

Enlivening the Center & Brightening the Boundaries of Ethical Culture

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Like with pretty much every talk anyone gives, the further one gets into preparing it the larger the task becomes. It doesn't seem like that ought to be the case but it is and it was especially so with this one.

To talk about enlivening the center of Ethical Culture requires first describing that center and that's no easy task in and of itself. The same can be said for brightening the boundaries of Ethical Culture, which are not the sharp lines of demarcation, but rather zones of overlapping agreement with those who place different elements at the center of their lifestance.

The task would be a bit easier if we had all day, or better yet several sessions of several hours each. Then I could place a dozen or more things at the center of Ethical Culture, fully explain each in both philosophic and practical terms, and then relate them each one to the others. But we don't have that long. We've only got half a hour.

So the challenge is to stake out some territorial boundaries, compress a complex body of thought into a few—I've chosen three—central elements, and then enliven and brighten them.

Ethical Culture is about connecting theory and practice and, while this is not the first of a two-part series, I will be speaking more about what it means to live Ethical Culture in two weeks and I'd like to do so with as little overlap as possible.

I've not been entirely successful in that effort as it's nearly impossible, at least for me, to talk about the center and perimeter of Ethical Culture without wandering into what it's like to exist, to live within that quarter—to be an Ethical Culturist.

The two, the philosophic and the practical, are not mutually exclusive but rather organic in an agrarian sense—they cultivate each other and grow together. But hopefully I can stay focused on the former and offer only enough of the latter to entice you back on the 18th.

Ours is a lifestance of discovery rather than one of revelation. That alone distinguishes us from the dominant culture in which we find ourselves, and to establish the boundaries of Ethical Culture. Not a barrier, mind you, although others may see it as such, but a distinction that goes toward making some Ethical Culturists and others not.

As nearly all of us were born into and raised under the orientation of the aforementioned dominant culture, it seems to make sense to follow the path we have taken to Ethical Culture—traveling from the outside in before looking at it from the inside out. And that path toward the center of Ethical Culture traverses its boundaries, so I'll begin there.

Being the progressives that we are, and having found an inclusive home in Ethical Culture, many of us struggle with boundaries, all too often seeing them as exclusionary

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.

rather than descriptive. Be that as it may, our identity lies within certain parameters that form a perimeter around what we are.

Without recognized boundaries, we have no identified field—nothing to differentiate us from the vast and growing number of well intentioned, good hearted people who are in league with us on the core issues of our day.

These boundaries are not as distinct as the bright lines that describe us in other ways—for example, birth and death being the boundaries of life—but they do serve to establish our identity as Ethical Culturists.

So, what are the boundaries of Ethical Culture? I've settled on three. Our approach to matters of origin and destiny, our Humanist epistemology, and perhaps most distinctive today, our placing deed before creed.

In founding Ethical Culture, Felix Adler set aside matters of origin and destiny in much the same fashion he set aside theological concepts. Not so much because they were necessarily invalid, though he held many of them to be just that, but because he found them unnecessary—superfluous and perhaps detrimental to ethical living.

One of the founding generation of Leaders, Percival Chubb, put it this way, “To live out of our best self—that is the duty which, theory or no theory, we must fulfill to the best of our powers, and dare not postpone on any plea of intellectual perplexity concerning the obscure problems of human destiny.”

Having set aside matters of origin and destiny, and focused on life between the shores of birth and death, we're led to the naturalistic worldview of Humanism. Ours is a Humanist movement, part of the broader community of reason comprised of folks who have faith in our ability to better ourselves through our own efforts.

While unlike those within the community of faith whose views are predicated on a leap of faith, we do share much in common with many of them when it comes to the critical issues of our time. It's just that when it comes to faith we reach, but we don't leap.

Ethical Culture adheres to the Humanist view that knowledge is derived by observation, experimentation, and rational analysis—that we know things by observing, testing, and thinking.

By implication this means that we don't arrive at our conclusions by means of revelation, authority, tradition, mystical inspiration, divination, or the like. This approach places a limitation on what we are willing to class as knowledge and that limitation is uncomfortable for some. While we respect those who require and depend upon other sources of knowledge claims to uphold their beliefs, at the end of the day we accept only that which has been subjected to analysis by critical intelligence. When weighed in the balance, we find other means wanting.

And just as we place this sort of knowledge before beliefs acquired by those other means, so we place deed before the creeds arrived at in the same manner.

Now, as I said earlier, some of us struggle with boundaries as we find them exclusionary and inconsistent with our claim that all are welcome. They are not, at least not by our intention or doing. We have no ideological litmus test here. Our doors are open and our community is welcoming of all who are comfortable here. Further, membership is open to all who are in accord with our views, share our aspirations, and are willing to strive toward them.

