

Living Naturally In A Transcendental World

A Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, January 8, 2006
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When I selected my subject, or subjects, for this morning, *Living Naturally In A Transcendental World*, I didn't quite appreciate just how much I'd bitten off. I thought only of the second, more functional part, what it's like living with a naturalistic outlook in a culture dominated by transcendental or supernatural views. Being an Ethical Culturist is challenging and can be lonely.

It didn't dawn on me until I started gathering my thoughts that it's incumbent on me not only to define, or at least describe, naturalism, but to do the same for the transcendental while giving a passing nod to Transcendental-ism, as it's a school of thought most are familiar with, but not really my subject this morning. In other words, to outline the natural and the transcendental and to contrast the two so we have a common idea of the landscape—all before getting to the living part.

Well, these aspects aren't quite as separate as I've painted them. I'll talk about naturalism. I'll talk about transcendental views. And I'll weave in *living naturally in a transcendental world* along the way, hopefully offering something that will make that easier for you, even though this is more a "what's it like" than a "how to" talk—more comfort than instruction.

But before charging off, let me pause a moment on Transcendentalism with a large "T", the nineteenth century liberal religious movement most commonly associated with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Actually, the founder of Ethical Culture, Felix Adler, flirted with it before moving on, finding the strong individualistic strain of that school of thought at odds with his own ideas on our interrelatedness and social responsibilities, indeed with the very basis of the origin of ethics—that being one of discovery rather than revelation or intuition.

The transcendental or transcendentalism I speak of this morning is of the small "t" variety. Sometimes is just as important to know what's not being talked about as what is. But to frame this properly, let me quote from one of my favorite little books, *The Life Experiences Of A Skeptic*, by himself.

"As long as a preacher restricts himself to saying, 'Our religion teaches,' or, 'we are told to believe,' he has the good will and the sympathy of the skeptic in his hard and thankless task to turn out a good piece of work with old worn-out tools, but just as soon as he commences to explain transcendental matters or to prove unlikely stories with insufficient argument, he becomes an object of pity or contempt in the eyes of the [skeptic]."

That little book was self-published in 1899 by Franz Petsch, a German intellectual and gentleman farmer who came to this country in the mid-nineteenth century and eventually settled in a small town in Southern Illinois where he married my great grandmother's twin sister. My mother and her siblings simply called him 'Uncle'. I'm a bit more formal but nonetheless fond in calling him Uncle Franz. I'll be citing a bit more from him as we go along because he was studying and writing at a very interesting time in the annals of naturalism.

¹ 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.

Now, let me stress that I identify with the skeptic in dear Uncle Franz's quote, not the preacher—the dispenser of absolute truths about the unknown. We Ethical Culturists are skeptical by our very nature—skeptical but not cynical, though recent events in the surrounding transcendental world in which we live have driven more than a few of us over the edge of cynicism. Talk about trying to prove unlikely stories with insufficient argument—we've heard a lifetime of that recently.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett likens transcendental belief to a cover crop. To a farmer, a cover crop, such as winter rye or wheat, is planted between periods of regular crop rotation to prevent erosion and provide nutrition to the soil so that the crops that come after might flourish. To Dennett, that makes transcendental belief a cover crop that served us well while waiting for a more dependable worldview to develop—that of naturalism.

The question he poses, and that I echo, is, “what do we do with the wheat?” That's really the question we're facing today, living naturally as we are in a transcendental world. Now that we have that more reliable way of viewing the world, what do we do with the old way that continues to haunt us? What do we do with the wheat?

When confronted with doubt, with conflicting views, transcendentalism retreats into itself, becoming more literal, more fundamental. And that's where we are today. Tedious, isn't it?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Back on point.

Naturalism. What is natural? Well, without putting too fine a philosophic point on it, we are natural. The planet on which we exist is natural. The universe is natural. That incredibly dense collection of all-that-is that erupted into the Big Bang however many billions of years ago was natural. Nature is natural. The course of our history, and especially our experience of it, is natural.

Naturalism is, again in simple terms, the belief that truths are derived from nature and natural causes and not from revelation or speculation. As Humanists, we posit:

- That such knowledge is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis.
- That humans are an integral part of nature, the result of unguided evolutionary change.
- And that ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience.

So, in deriving knowledge, we do not rely on authority, tradition, mystical inspiration, divination, faith, or so on. We can't in all honesty consider these reliable. Such methods may result in ideas, to be sure. But at the end of the day each idea must be subjected to analysis by critical intelligence.

The transcendental, on the other hand, is concerned with the intuitive basis of “knowledge”, and I here put knowledge in quotes, the intuitive basis of “knowledge” independent of experience. Knowledge independent of experience, imagine that, if you will. Imagine that if you can!

