts of traditional religion were under siege by new understandings of the world. It was fertile ground for the expansion of revolutionary ideas, as well as for an intensification of the continuing struggle between progress and traditional religion, between reason and unexamined faith.

The stage for change and conflict was set, in no small measure, by science. There was, as I said, a lot more going on, but science was and is right in the middle of it. So it serves as a handy focus. Let me give you a couple of examples of how science challenges tradition and impacts culture.

When Galileo refined the theory that the earth was not the center of the universe, he shook the pillars of traditional belief. The thought that the universe did not revolve around the earth, around us, was devastating to the cultural of the time. By eliminating the cosmic notion of up and down, Galileo tossed the concept of heaven and hell right out the window. That was simply more than could be accepted. It was frightening to the people and terrifying to the authorities.

It took a couple of centuries to even begin assimilating this altered concept of ourselves, and we hadn't nearly come to grips with our reduced status when along came Charles Darwin to take us down another notch. With what philosopher Daniel Dennett called *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, he started a battle that is still very much with us today.

Darwin challenged the bible's story of creation, and that was bad enough. But in positing that human beings came about through ordinary rather than divine means, he made us part of rather than apart from nature—the nature we supposedly held dominion over.

Now not only was our world not the center of the universe, the demarcation between a heaven above and hell below, between good and evil, but we, it's humble inhabitants, were exposed as naturally evolved rather than divinely inspired. No longer the image of an intelligent designer, humanity was reduced to the strata of animals.

Galileo robbed the world of heaven. Darwin took away our soul.

And today science is challenging our basic concept of life itself, forcing a sharper understanding of what it means to be human, and forecasting that our further evolution may well be up to us.

I don't have anything against traditional religion or the supernatural part of the Old Time Religions. Doesn't work for me but it does for many. It's the "traditional" part that troubles me as it can all too often become hidebound and regressive—the attitude that things should remain the same because that's the way they've always been, that's the way they should be, and that's all there is to it.

But in contrasting the two, I don't mean to demonize tradition or to glorify science. In many ways they are antipodes—the one dedicated to the status quo and the other dedicated to expanding our understanding of reality.

Tradition cedes ground stubbornly and that's not an entirely bad thing. It makes us examine our direction and keeps us from confusing arbitrary change with progress. So tradition should have a say, but it should not have a veto.

In the history of human culture, people like Galileo and Darwin, stand as prime examples of freedom's battle against authority—the ongoing struggle between change and sameness. They advanced new ideas that confronted ancient and cherished explanations of reality upon which princes and prelates based their empires. Those who considered both science and theology their exclusive domain, the authorities, were having none of it.

They responded with stifling censorship and accusations of heresy, and did their best to impose their veto on developing scientific reality. But, try as they might to force them, science and the supernatural, once separated, could not be put back together again. Charles Darwin had forever changed the way we look at nature and at ourselves.

That's pretty heady stuff, and it was into this rarified atmosphere that Felix Adler stepped with his own dangerous ideas. The discoveries and advancements of science made necessary a restructuring of traditional ideals and values. Adler delivered that restructuring.

He, too, challenged traditional belief with bold ideas; ideas designed and intended to change the world. I don't agree with everything he ever said, time has passed and ours is a progressive lifestance, but the concepts at the heart of his thought remain as valid today as when he first advanced them.

- The ethical manifold that balances individual fulfillment with collective responsibility.
- The recognition of the reality producing function of the human mind that's been responsible for so many mythological and theological interpretations of reality.
- His reconstruction of the spiritual ideal into a religion of duty, a duty toward one another rather than a worship of things produced by human imagination in response to primitive trepidation—fear of the unknown.

But to me his most powerful and revolutionary contribution was his advancement of the Golden Rule that challenged both the ancient and common era versions: “What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow man.” and “All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

The shift from the negative, “do not unto others,” to the positive, “do unto others,” was progress of a sort, but both are still me centered. If I don't want it done to me, you shouldn't do it to me. If I'm uncomfortable with closeness and affection, you shouldn't grow close to or care for me.

