

The Underpinnings of Ethical Culture

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, April 2, 2006
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For many, Ethical Culture means this Sunday morning meeting. For some it's our adult education classes aimed at a broader understanding of our philosophy, and toward more ethical living through more developed relationships. And for still others it's colloquy, singing, drawing, or writing courses, or any one of a number of other programs that deepen our understanding of ourselves and of each other.

But whatever your particular attachment or involvement, the underpinnings of Ethical Culture are the same. It rests on the same firm foundation no matter which part or parts of its considerable superstructure you choose to inhabit.

As we are a Humanist movement, the basic elements of Humanism are certainly part of our foundation—part of but not all of. While I do not intend this to be an exhaustive treatise, one cannot speak of the underpinnings of Ethical Culture without visiting the contributions of its founder, Felix Adler. Much of what was part of his radical, nineteenth-century, reconstructionist thinking has been streamlined into American culture. Talk of universal rights, human dignity, individual freedom coupled with societal responsibility is to be found everywhere today.

Even so, the germinal thinking of Ethical Culture remains distinct. Stripped of much of their radical veneer through cultural assimilation, these underpinnings stand all the more vivid today. And they're still considered revolutionary by societal norms, differing in significant ways from what can be considered customary standards. Ours is a vibrant movement with a rich heritage.

But before getting into what's uniquely ours by means of direct inheritance, let me start with the underpinnings of Ethical Culture that can be found in Humanism because Ethical Culture is a Humanist movement.

That's not my determination alone but that of the National Leaders Council of the national body of Ethical Culture, the American Ethical Union, as expressed in a 1965 statement entitled *Ethical Culture as a Humanist Movement* and delivered to the International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1966 in Paris.

That statement of the Leaders began with a simple declarative recognition that, "Ethical Culture is a Humanist Movement." Without equivocation it avowed that, "Ethical Culture is a Humanist Movement." and then goes on, "Even before [it] came to be described as such, we were a Humanist movement in our essential purposes and values, the first [such movement] of national and international scope to develop an ethical, social and religious philosophy on a non-creedal, non-theistic basis."

It will come as no surprise to you that Ethical Culture was one of the seven founding entities of the International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1952. In fact, we're the Ethical in its name. So we can include the central elements of Humanism among our underpinnings.

Here's what the IHEU has to say about those central elements in its *Minimum Statement on Humanism* issued in the 1990s,

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.

“Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethics based on human and other natural values in a spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality.”

That’s quite a distinction. It’s a statement, a description that certainly fits within the boundaries of Ethical Culture. It stresses Humanism’s naturalism—that we consider ourselves a part of rather than apart from nature. It implies that we accept the universe as self-existing and consider ourselves the result of an unguided evolutionary process.

That is certainly a distinguishing characteristic and a significant underpinning of Ethical Culture, arrived at through a reasoned epistemology. That’s another central element of Humanism, that the ways we know things are by observing, testing, and thinking—through human experience.

As an aside, A.A. Milne, whom you may recognize as the author of Winnie-the-Pooh, once said, “Good judgment comes from experience, and experience—well, that comes from poor judgment.”

Still, we do not accept “knowledge” arrived at through revelation, mystical means, divination, or the like. Ethical Culture rests firmly upon a natural worldview arrived at rationally.

So, without a higher metaphysical source to reveal the truth to us, to guide us in right living, how are we to find our ethics? Well, Humanism postulates that we find our ethics through self interest and interest in others—through human experience. In this respect, compassion is a reasoned sentiment—the realization that our own welfare is inextricably entwined with the welfare of others leads us to genuinely care about their well-being. This is a concept that Adler refined to a high ideal, but more of that in a moment.

But what’s it all about? What does Humanism have to say about the meaning of it all—about the purpose of existence? Like all surviving animals, we’ve developed an ability to withstand the struggle for existence. But, as far as we know, we humans are unique in that we find meaning in that struggle.

We extend this purpose through our social nature, finding meaning in relationships. Humanism is not nihilistic but holds that the balancing of individuality with interdependence enhances our lives and motivates us toward the common good as well as toward personal fulfillment.

So, by investing ourselves in the here rather than in the promise of a hereafter, we find purpose in a universe that is, itself, without any apparent purpose.

Which means, as Humanists, we find happiness in working to benefit not only ourselves but each other—indeed for the betterment of society as a whole. We strive to expand the concept of us from just our own family, social circle, neighborhood, or country to include the whole world—and promote and long for a planetary ethics that spans differences.

Those are the underpinnings of Ethical Culture drawn from Humanism—our naturalistic outlook; our willingness to accept growth, improvement, and progress; our belief in both the capability and necessity for human beings to live ethically; and our recognition that personal fulfillment is tied to our social nature.