That allows room for those who hold views that lie outside those we focus on, so long as they do not impose them and are content in setting them aside. That's a tall order for any to whom those views are central and many are understandably reluctant if not resistant to do so. We honor and appreciate that and them. Our doors and our arms, if not our membership, still remain open to them.

So those are the boundaries. As I mentioned, they consist more of areas of overlapping agreement than bright lines. Others may hold the revelations of ancient prophets to be factually true, but most of them still accept knowledge arrived at through rational means. And while many fervently hope for a heaven—though none seem in any rush to get there—still they hold deeds as the measure of who attains it.

So these boundaries serve as more of an onramp to our Humanist lifestance than a wall of separation between us and others. And when I speak of brightening them I do not intend to narrow or sharpen them but rather to make us more aware of them—to shed light on them, to add contrast to them.

For example, we should be aware and accepting of the fact that the perimeters of Ethical Culture distinguish us from the mainstream of contemporary society. I know that comes as no surprise to you, but many seem to lament it. Not only in the respect of wanting more to adopt Ethical Culture, or at least the aspiration of better living, but there also seems to be a sense of regret that we are out of step with that which surrounds and challenges us.

Frankly, I take heart in that. I am comforted by the recognition and acceptance of my own limitations. Even while striving to expand them I am not guilty or morose over my failures—just resolute in my determination not to repeat them, to do better. I want to get closer to, to cozy up to the ethical ideal of perfected living and feel its welcome. And I am content in leaving behind the religious tradition of my birth.

In Adler's own words, "The impulse that led originally to the formation of Ethical Societies sprang from the profound feeling that [life] needs to be consecrated; furthermore that the consecration cannot be derived from doctrines which, however vital they may have been in the past, however true they may still be for some, have ceased to be so for oneself."

I said in the newsletter description of my talk this morning, that Ethical Culture can be difficult to grasp and to embrace until seen and lived from the inside out. So let's turn to the center of Ethical Culture because, viewed from that perspective, it is truly an inspiring, rewarding, and personally fulfilling lifestance that embraces life with exuberance and offers the prospect of a vastly improved global culture.

You can slice, rearrange, and organize this lifestance of ours so many different ways. I've chosen to organize it into three central concepts: The Ethical Ideal of perfected living; The Ethical Manifold of our interrelatedness and interdependence; And the moral axiom of Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself.

Felix Adler held that ethics is central to right relations and ours is, if anything, a religion of ethical relationships. That must be acknowledged before exploring these three Adlerian principles that inform this movement.

And we must also acknowledge his concept of *the reality producing function of the mind*. The recognition that the "reality" we embrace may be conceived rather than perceived is humbling. So much so in fact that it tempered Adler's sense of certainty as to the finality of his social and philosophic advances, steered him from a hubris that he

easily could have fallen into, given the adulation and admiration afforded him, and gave him—and us—a healthy suspicion of any who profess to possess absolute truth.

Humanity has a long and storied history of conjuring up rock solid realities that simply do not match our expanding understanding of the universe and our place in it. And we can fall prey to that proclivity just as easily as those we feel we have progressed beyond.

That understanding of Adler's, that realization that what he held to be true may not, in fact, be truth at all but only a distorted or partial view of what actually is—that admission was no mean feat for a religious reformer of the nineteenth century.

While many others were also brushing aside outmoded certainties, many of which are inexplicably seeing a revival today, they were all too anxious to replace them with other, equally dogmatic views.

The time of our founding, the late nineteenth century, was a time of challenge. And it was at that time that religious fundamentalism was born largely in reaction to the challenge of Darwin's scientific theories. Tradition still feels the pressure of that same challenge, that same threat, today.

And in the intervening years, philosophic idealism has itself been challenged by dogmatic naturalism and strict pragmatism and had to tread water to keep from drowning.

But none of these approaches have the loftiness, the magisterial reach of Ethical Culture. Mainstream religion and fundamentalism, science and reason, naturalism and pragmatism, do not substantiate the worth of the individual. Adler did so without a leap of faith by creating the Ethical Manifold—the simple recognition of our interrelatedness and interdependence.

Traditional religions all too often diminish and demean human existence, which we honor and respect at every turn.

Many of Adler's advancements were evolutionary—reshaping, reforming, and reconstructing what had come before. But his insight that we could—within a religious as well as a civil context—affectively cope with deed while disagreeing or setting aside creed was revolutionary and led him to the abstract ideal of perfected living.

I say abstract for two reasons. First, Adler never let go of his notion of a supersensible realm, of something of a nature not familiar to the human senses, something that can only be felt or intuited. But he set that, too, aside in favor of the ideal he held it to represent. But, secondly, the ideal was not something to be attained but to be worked toward rendering it an abstraction.

