

Morality and Modernity—Can We Have Both?

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, September 17, 2006
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Morality and Modernity—Can We Have Both? And why would I even ask? Just the fact that the question has currency says something about our culture. Have we come to a point where morality has lost meaning, lost the power, in and of itself, to motivate us toward good behavior?

I was recently reading a novel by James Othmer appropriately entitled *The Futurist*. Appropriate because I consider us futurists and Ethical Culture a futurist religion not because we predict the future but because we are dedicated to it.

In his book, the protagonist asks, “It there room for a futurist in a terrified, compromised, morally ambiguous world? What is the right moral thing for a human being to do in a world that makes less and less sense with each passing nanosecond?”

Optimism is a mark of those dedicated to the future, and the main character in Othmer’s book is no optimist. But he does pose questions in a way that resonates with us. Is there a place for us in the world today, a place in the 21st century for an ideal conceived of in the 19th? And, equally on point, how do we act morally in a world increasingly difficult to understand, in a world that’s re-defined morality to the brink of extinction, in a world where right and wrong are all too often considered in terms of right and left.

As we explore these and other questions, I’ll take up modernity first because I think it is modernity that questions morality rather the other way around. True, fundamental traditionalists would have us roll back the frontier of modernity, of progress, until our world once again resembled that in which their moral constructs held sway. But I don’t think that’s going to happen.

Despite the efforts of considerable forces within our culture, and despite the anchor of sizable segments the world’s population who sadly see hope only in another realm, the tide of history will not be reversed. Both of these factions are unbridled in their efforts to deny others the legacy of a rich and progressive past and unhesitating in their desire to take from us the promise of magnificent future for all here, in this world.

Our world is modern. The universe and the world in which we live have changed and changed for the better over the course of human history. But there have been periods of brutal repression when our direction has been stayed or reversed. It is my fervent hope, and a postulate of my devout faith in humanity, that those times are behind us.

Today it is nearly impossible to conceive of a reversal through the means that such setbacks were brought about in the past. But it is not nearly so difficult to envision doomsday scenarios in which humanity itself perishes or is once again reduced to a base struggle for survival either through the slow erosion of our sustaining environment or the advent of cataclysmic events brought about by our own hand. Those possibilities concern me, they worry me. And that’s why we need to revisit the concept of morality within the modern context in which we live.

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.

We've come a long way since the end of the Middle Ages, those dark times of oppression when most of Western civilization lived in fear of the brutal threat of authority brutally imposed. The finer points of morality or considerations of right and wrong have little influence on a fearful people fending off lethal threat. Our culture today has been seasoned with that flavor by those whose thinking is stuck in the past, and we find that seasoning bitter and distasteful.

But this isn't the return of the dark ages, at least not yet. No longer is knowledge hoarded by those who wield it to their own ends, fostering fear and superstition as tools of control and self-aggrandizement. The divine rights of kings and prelates have been replaced by the equal rights of an educated citizenry. And the courage and self-determination of an empowered public has led to an open society.

None of these are universal or secure in absolute or even general terms, but they are substantial and significant when compared to the world of just two or three centuries ago, let alone to the beginning of the Modern Era the better part of a millennium ago.

We've gone from isolated local communities to a large-scale, in many respects global, society. Economic and physical mobility, the formalization or standardization of social elements, increased specialization such as in the division of labor and civic responsibility, and, perhaps most significant, pervasive forms of communication that bring events from around the world into our lives faster than news from next door reached our grandparents, these things have changed our world and they have changed us.

These changes have, in many ways, depersonalized our sense of dependence on each other. A lack we're just beginning to notice and come to terms with through the formation of intentional communities to replace, often in more meaningful ways, the very elements of life lost in that transition.

And as we form new and hopefully better ways of being together, we need new and better concepts of how we ought to treat each other, how we should behave toward each other; new and improved understandings of right and wrong, of morality.

Modernity, the state or quality of being modern, needs context to be intelligible. It's like tall and short, or good and bad, one doesn't mean much without its antithesis. And we can contextualize "modern" by contrasting it with, what? Right, old, outmoded, or ancient. In fact, that's the way historians often divide history, into three large segments: Antiquity or ancient history, the Modern Era, and, in between, the Middle Ages.

Modernity is, roughly, that part of the Modern Era that began in the mid to late nineteenth century—the time that gave birth to the Ethical Culture movement and that saw the founding of this Society. The Modern Era itself began in the mid-1400s and is of interest to us because it is defined by characteristics and events that bear directly on Modernity.

The Modern Era saw the advent of moveable type and the printing press that led to mass literacy and a proliferation of mass media; the formation of nation states and the institution of representative democracy; the increase of science, technology, and industrialization; the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of socialist countries; and, of course, urbanization.

This all took place through the Age of Discovery, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Reason, and the Enlightenment, punctuated by the American, French, and

Russian revolutions, and nearly constant armed conflicts culminating in two world wars and nuclear weapons.