But there's more, much more, that supports us. Which brings us to what Felix Adler and the founding generation of Ethical Culture added to the mix, and what has been refined and advanced since.

I guess this is as good a time as any to pause and throw in a disclaimer of sorts, lest it be interpreted that I imply that Adler himself was a Humanist. He was not. In fact he shunned the identification. So how did it come to pass that Ethical Culture self-identified as a Humanist movement?

Well, bear in mind that just as Ethical Culture was evolving in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, so, too, was Humanist thought being consolidated. And while contemporaries like John Dewey and William James advanced a naturalism and pragmatism unfulfilling to Adler, Humanism as we know it today did not issue its first descriptive statement until the year of Adler's death in 1933.

It's impossible to say what Adler's reaction would be to Humanism today. But it's safe to say that Humanism's refinements have not overcome all of his objections as they stood in his later life. It's also safe to assume that his thinking, too, would have advanced in the intervening years, and it likely would have come closer in line with the softened, less triumphal attitude of today's Humanism. But whether it would have done so as quickly and surely as that of his followers, who knows?

So we're left to ponder that one while appreciating those enduring foundational elements bequeathed us—many of which are hinted at but not fully developed in Humanism. Putting cultural or philosophical maxims to work in the microcosm of intentional community, as we do here in New York and in other Societies, is not Humanism's aim per se. But it is the purpose of Ethical Culture.

This is where it gets tricky. Humanism itself is pretty well defined and understood, its basics laying out in an almost linear fashion—take one step and then another. That's not so with Ethical Culture that is more organic—push it here and it moves there, nourish one element and another flourishes. So ferreting out its centrality is something of a subjective undertaking. Bear that in mind as it's my response to those who would differ with my take this morning. I'd probably differ with myself as my own take on any given day is likely to be at least subtly and perhaps grossly different from that of any other day. That's the nature of things organic.

For it to appear as a whole, Ethical Culture must be viewed from a progressive perspective. Adler's life work is a case study in reconstructionism, reaching full flower in his *Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal* in 1923. Just that title pretty much says it all and is to me one of his greatest teachings. He saw something good in religion, in the spiritual ideal, and struggled his entire life to identify, rationalize, and perpetuate it. That's an effort we carry on today—to identify the good in the traditional, tie it to reason, and bring it into today's culture.

So what does Ethical Culture add to the Humanist mix of underpinnings that differentiates it from Humanism alone? Well, to my way of thinking, the first thing is the concept of a natural ideal. Now idealism itself is not new in teleologic thought. What Ethical Culture does for idealism is wrest it from the clutches theology where it had become petrified in the concept of a personalized supreme being. The world of Ethical Culture's ideal is a natural rather than a supernatural one, and the object of our idealism is human perfection—the idea of a perfectible world, a supreme way of being.

This gives life an aim, a direction, even if an unattainable one. Fully appreciating this natural idealism is to grasp that its ultimate attainment is not the goal, but rather it aims at the continual and successive approximation of the ethical ideal through individual and collective advancement. Our success is not in the destination but in the journey. Our mission is to bring the one, the real, closer to the other, to the ideal. That's both a idealistic as well as a realistic stance.

So one of Ethical Culture's underpinnings is the ideal of a supreme way of being. Another is a refinement of the Humanist premise of togetherness reflected in an advancement of the Golden Rule. Many of you have heard me say that everyone needs a philosophy and everyone has one, no matter how rudimentary, how thoughtlessly accepted, or how unaware of it they may be. Well, every religion seems to need a prime maxim and each has one. The Western, monotheistic or Amrahamic religions usually refer to it as the Golden Rule.

I don't know how many of you ever find yourselves in philosophic conversation with those who hold traditional religious beliefs, but it happens to me frequently. And at some point in any such conversation, someone almost inevitably says, "Well, we all believe in the Golden Rule." Like that's some, generally understood and accepted maxim the world over.

Oh, how I relish those moments. I'm not particularly proud of it, but I experience a real *gottcha* sense of elation whenever I hear those words. They're seeking common ground and I'm ceding none of it in saying, "No, not me. I don't ascribe to the Golden Rule, but rather to an enhancement of it" That's usually greeted with a slightly perturbed look of surprise, but it also piques interest.

Golden Rules are "me" centered, both the ancient and the 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. Or if, in the newer version, it's okay with me, then it should be okay with you. Neither really take you into account.

Islam, being newer, offered its own step forward in saying that "No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself." It recognizes you, but still calls on me to determine what you might desire.

In reformulating the sentiment hinted at in these adages, Ethical Culture takes us past them. With "Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself." We go from me to we, firmly establishing two as the smallest number in ethics, or in an Ethical Culture. It brings you into my ethical circle. No longer am I the sole arbiter of what's right and good for you, but must take you into account in determining what's best for both of us.

