

What It Means To Be An Ethical Culturist

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, June 18, 2006
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Good morning. This is quite a week. It is Gay Pride Week here in New York City. And, as Christine mentioned, this is Father's Day. I want to add my congratulations to all you fathers, and to remember my own with thanks for all he did for me and our family in an all too short life. Tomorrow is Juneteenth, the 19th of June, the day chosen by the African American community to commemorate the ending of slavery in the United States, and Wednesday is the summer solstice, the longest day of the year, and a day that has been observed since before the dawn of recorded history.

For an Ethical Culturist, there is no shortage of things to celebrate. Just being alive is reason enough for us, for to be an Ethical Culturist is to embrace, to engage life with an exuberance that is increasingly rare in our culture.

Just nine years after founding the Ethical Culture movement, Felix Adler described it as , "... a distinctly religious movement." and said that "Its aim is to fill the void left in many lives by the decadence of theology."

He left little doubt in that compact statement as to what he thought of the movement's identity (religious), its purpose (to fill the void that exists in our lives without religious expression), or of what he thought of traditional religions (that they had become decadent. Adler was a high-minded intellectual, an academician and a first rate lecturer with a bent toward flowery rhetoric. But he could also be very plain spoken. *The decadence of theology.*

He went on to say in that 1885 statement that the ethical movement "Seeks to satisfy the religious needs of those who have parted company with the traditions of the past and who feel at the same time that they cannot do without the inspiration, the support, and the comfort..."

For many of his time—or, more accurately, just before his time as many of his contemporaries were also hard at work constructing new views from the scattered timbers of outmoded traditions—but to those of that era who were not so involved, so progressive, religion meant ridged creeds and authoritarian institutions. It still does for all too many in our world.

But others see it differently, more clearly I think. Here's what Ethical Culture Leader John Hoad said about it recently, "What is religion? As I see it, religion is a consciousness, an insight, an idea organized." *An idea organized.* That was Adler's approach, to organize an insight, an idea, an ideal that encompasses the past, is animated in the present, and projects into a better future, a future that was never very far from his consciousness.

It follows that ours is a dynamic effort to take from the past and build for the future, and in so doing to give purpose to the present—to create for ourselves a meaningful life, and for others an enhanced future—ours is a movement that inspires, supports, and comforts.

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.

Of those traditional religions of which he clearly was not fond, Adler said, “We do not quarrel with them, we do not assail them. We are on a totally different road from theirs. We salute them as we pass them by. We have problems of our own to work out, and cannot tarry to spend our time in useless argument and discussion.”

He clearly held Ethical Culture to be a progressive and progressed lifestance that surpassed others of its day, one without their hubris or certitude—one that recognizes its own limitations and sees the difficulties yet to be addressed, the dilemmas to be worked out. And he wasn’t about to waste time in convincing or converting.

So, turning away from that, let me briefly stake out the parameters and describe the heart of Ethical Culture, a necessary step to getting into what it means to be an Ethical Culturist.

Our chosen lifestance is just that, a stance toward life as we understand and live it. In choosing to focus on this world, on life as demarcated by birth and death, we leave aside matters of origin and destiny as part of those worn out discussions we don’t have answers for and life just doesn’t have time for.

Ethical Culturists approach life in a pragmatic and natural way. We accept the universe as self-existing, view our world as one that can be made better through our own efforts, and recognize ourselves as temporal and spatial beings. As such, we don’t dwell on the unfathomable issues of eternity and infinity, let alone infinite and eternal beings.

Which brings us to our Humanist epistemology that says, in an oversimplification suitable for our purposes this morning, that knowledge is derived from what we can ascertain or infer from reliable observations as tested by time and experience. Through the employment of critical analysis science relies on just such an approach to describe a cohesive world in which all phenomena are related in a dependent way.

Felix Adler extended this scientific idea to an ethical ideal that recognizes our own interrelatedness and interdependence with each other as well as with the natural universe of which we are a part. As Ethical Culturists, we strive to form and maintain ethical relationships in which we behave well toward each other, the environment, and the future. And in so doing, we place deed before creed.

He summed up an Ethical Culturist’s aim of perfected living in the moral axiom *Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself*. This welcomes another into my own consideration of right, and mandates the inclusion of others in my life in an integral, essential, and profound way. Ours is a religion of ethical relationships. And the smallest number in any relationship is two.

So being an Ethical Culturist means actively bringing others into our lives, and playing an active role in the life of others, with the aim of becoming our best by helping others become their best. That’s the guiding principle of Ethical Culture, one that not only gives meaning and purpose to one’s life but charts for it an upward spiral the top of which we can only imagine.

Distilled to its potency, Ethical Culture has two aims: To help people do the good they know, to form the ethical habits necessary to be all that we are, and, more importantly, to gain insight into the good that is possible, to see all that we can become.