History has yet to write the post-modern chapter, if indeed that is the age we are in now. But if we are it certainly includes in our country post-war prosperity and the baby boom, the Viet Nam war, the cold war, and the Internet. It will also include 9-11, terrorism, and theocracy.

Max Weber points out that from the Renaissance humanists and early modern philosophers and scientists onward, rational thinking has come to replace intellectual activities that had been under the heavy and heavy handed influence of convention, superstition, and religion. Those influences and heavy hands are still with us today. That's an awfully long time for something so clearly outdated to survive, but convention and superstition are nothing if not tenacious.

Still, in general, rational thinking, the scientific approach, and the pursuit of an improved economic lot are generally accepted as the best means to social well being. And so we've come to adopt them as the bedrock of the betterment movement.

Not to the exclusion of other means, by any stretch of the imagination. Indeed, imagination, ideas, however originated; the expression of our fondest dreams and worst nightmares through the arts and literature; the exploration, sharing, and heightening of our emotional response to each other and to nature; all of these add to the tapestry of life and inform both our modern, open society as well as our sense of morality. These are no less luxuries of modernity than the creature comforts we've come to enjoy.

We have come a long way since the Middle or Dark Ages. Each aspect of that transition impacts any consideration of Modernity and Morality, especially an educated laity, the concept of equal human rights, and a courage born of a record of human advancement. Our past gives us the courage to face the challenges of the present resolutely and the uncertainty of the future with optimism.

All people need and have rules to live by. Some are arrived at through the social lore of convention; others are established cooperatively through legislation; and a disturbing number are still imposed by authoritarian fiat. But it is those that we accept and impose on ourselves that truly deal with morality.

Our expanded knowledge of ourselves, the world or universe, and our place in it pressures traditional constructs of morality. As supernatural beliefs give way to natural understandings, revealed commands give way to discovered principles that lead to better ways of being together.

Morality can't be approached in an Ethical Humanist environment without stumbling over the distinction between morality and ethics. Morality. The very word is fraught with a gravitas "ethics" just doesn't have. For example, which has more impact, *the ethically concerned*, or, *The Moral Majority*? Clearly the latter even though it speaks only of numbers while *the ethically concerned* conveys intent, good intent. We have something to learn from the wordsmiths of the conservative think tanks. Those little *bon mots* cost them millions and reap for them a rich harvest.

The difference between morals and ethics is a tough nut. Sometimes I think it's a contrived distinction without a difference. At other times I think it makes all the difference in the world.

Throughout most of my life I conceptualized morality as having to do with absolute behavioral dictates or divinely revealed commandments, and ethics a more naturally derived set of agreements about how we should behave. That's a useful distinction and more than pure cultural imprinting on my part. Philosophers speak of a meta-ethics that address questions of moral absolutism. That's a pursuit that some, Kierkegaard among them, think can only be understood within a normative religious context.

Others concentrate on applying ethical postulates or theories, however derived, to specific issues and wrestle with the more controversial considerations of our time.

My focus lies between these two, on the interplay between them. That's the area of normative ethics and where I think our modern sense of morality has settled, at least for the time being.

There are those who contend that ethics doesn't have any more to do with right and wrong than logic has to do with fact and falsehood; that just as logic is a tool for determining what is fact and what is nonsense, so ethics is but a tool for determining right from wrong. That's the applied ethics crowd and they don't pay a lot of attention to where our sense of right and wrong comes from. They find them in our culture, in our social mores, in the expression of our wants and needs, and apply them to issues that we, too, struggle with.

Wherever you land on those considerations, and I'll say more about where I stand in a moment, morality is historically and logically linked to human aspirations as expressed religiously, specifically through religions of revelation, as these were, for a considerable part of our history, the sources of both the vision and the regulation of an ideal life. Supported by religious belief as they were, they were highly authoritarian by necessity. Without reason to support them, people accepted them as gospel largely because they were told to. Often they were told to *or else!*

Our struggle today is in no small measure the attempt to wrest our sense of morality from the clutches of tradition and authority, and many see our global cultural divide in just those terms. Religions, insofar as they are the institutions that embody these traditions and authorities, are at the center of the turmoil. And when you combine religionism with nationalism, as the theocracies of our world do today, you have a heady brew.

And I give a broad definition to theocracy. One that includes not only those nation states that openly proclaim themselves as such, but also those whose laws and actions have been subjected to political interpretations of a divinely revealed "morality."

Once a nation gives the teachings of religious scripture precedent over reason, rationality, and the judgment and will of its own citizenry, you have a theocracy whether it's politically or constitutionally structured that way or not.

The time for that, if it ever was, has past. It's been replaced by a desire for a vision that fosters the greatest amount of cooperation coupled with minimal regulations that are the least intrusive or coercive. Our sense of morality, like our sense of government, has become more participatory, more individual, and less authoritarian, less prescribed.