"Act so as to elicit the best in others" 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. That's a significant underpinning that can support a lot.

As I said, this maxim bespeaks an important underpinning of Ethical Culture, that of the Ethical Manifold—a developed sense of interconnectedness that supports an attitude of individual worth as well as collective responsibility. It is through this sense of

ourselves as part of an organic whole that we arrive at the attribution of worth to every individual.

Interdependence, that I cannot do without you and you cannot do without me, and interconnectedness, the understanding that if either of us were different the world would be different, is the essence of the Ethical Manifold.

It also means that if I change, you change. And if I can act so as to change you for the better, to elicit the best in you, I will become better myself. In this fashion, we change the world by changing each other and by changing ourselves. Thus personal improvement becomes a social responsibility, and social betterment a part of personal fulfillment.

The prime maxim of “Elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself” also illustrates the reconstructionist method I mentioned earlier, by retaining the sentiment, the ideal of older formulations. Building on the past in this fashion is the engine that drives ethical progress, our advancement toward the ethical ideal of a supreme way of being. It also indicates that we cannot do that alone but must act in concert in a deeply democratic way that requires us to participate in society responsibly. Perfection is the end but skeptical pragmatism, a continual reexamination and reconstructing, is the means.

So, in addition to the naturalism, personal and societal progress, and ethical orientation found in Humanism, Ethical Culture, as it says on the façade of our building, also rests on being, “Dedicated to the ever increasing knowledge and practice and love of the Right.”—to continually reconstruct the ideal to be found in time-honored and timeworn traditions.

Ethical Culture adds to the basics of Humanism, expands upon the sum, and provides a method and a means for enlivening that body of thought. The focus of our endeavor is an ideal, a supreme way of being. We exist in an enormous chasm between is and ought, in need of a way of closing the gap. Ethical Culture is that way.

Even before founding Ethical Culture, in his one and only sermon to his father’s congregation at Temple Emanuel, Felix Adler sent forth the harbinger of his new religion in saying, “... religion not confined to church or synagogue alone shall go forth ... laying its greatest stress not on believing but in ... acting ...”

In placing deed before creed we place a special emphasis on what we do, on our actions, on our activities, and focus attention on personal development as well as the critical social issues of our time. In this fashion we link the ideal with the real, in a lifestance as participatory as the democracy it espouses.

The prime maxim of, “Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself” represents a pivotal point in liberal religious thinking as advanced today as it was at the founding of the movement 130 years ago.

Part of any quest, personal or religious, is the desire for permanence. Humanity has through the course of its history pursued a myriad of mythologies—some simple, some complex—in that search. Reconstructionist in nature, Ethical Culture has settled for a kind of reason-based durability, a transience that gels but never sets—fluid rather than solid.

Therein lies the animation, the vibrancy of Ethical Culture that continues to appeal and remains as relevant today as it was at the time of our founding.

For me, the old mythologies never worked—their answers never satisfied. I sought something else and found it in Ethical Culture. There’s a lot of political talk these days

about personal responsibility, but very little religious talk. Ethical Culture is a religion of ethical relationships, of personal responsibility, where you are part of my personal responsibility and together we are responsible for the world in which we live. It is our responsibility to construct from all that has gone before something that will endure into the future.

It's about more than survival, it's about progress, betterment guided by the ideal of perfection, of a supreme way of being. The real, the ideal, and the progress of the one toward the other. Adherence to an ethical way of life places a tremendous burden of responsibility on us. A burden we dare not shirk if the momentum of our progress is to overcome the retrogressive pull of tradition. These are serious times and we are serious people. My faith is in you, in me, in reason, and in our ability to more closely approximate the kind of world in which we would like to live.

Stephen J. Gould was found of saying you can't make an IS out of an OUGHT. But we can try. We can come closer.

Ethical Culture adds to the foundational elements we share with Humanism, and in so doing, we animate those principles in our lives. Cultural involvement, social action begins with how we as individuals act. How the world changes begins right here, within us. Understanding that opens our natural inquiry into these underpinnings and keeps them fresh.

By adopting the ideal of perfection, of a supreme way of being as our guiding aspiration, we imbue our every action with universal implications. By understanding that my own well being, my own advancement, my own development and fulfillment is dependent upon yours invests us in each other and in the future—the well being of generations yet to come.

By choosing to live in intentional society, in agreement, in covenant and community with others, as we do here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture and at other Societies across the country, we deepen our understanding of the underpinnings of Ethical Culture, and illuminate and broaden them through the practice of ethical living.



A member of the American Ethical Union
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