Or if, in the newer version, it's okay with me, then it should be okay with you. If I'm passionate and enjoy, welcome, and encourage vigorous, sometimes heated debate, then it's okay for me to press my opinions and beliefs on the meekest among us.

In reformulating the sentiment hinted at in these ancient adages, Adler took us past them. With “Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself.” he took us from me to we, firmly establishing two as the smallest number in ethics, or in an Ethical Culture. “Act so as to elicit the best” is a bold and profound concept. One that bespeaks an informed optimism, reflects a faith in humanity, inspires hope in ourselves and in others, and foreshadows change.

Taken together, Adler's concepts form a rational basis for a universal ethics uniquely suited to today's emerging sense of global community, and that brings with it the long overdue realization that we're all in this together.

Technology has made the world smaller, and the Internet has made ours a true global village. We progressed from tribes, clans, and fiefdoms, to nation states, and now we're approaching a global awareness. This foreshortening of cultures has brought traditions with opposing views of reality into sharp contrast and violent conflict.

If we're to compassionately and effectively address these conflicts, we have to get past the idea that the global interest is best served through a simple balancing of national or ideological interests. We have to reach an understanding that there is needed a true planetary ethic. Not a cultural identity of faith that accents difference while striving to impose sameness, but a recognition of our natural diversity and commonality.

As Ambassador Carl Coon, vice president of AHA's board of directors, said in the a recent issue of the *Humanist* magazine, "In this uncommonly crowded and disputatious world, such a global ethical consciousness is more vital than ever before."

Ethical Culture offers that, an ethics born of compassion rather than dogma that applies equally to personal as well as collective relationships. That, as Carl so eloquently emphasized, is something that's desperately needed today. And it's in that need that I find the viability, indeed the necessity, for Ethical Culture.

Our aim is to make the world a better place. I don't think that's been happening lately. Not through our fault but due to the efforts of those who view as threat what we consider progress; by those who would reverse the tide of progress and return us to a bygone time; by those who do not accept and are frustrated and angered by our cultural advancement.

Tradition had been taking it on the chin for quite a while, and found itself eroded by science and reason—many of its cultural prerogatives having been legislated out of our society. Attractive alternatives to identity, hope, meaning, and community co-opted what had been theirs exclusively. But recently it has regrouped and rallied and is now potently confronting that which had knocked it for a loop—change, expanding knowledge, and advancing culture.

Cultural advancement is a funny thing so let me digress for a moment. In remarks earlier this month to the 16<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, of which both the American Humanist Association and the American Ethical Union are founding members, its president, Roy Brown, said something so simple yet so profound that it resonated intensely with me. He at once encapsulated all my personal aspirations and professional motivations, my intense concern for the world in which we live and my passionate hope for a better future. He said simply, "We have a world to change." We have a world to change.

Sociologist Paul Ray refers to those set on changing, on bettering our world as "cultural creatives," a group that likely includes everyone in this room. In his 1996 thesis, *The Rise Of Integral Culture*, Ray holds that, compared to the rest of society, cultural creatives have values that are more idealistic, have more interest in relationships strive for psychological development, for personal growth are more environmentally concerned, and are more open to creating a positive future—more open to change.

Does that sound like anyone you know here? Or does that sound like most everyone here?

The distinguishing characteristic of cultural creatives is their eager embrace of change—personal, social, and cultural change. The late Willis Harmon, futurist thinker and author of *Global Mind Change*, said, “Throughout history, the real fundamental changes in societies have come about not from the dictates of governments or the results of battles but through vast numbers of people changing their minds.”

If you want to change minds, if you’re out to change the culture, as we are, then you have to engage the culture—you have to meet it where it is. If we want to improve society, we have to be socially active. That can appear daunting, but it need not be. Like with all things, you start where you are and work with what you have. And you have a lot to work with here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

Ethical Culture has a rich history of social engagement that validates our intentions. Our heritage has left us with a respected reputation in the progressive community. And you have this platform that you’ve loaned me this morning from which so much has been said, influenced, and accomplished

And you have Ethical Culture itself that offers a profound respect for equality and diversity, a reverence for ethics, a deep appreciation of community, and an acceptance of leadership—personal leadership and personal responsibility.