For Adler, the aim was, and here I quote, “Not the realization of the ideal...but the realization of the [existence] of the ideal.” Which leads me to ask, If perfection of right relations be the guiding light, can the path it illuminates be anything but one of betterment, of a more humane way of living?

I often refer to this Ethical Ideal as the North Star of Ethical Culture. The nineteenth century Senator from Missouri, Carl Schurz put it this way, “Ideals are like stars; you will not succeed in touching them...But, like the seafaring man on a desert of water, you choose them as your guides...” The ethical ideal of perfected living, of right relations, guides us.

You might better remember the German-born Schurz, who was at one time the editor of the New York Evening Post, for his words delivered from the Senate floor in 1872,

“My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.” He, like Adler, was, in many respects, a man of his times, and of ours.

But why should we care? Why should we want right relations in the first place?

Ethics is central to Ethical Culture and compassion is central to ethics. If we didn't care about ourselves and about others it wouldn't matter how we lead our lives. This sense of care connects us to each other in manifold ways, bringing us together in an intricate and profound manner.

Adler saw this connecting of individuals to the whole of humanity, as the Ethical Manifold, an interrelatedness reaching back to the dawn of humanity and even before—to the primordial ooze from which we arose—and extending past the horizon of any foreseen future. He saw it as a web of interconnectivity in which each is different yet indispensable to every other—present, past, and future—and in which each is just as necessary to the whole, which would be different without me, or without you, or you, or you.

I hesitate to say “infinite” when speaking of this vastness, but Adler didn't. He saw the Ethical Manifold as an expression of everything he held dear, and echoed it in his conception of spirituality. “Spirituality” he said “is the consciousness of infinite interconnectedness.”

In that respect, the Ethical Manifold is the uplifting and inspiring effort and ability to experience humanity as the largest part of one's self, and even more. Caring and ethical relations extend past humanity to the rest of existence, to the universe of which we are a part.

This leads naturally to an appreciation of the third central element of Ethical Culture the supreme moral axiom, Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself.

The significance of Adler's advance of the me-centered “golden rules” of tradition is profound. In recognition of the Ethical Manifold, it welcomes another into my consideration of right and firmly establishes two as the smallest number in Ethical Culture. This organic rather than dogmatic consideration of right relations embraces and emphasizes the worth and dignity of all.

So that's the center, the core of Ethical Culture, but what enlivens it? What lends encouragement to the Ethical Ideal, to our sense of infinite interrelatedness, to the maxim Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself? What animates them? And what sheds light on, what brightens the sometimes murky distinctions between Ethical Culture and the dominant culture?

Well, one thing that does is posted on the side of our building, our dedication to “the ever increasing knowledge and practice and love of the right.” What could enliven a whole philosophy of life more than a dedication to live well and justly?

This dedication, this desire, leads directly to a deep-rooted sense of reform and reconstruction, of genuine progressiveness. The Ethical Ideal of perfected living may be abstract, but our efforts toward it are not. The continual synthesizing of what has gone before in order that it may serve that which is yet to come is real and rewarding.

In the progressive tradition, Adler sought the middle ground between the traditional ideas of a fixed metaphysics and the nihilism that arose from the rejection of tradition's certitude.

He said nearly fifty years after his founding address, “Among those who assembled that first evening, there was manifest a desire to separate the grain from the chaff, but also to preserve the grain, and not only to preserve but to plant it anew in the expectation of reaping a richer harvest.”

That mandates a commitment to personal development and social advancement for a richer harvest cannot be reaped if we continue to rely on that which has always been. Keep doing what you have been doing and you’ll keep getting what you’ve been getting. If you want better you have to do better, you have to be better—to become better.

If you put all that together, it leaves you with the understanding that our global culture is directly influenced by our individual actions. Cultures are not changed by force or imposition. They exist in attitudes as well as behavior. Actions can be restricted or controlled, but we all have free minds, and cultures change when minds change.

And minds change when people see others acting more caringly toward one another and toward the universe.

Attitudes begin to shift when people hear others speaking more authentically.

And cultures change when people believe others to be more ethical—when they see right relations in action, when they sense a better way of being with each other.

Cultural change is viral and spreads rapidly once it takes hold.

I do not believe that avarice has permanently inoculated our culture against generosity.

I do not believe that power can much longer stave off compassion.

And I do not believe that wrong can forever prevail against right.

I do believe we can melt boundaries and become one world.

It is the courage to do something about it that distinguishes us from the dominant culture.

And it is our faith in humanity, the optimism that we can make a difference, that enlivens Ethical Culture.



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