This is what Adler had to say on the subject of ethical habits. “Aristotle wisely says that ethical habits must precede the recognition of ethical principles. The principle of living to promoting the best life in others must likewise be grounded in habits. The

Ethical Societies, therefore, are educational societies intended to create those habits...The problem of the Ethical Society, looking quite far ahead, is, How shall these habits be formed? What kind of binding tie shall be proposed?" He went on to say, "Binding ties are imposed not from above (by fiat of God) but from ahead. The radiant future stretches forth its arms toward us, and binds us to be willing servants to its work."

I told you he had a bent toward flowery language. He saw the possibility of a better future as the organizing and animating vitality of the present.

A couple of years ago, Kate Lovelady, now the Leader of the St. Louis Ethical Society, stood at this lectern and reached out her arms—well, actually she was by her own admission waving them about. I wasn't here and only heard the audio but I can easily picture it. Kate is nothing of not animated. Anyway, she waved her arms about in describing traditional religion as vertical, Eastern tradition as inner, and Ethical Culture as horizontal.

Traditional religion is top heavy, reaching down from above, its spiritual posture being one of supplication, of kneeling in prayers that rise up from the inferior to the superior—prayers of petition and intercession, primitive pleas to the supernatural for tangible aid and active help, prayers born of human want and need.

Eastern religion is inner, focused on introspection and meditation, its spiritual posture being one of sitting—one of detachment in which wants and needs are released.

But Ethical Culture is horizontal, reaching out to the future and to each other, communication being its spiritual practice, the means through which we experience our interrelatedness and our interconnectedness. That requires close and deep listening to others and that's hard. For passionate people, it is often difficult to resist the urge to toss in our pennies. We're often on the losing end of talking versus listening, or debate versus dialog.

Our spiritual posture is an active one of doing for others and ourselves—on of fulfilling our own wants and needs ourselves. And that, too, is difficult, favoring cooperation over compromise as it does. There are those who have attempted to make a virtue of compromising principles. In some areas compromise has its place, but not in the realm of right relations.

Compromise is a lose/lose equation, one in which each side cedes a bit of what it has in order that each may achieve a bit of their conflicting agenda. That's not the kind of stuff that an ethical relationship is made of. We don't compromise ethical principles. But we do cooperate with other good-hearted, well-intentioned people who may not share our views but with whom we do share the common aim of a better world and a better way of being with each other in it.

That's a context in which you can cooperate in a win/win manner. Setting aside differences of opinion in order to more closely approximate an ideal—to move forward toward a better world.

Being an of Ethical Culturist is not easy, especially as naturalism, pragmatism, and empiricism are experiencing increased pressure from supernaturalism. While that challenges us to sharpen our understandings in response, it is not an altogether good thing.

Those who have made the leap of faith requisite of a supernatural version of reality have relaxed the standards of evidence that reason requires of knowledge. With no

logical check, their certainty flourishes in a rarified atmosphere devoid of rational doubt until it becomes, inevitably, absolute. Such views so held cannot help but aspire to a totalitarian ambition of ideological conformity. The hubris required to believe one's self in possession, perhaps sole but certainly absolute possession of absolute truth demands that that truth be universalized—that everyone everywhere accept and adhere to it.

No longer content to restrict their beliefs to their own lives, and no longer accepting of a government that aims simply at providing equal protection for the living and establishing and enforcing behavior norms with the least amount of coercion possible, they demand of nations that they conspire to impose their personally held views on their citizenry. That's a downward spiral in which the religious right descend into the realm of theocracy. That's what the founders of our country guarded against, that's what the founding generation of Ethical Culture foresaw, and that's what Ethical Culturists today stand foursquare against.

Ethical Culturists don't talk much about ultimate concerns, except to declare them inconsequential. This leads us to an open society foundationed on reality-based policies that accommodate a plurality of worldviews about those ultimate concerns. Ethical Culturists are inclusive, but not of those who would impose their ideology on us or others. Ethical Culturists are inclusive and welcoming of diversity, but unaccepting of ideological totalitarianism.

This is Adler again, "For us, the moral state, like the political state, no longer culminates in the person of a sovereign, the moral law does not express the will of a sovereign, and religion does not consist in loyalty to that sovereign. The moral law originates in the reason of those who are subject to it, and only because it is the utterance of their own reason are they bound to obey it."

What an inspiring , empowering, and democratic concept! A concept sidestepped by those with a blatant agenda of global uniformity of belief about ultimate reality. That sidestepping, that avoidance of reason has led many today to question, to doubt, and to begin the struggle to unburden themselves of the hindrances of the past, to unload their excess baggage as it were. Another lecturer of Adler's time, Mark Twain, told this story. This is from memory but the gist of it's right.

I once found myself ailing and consulted a physician friend of mine. He told me to get more rest, cut out the spicy foods, and lay off the smoking and drinking. I did and felt better almost instantly. When a lady friend of mine was similarly ailing I passed along the same advice. "Well," she said, "I go to bed when the sun sets, my diet is and always has been bland, and I've never smoked or indulged in beverage alcohol." The poor woman was dead within a week. She was like a sinking ship with no excess baggage to throw overboard!