Ethical Culture begins with the recognition of the equality, the common worth and dignity of every person, and the communion of humanity and nature, of which we are a part.

From that flows a respect for diversity, a realization that a world of sameness is not a creative one and is not likely to move forward at the same pace as one that values and makes a strength of difference.

Diverse people cannot form ethical relationships without a sense that their shared desire for noble ends must be achieved by noble means. Humanist Institute dean Bob Tapp reminds us that, “Values are inseparably related to desired ends.” Yet those who denigrate human life and place other aims above it all to often pursue seemingly just ends by ignoble means. Ethical Culture demands of just ends equally just means.

Invested as we are in the here rather than in the promise of a hereafter, and understanding that the kind of person we are to become is largely dependent on the relationships we form, we seek to nurture caring communities that support us as we support others.

And that takes personal leadership. Placing personal growth and social progress high on our priority list, we accept responsibility for the kind of world in which we live. That takes leadership and that takes courage. But Ethical Culture is nothing if not a lifestance of courage.

Moreover, a religion of ethical relationships brings joy to life. As philosopher Corliss Lamont put it in *The Illusion of Immortality*, ours is a lifestance that “heartily welcomes all life-enhancing and healthy pleasures, from the vigorous enjoyments of youth to the contemplative delights of mellowed age”—Don’t you love that phrase, mellowed age? We believe in the beauty of love and the love of beauty, and exult in the pure magnificence, the awe and wonder of nature.

Humanism is my life’s work, and as a Humanist I find this life all and enough. Yet I want, I seek, I need, a context in which to explore, experience, and expand the profound and overwhelming emotional response to life’s vast potentialities. A place to be and feel

fully alive. I find that in Ethical Culture. Ethical Culture is not abstract to me. It's about you, it's about me, it's about us. Ethical Culture is enough, but it's up to us to make it more.

We face challenges: The continuing struggle between change and tradition, and tradition's response to that struggle; the ethical considerations of the biomedical revolution; the expansion of national patriotism to a planetary loyalty; the concentration and hoarding of wealth by a few rather than the creation of assets and resources to be shared by the many. The list is long, the list is challenging, and Ethical Culture is up to the challenge.

Adler's concepts were bold, designed as they were to change the world. And, by the standards of his time, much has been accomplished. Yet by our own progressive aspirations ever more remains to be done. That's both the beauty and the bane of Ethical Culture. It is a soaring truth we chase, a truth that has a way of receding into the future whenever we near it. At the center of Ethical Culture is a majestic craving for a continually unattainable goal, a sublime end far beyond our daily cares and likewise ever beyond our present reach. The aim of Ethical Culture is always on the horizon.

We have a world to change but we don't have to do it alone. We Ethical Culturists may be comparatively few in number but we travel among an enormous and growing company of likeminded people of goodwill who may not share our worldview but who share our aims, our goals, and our aspirations.

We are not alone in our struggle for progress. Millions share our desire for positive change, and those million share our dream of a better world for all, a harmonious, sustainable world achieved through our own efforts. I have a fervent and rational faith that they will one day stand beside us, shoulder to shoulder, as we change the culture.

For a growing number for whom the Old Time Religions no longer work, Ethical Culture offers a meaningful, fulfilling alternative. Forward oriented as it is, it offers a positive, welcoming view of change and progress, one that gives a rational hope of a better world for us, our children, and our children's children. A hope that gives life meaning. It provides identity and a sense of belonging through an expanded atmosphere of community.

Adler's ideas are as vibrant today as they were in 1876. He found it his responsibility to formulate ideas that could foster ethical relationships and inspire others to ethical living. Today that responsibility is ours.

We have an obligation to the heritage of the uncounted and unknown generations that came before us—an obligation to honor their efforts and to nurture their accomplishments.

We have a duty to the generations we are connected to over the span of our lifetime—a duty to elicit their best.

And we have a responsibility to the generations yet to come, those we serve but will never know—a responsibility to leave for them a legacy as rich and textured as that which we received.

For those willing to accept that responsibility, for the women and men of courage willing to meet that challenge, for those eager to better self, others, and the world, Ethical Culture is more than enough.

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