When it comes down to the semantics of morality or ethics, I think I side with Rushworth Kidder whose work at the Institute for Global Ethics may well revolutionize ethics as a practice. He takes the position that telling right from wrong is not the issue, that that's the easy part.

He describes ethics, and in so doing has spawned an entire new field called descriptive ethics, as the dilemma of balancing two rights—truth versus loyalty, the greater good or the lesser evil, that sort of thing.

So I don't leave you hanging, he internalizes considerations of right and wrong and subjects that to three tests. The smell test; it's just wrong on the face of it. The highest moral exemplar test; this is seen in the What Would Jesus Do? consideration. And the transparency test; how would you feel if it was on the front page of the New York Times.

Those are not sophisticated philosophic inquiries, but they are not as simplistic as they first appear. If you're interested in that approach his book, *How Good People Make Tough Choices*, is as good a read today as it was when released a decade or so ago.

Modernity is the culmination of humanity's history, advancements, and accomplishments. Our global sense of morality today isn't. It's rooted in a past whose time is just that—past.

Our world and our ways are not perfect, nor are they complete. Aside from the still prevalent tendency to settle our differences through violent means, environmental problems of pollution, decreasing biodiversity, and climate change haunt us.

Advances in biotechnology present moral challenges that compel us to define ourselves differently and more clearly. In the face of these challenges, many who feel alienated, rootless and restless, and who lack a sense of connection with others, slip unwittingly into a nostalgia for a revised and idealize past.

Can we have morality, an informed and inspiring sense of right and wrong, in this modern world of ours? Yes, so long as it's as reflective of our progress as the rest of our culture. Yes, if we modernize our sense of morality in the same fashion that we've modernized our view of ourselves and the world.

Morality governs how we are together and rests on how we conceptualize right living. Our view of that ideal expands with our expanding knowledge. But facing reality rather than increasing our subscription to mythology takes courage.

Ethical Culturists are in many respects idealists but our ideals lie in the future, not in the past. We are skeptical of the absolute or universal truth claims upon which traditional morality is based. Yet we have not fallen into the trap of moral relativism of which we are so often accused by those who have no rational defense of their own sense of right and wrong and strike out at others in their frustration.

We do not make claims of absolute truth but rather celebrate and find our ethics in the same place we find the beauty of life, in the context of ever-changing relationships among ourselves and with the world. We are skeptical about bringing the past, whole and undigested, into the present.

This skepticism, along with the lessons of history and reason, cause us to eschew inflexible versions of reality and morality rooted in interpretations of reported revelations, just as those who adhere to them reject things we hold dear—self-determination and realization, science and technology, equal access to education, freedom of thought and expression—the hallmarks of Modernity.

And Modernity is a given. We are where we are. Modernity is with us whether we have indeed advanced past it into a new age or not. If we are to have morality today we must bring it along by much the same route, subjecting it to the same expanding

understandings that have brought us to where we are today. We have to keep working at it and we have to keep thinking about it.

To think is to doubt and that often leads to productive disagreement that cultivates progress. That's what Felix Adler did in founding the Ethical Movement: He looked, he examined, he doubted, and he rejected that which was no longer valid. But he didn't stop there and neither should we. He went on to formulate a new and better way. Not just a different way that cast aside the old, but one that honored and kept the best in it while welcoming new, more meaningful, more inspiring, and more effective understandings.

A kind of "back to the future" so back to Othmer's the futurist as he did, despite his pessimism, offer some useful advice, "Find something more important than you are and dedicate your life to it." That something for us, no matter what our particular vocation or avocation may be is the future.

No matter what our path to it is, and there are many, Ethical Humanists are dedicated to a better future. And the ideal future, carefully and broadly considered, is the most reliable guide to moral living today.

If we continue to draw from the past and project its best into the future, if we do that, we can have morality and modernity.

Without dedication to the future there is no hope in the present. Just as the best of the past supports and lends substance to the present, our dedication to a better future folds back upon us lending warmth to an otherwise indifferent universe and bestows promise on the present.

There is a place for we Ethical Culturists and that place is to preserve and protect the best that is within us. And therein lies the answer to our theme question today, Can we have both morality and modernity?

The ideal of perfected living, the moral maxim *Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself* provides constant moral steerage in these turbulent and rudderless times. With care for each other and dedication to the future, we find moral guidance in our togetherness.

There was a time when morality was universally seen by those who contemplated it as the sum of our views as to what comprises the good life—a balanced life well and comfortably and cooperatively lived.

That concept serves us well today.

The morality modernity demands is a morality that is no longer tied to the moral codes of past, not one of authority but one of personal responsibility. A morality that is inspired by the future, by the concept of an ideal way of living and the understanding that we are infinitely interrelated and interdependent.

With that vision and that understanding, it just makes sense for me to treat you as an extension of myself; to set aside whatever differences we may have in the effort to elicit the best in each other so that we might, in the process, become better ourselves.

It's through that vision and through those understandings that we find morality in a modern age.

And that is something Ethical Culture has to offer a troubled world.

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