Ethical Culturists don't have that problem; most of us have long since thrown the excess baggage of certitude overboard. But we have to be a bit careful in our enthusiasm and not throw out the right with the worn. Many identify religion with difficulties, with harms both real and imagined—and in this context I find that a distinction without a difference—and in their pain they throw religion's essence overboard along with its excesses.

The past can be painful, but it's not a terminal pain. It won't kill you to search through it for valuables. That's what Adler did in founding the ethical movement. He took from the past the good and build from it a better future. He threw out the excess

baggage of certitude and unfounded knowledge claims, and reconstructed the ideal they represented and expressed, leaving the dead past to deal with itself.

And that's what we, as ethical Culturists, continue to do today here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. With an eye to the future and an appreciation for our heritage, we find inspiration, support, and comfort in our chosen community.

The business of religion, as we have come to know it, is to connect our life, the life of the individual, with all life. And, to again quote Adler, "To my mind, the time will never come when the need for such a connection will cease to be felt."

Let's face it, even the most curmudgeonly among us feels the need for others or he or she wouldn't be among us in the first place. Without a community, without the support of likeminded people, I am just one person hoping things will get better. Together we are a powerful force helping make it so, each successive experience inspiring us to envision and achieve still better experiences. That's what it is to be fully alive—to be an Ethical Culturist..

This is from a book, a novel, I was reading recently, *The Edge of Pleasure*, by Phillippa Stockley. It's a passage that, sadly, describes so many in our society today. "The relentless burden of making a living, affording a home, raising children, is sufficient to dull [the] bright enthusiasms of youth. One chip at a time their luster dims, so that the great block of shinning marble from which we thought our own monument would rise itself is scraped and chiseled away, little by little. Such a slow process, so nearly insensible: so unerring that there comes a day when one turns to contemplate the great block and finds a pebble."

Wow! Talk about the reality producing function of the mind—our all too human ability to look at one thing and see another—to see a pebble where a great block of partially if somewhat inelegantly carved marble stands majestically awaiting completion.

We're not finished, you and I. The finish carpenter is the most skilled and admired of the trade, and the master artist's genuine genius is reserved for the completion of the work begun under her or his direction.

It's not easy work, this task of completion, of finishing, and we do not come by it naturally. My father, grandfather, and an admired uncle were all finish carpenters. I have their tools. And, ample evidence to the contrary, I still can't rid myself of the foolish notion that their use should be imbedded in my genes, that I should just be able to pick up their tools and use them with their skill, imagination, and alacrity. I can tell you from repeated effort and much frustration that it is not so!

My attempts, like so many of our efforts, would skid off the hard wood of experience leaving gouges, scars, and roughness where smoothness and elegance were intended. Much sanding is required. That's the way life is.

We all have the capacity for betterment, to be more than what we are. And if we keep working at it, if we keep chipping away, if we keep sanding and smoothing, our work with ourselves in reaching our full potential, in existing at our forward, our creative edge; our work with others in forming and fostering ethical relationships; and our work with the world in nudging it toward peace and justice—if we keep at it with patience and determination, our work can be a masterpiece.

And therein lies the art of being an Ethical Culturist. To assimilate this work, to so deeply engrain it in our being that it ceases to be what we do and becomes who we are.

To be an Ethical Culturist is to be reminded—No, more than that—to be continually aware that we are alive.

And to do that, to live fully engaged lives, takes courage and humility, along with other hallmarks of what it means to be an Ethical Culturist—like optimism, curiosity, skepticism compassion

Let me conclude with a litany of sorts.

Being an Ethical Culturist is to fully experience that which is within us, even if it has been so dormant for so long that we have almost given up on it. That experience, that rediscovery is a pleasure so piercing it's almost painful and leads to the understanding that being an Ethical Culturist is to care about others as one cares for one's self, in ways that encourage us and others to find better ways of being together—ways dedicated not only to our own comfort but to a better future.

In our quest for a better world, a better future, we realize, in the words of Albert Camus, that “True generosity toward the future consists in giving everything to the present.” Not taking from it, but giving to it.

Being an Ethical Culturist requires the humility to recognize not just that you might be wrong, though certainly that. But also that, with dedication, you can be more right tomorrow.

Being an Ethical Culturist includes a recognition of our gifts and abilities as well as our responsibility to share them with others in a way that moves them closer to their own aspirations, their own fulfillment, their own betterment.

Being an Ethical Culturist is having the courage to speak truth to power. Whether it is on the trumped up wedge issues tendered in service to a sectarian agenda, or the truly moral issues of poverty, peace, and the environment—or the simple protection and survival of a single life. Being an Ethical Culturist is filtering right from wrong, and then learning to love the right in the right way.

Being an Ethical Culturist is to understand that every creature and all of history is reflected in us, to know that we shine in every star, and that together we light the future.



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