In Emmanuel Kant's theory of knowledge the transcendental is beyond the limits of experience and hence unknowable. In fact, you will find many a modern street-corner philosopher, as well as an overpopulation of the kind of preacher described by Uncle

Franz, who will tell you that ultimate reality is indeed unknown and unknowable. They tell you this just before they begin telling you all about this unknown and unknowable realm and are seemingly unbothered by this self-contradiction.

I don't mean to disparage those who hold a transcendental view of the world, nor am I on a mission to change their minds. Belief in the transcendental is not a reasoned position but rather a leap of faith, which I respect. But I know enough of human nature to know that you can't reason a person out of a position not arrived at through reason in the first place.

So I am content to let personal positions on transcendental matters stay just that—personal positions—and ask only that those who hold them do the same. Unfortunately, all too many of them do not. And that's where the challenge of living naturally in a transcendental world comes in, when those views get blended in with all sorts of other things in our culture.

That's a danger, a slippery slope Felix Adler adroitly sidestepped in staking out for Ethical Culture the solid ground of life between the shores of birth and death. Taking no position on matters of ultimate origin or destiny, we're left free to enjoy, appreciate, and live this life as all and enough.

Ethical Culture rests on Humanism, and Humanism rests on scientific rationalism for its epistemology. We have to have an agreed upon way of how we ascertain knowledge before we can go on to assert what we do know. And, as outlined, the ways we depend on to know things are by observing, testing, and thinking. Not through unsupported intuition, no matter how real that intuition may seem. That clearly separates us from anything transcendental and likewise separates us from the mainstream of today's culture.

Returning to the wisdom of Uncle Franz, for a moment, "For the skeptic" and he used skeptic in a very naturalistic, Humanist way, as you will see, "For the skeptic who does not mistake belief for knowledge, it is hopeless to learn anything of the origin of the world and other transcendental matters."

Like most of you, I have lived the transition from one to the other in as much as I was born into a transcendental atmosphere, the positions, the answers of which simply never worked for me. That transitory experience, however, has convinced me that such beliefs are not "let go of" in a sudden unclenching of the faithful fist as much as they simply dissolve in the light of reason.

When we were boys, we used to get a kick out of giving the raccoons at the zoo lumps of sugar. We also used to get kicked out of the zoo for it but that's beside the point. Now raccoons wash everything before eating it so they would take this very real, very solid lump of sugar to water and worry it about in their front paws. And it would dissolve, leaving the raccoon in great confusion, wondering where it went. We took great glee in this. The raccoons? Not so much.

Transcendent beliefs are a lot like that. Wash them in the waters of reason and they dissolve. That can cause more than confusion; it can cause fear—even panic. Often we of a naturalistic bent want others to set aside their transcendental views up front. That's asking a lot and we should be more gentle, more understanding. The road of reason is open to all, even those who still have old images dancing before them. They disappear more readily in the rear view mirror, looking back on where we've come from, than they do in advance of something that can replace them.

Matters of origin and destiny serve as demarcations between the natural and the transcendental, as does the Big Bang. And we all know that there are things about the physical, the natural universe that we don't know or understand. And I don't argue against the assertion that there may well be things that are unknowable. Where I part company with those of a transcendental bent is at the same intersection where Uncle Franz parted—the crossroads of uncertainty and assertion. Knowledge claims based on the unknown and/or unknowable.

I respect and support the right of each to believe as she or he wishes, and make no value judgments about them personally based on those beliefs. But I do object to attempts to impose those beliefs on others, or to judge others by what they think, what they believe, rather than what they do—how they act.

The transcendental shake their heads in wonder and pity at we naturalists, at we monists who use the mind-body-spirit separation only metaphorically. Those who find meaning only in the transcendent, in the worship thereof or in the hope of a better world to come beyond this one, are prevented by those very beliefs from fully appreciating this life for everything that it is. When your whole focus in living is on an unknown realm above and beyond, you tend to gloss over the present.

There's been a recent and fundamentalist resurgence, but this is not a new phenomenon. The whole concept of transcendentalism, or the belief in a higher reality than that found in our own experience or achieved through reason, this division of reality into different realms, goes back at least to the ancient Greek philosophers, particularly Plato who affirmed the existence of *absolute goodness*, which he characterized as something beyond description and as knowable ultimately only through intuition.

Methinks the man would have done as well today through the medium of television as he did on the steps of the Senate in Athens two and a half millennia ago, as today most of the religions of the world are transcendental in nature, espousing as they do absolute knowledge of what they themselves categorize as absolutely unknowable.

Do two absolutes make an impossibility? Or just a maybe?

There are those who advocate for a “minimalist vision of transcendence”—I kid you not, there are those who do, there's even a book by that name. But you can't be “just a little bit transcendental.” Either you are or you aren't. It's a binary choice. And even those who try to be just a little bit transcendental admit that proof of the transcendent is non-existent and that whether transcendence can be said to exist at all depends on how you define transcendence. Neat trick, huh?

And then there are those who hold up ideals as having a transcendent quality. Inherent in any ideal is the impulse, the motivation, indeed the necessity to work toward it. There's a plaque on the side of this building that reads, “Dedicated to the ever increasing knowledge and practice and love of the right.” The right, truth, is an ideal never fully attained—a continual demand that we strive for without reaching, really without any expectation of reaching.

And any value that resists any attempt to attain it and continues to call no matter how much is achieved in its pursuit—any such value can be said to have a transcendent quality to it because they are above other values and considerations. They're like the North Star—there to guide us, there to be aimed at, but not to be reached.

I'm inclined to view that stance charitably as there's a word for those who so revere ideals. Idealist. Felix Adler was one, as John Hoad pointed out from this very platform

just a month ago. But there are far more merchants of creative metaphysical scenarios than there are idealists. Some of them are well intentioned, and some are not.

That's what Felix Adler called the reality producing function of the mind: The human proclivity for shaping transcendent constructs of which we actually know nothing, and then making them real, making them solid, making them hard and absolute. Our world has been dominated of late by those who have constructed conflicting realities while turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the realities of human existence and human experience.

Let me finish with some words of encouragement and optimism from Felix Adler on how to live naturally in a transcendental world. It will come as no surprise that he thinks you have already taken the first and most important step, you're here. Here with others who think as you do. Here with others who live naturally. Feels good, doesn't it?

The words are from the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Ethical Culture—1926. I've degenderized them so they would be more comfortable to us, a liberty I think Adler would have supported in the name of moral progress.

I want to cite three points from his statement on the objects and purposes of Ethical Culture with the caveat that we've become more pragmatic in our assessment of the attainment of perfection. So, be inspired by his words but also heed his advice that the sagest of wisdom needs to be updated from time to time.

He said our primary purpose is to —

- inspire with a certain ideal, namely that of the ethical perfection of human society as our supreme aim—an aim to which all others should be subordinate and subservient.

We might pragmatically restate the “perfection of human society” as the “betterment of human society,” but that still qualifies as North Star idealism in my book. Like perfection, betterment is one of those receding aims never attained.

His naturalist epistemology shines through when he affirms that —

- it is possible to live without formalized creed or philosophic doctrine, ... neither disowning or disparaging the far out reaches of religion ... but holding that their value, in the last analysis, is tested by the degree to which they illuminate the ethical ideal and actually affect conduct.

Values that actually govern our actions. That's a naturalist, Humanist standard for knowledge that places deed above creed, behavior above belief.

He also reminded us that we should —

- seek to take over what is vitally true in the moral experience of the preceding generations, but at the same time to restate the moral truths transmitted from the past in terms more comfortable to present needs, and above all to add to the fund of moral truth.

That's what we do with what can be reaped from the cover crop of transcendentalism; Use it as nourishment in our search for the right, for moral truth.

Cultures turn slowly. Look how long it took for the heliocentric system to replace the time-honored and resilient geocentric view. We didn't want to let go of a sense of ourselves as the center of the universe. And today, a century and a half after the publication of Darwin's evolutionary *and revolutionary* views on natural selection, there

are still those who refuse to let go of humanity's special status within the natural world, even as they see it dissolve before their eyes.

Looking back, we see that the process of transition can be painful and dangerous. Publication of both the above-mentioned scientific theories was delayed out of justifiable concern over reaction from those who saw them as a threat to their transcendental constructs, and thus to their influence over the culture and their power to control the lives of others. So this undertaking of ours, this resolve to live naturally, is not without its difficulties, or even its dangers.

Living naturally in a transcendental world means living with courage, living with compassion, living with patience, and, most importantly, living authentically—in accord with your own naturally derived ethical standards.

Cultures turn slowly, but they do turn. Today we live in a transcendental world. But it's less so than that of our ancestors. And one, I am confident, that is more so than that to be enjoyed by future generations.

We're headed in the right direction. Progress will out. We just have to hang on while others let go—while their resolve dissolves, dissolves in the face of increased knowledge of the natural world of which we are a part.

As our opening song this morning *Let Us Walk Together* reminds us, "There's a better world awaiting, we can build it you and I."



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