

# *The Ethical Center of Social Action*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, September 9, 2007

By **Tony Hileman**, Senior Leader

My theme this morning, *The Ethical Center of Social Action*, is a broad one. To narrow it a bit I want to start by giving a general view of the centrality of ethics in our movement and just what is meant by ethics in that context. Then sketch an understanding of *social action*, at least from my point of view, as that's an equally broad term that's often subjected to confusing interpretations. In the end, I hope to tie it all together by relating it to what we're doing here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture, and hopefully leave you pondering other things we might do and better ways we might do them.

Ethical Culture itself is an expression of Humanism in which ethics is central. This is stressed in the preamble to the National Leader's Council Code of Ethics. "The concept of supremacy, primacy, and autonomy of ethics is the foundation and guidance of Ethical Culture's philosophy of human nature, human community, and human action." It is from our ethical center that our social action arises.

Since our founding by Felix Adler in 1876, this centrality of ethics has been a distinguishing characteristic of our movement, but we have not been alone in our quest for social justice. At least since the articulation of the social gospel a century ago, liberal expressions of traditional religions have joined us in that mission. They are welcome partners even though there is something very different at the center of their motivation—a focus that separates us in inspiration but need not divide us in action.

Adler's direction toward social justice and his conviction that ethics is central to that effort is as sound today as it was at the time of our founding. Speaking to that very point in a message to this congregation this past May, Senior Leader Emeritus Ed Ericson said, "We must give ourselves entirely to the centrality of ethics. It is the alpha and the omega of our Humanism, the heart of intellectual and spiritual life. Without ethics in the central place ... Ethical Culture simply ceases to be Ethical Culture." Without ethics at the center, it's simply not Ethical Culture. That's a powerful and profound statement.

Ed went on to note that Albert Schweitzer wrote many years ago that those who attempt to rise above Humanism only succeed in falling below it. In other words, if in an attempt to better serve social ends we lose sight of our ethical motivation and means, we sink below rather than rise toward our ideals.

There are many in our movement today—some of our certified Leader's among them—who are concerned that we seem to have lost our focus on the centrality of ethics. If that's true, and I fear it is, then we have lost sight of that which distinguishes us from others in the field of social action.

But rather than a lamentation of that drift, my purpose this morning is a reification of the idealism from which our social interests spring— and consequently a revitalization of our urge toward social action, one in which ethics is ever present and ever central.

At the same time I worry over the loss of our ethical center, I am mindful of those—many of our movement's Leaders among them—who are equally concerned that we're

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

not paying enough attention to the moral problems of our day, that we need to engage the world around us in ways better suited to the challenges of our time.

It's no secret that our Society and our movement are not as prominent or robust as they once were. It's easy to get caught up in projects and lose sight of process. I believe there's a connection, that the *what* pulls us away from the *why*. Our lack of vigor and focus are real and related concerns. That's a general condition that certainly does not apply to specifics, as you will see. It is not, in my view, what we are *doing* that holds us back, but what we are *not* doing that hinders us, as I hope you will also see

Moral issues, however large, typically have local manifestations, whatever their national or international context. Our challenge, as I see it, is to identify those moral issues that rouse our interest, that excite our ethical energy, and then apply that interest and energy toward the betterment of our society, or a significant part of it; while at the same time sharpening our focus on the *why* of our social involvement—the centrality of ethics in our lives.

This centrality of ethics was addressed in 1991 in *A Concept Map for Ethical Culture*. “We see all of life through an ethical lens and we live all of life primarily in pursuit of quality of relationship and of social transformation.”

Quality of relationship and of social transformation. If we're going to talk about the nexus between ethics and social action we need to clarify terms. In a philosophic context—and we are nothing if not philosophic, in fact some who grasp only part of Ethical Culture would maintain that that's all that we are—ethics is the study of the concepts involved in practical reasoning.

Again turning to that 1991 document from the National Leader's Council, “We define ethics not simply and solely in terms of what is right or wrong, but in the larger sense of what is good and what is true. Our ethics is not just a debate about morality but a lived attitude of respect for the worth of others and of ourselves.” A lived attitude of respect.

Our ethics address things such as good, right, duty, obligation, virtue, freedom, rationality, choice, and others. In a practical sense, ethics applies our understandings of these terms to daily living as well as to larger issues of social concern. Issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the treatment of animals, and the environmental, legal, political, and social problems we face today. That by the way, is by way of example and is not intended to be an comprehensive list.

Our worldview rests on a natural interpretation of reality. As philosophic naturalists it follows that we place ethical proprieties, thought, and considerations likewise in the natural world. In philosophic-speak that's ethical naturalism. Meaning we turn to each other, in mutual respect, rather than to any higher or external power for our understandings of right and wrong. And we derive our sense of duty and obligation from within that same natural realm. Thus our ethics underlie our concern for others.

We choose to act with integrity toward each other and to treat each other as ends and not merely as means. In doing so, we affirm the worth and dignity of individuals and recognize their equal right to the greatest possible development and freedom consistent with the rights of others to pursue the same ends.

The essence of Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler's thinking, and what makes this movement he founded truly radical, was summed up succinctly by Jone Johnson Lewis, the Leader of the Northern Virginia Ethical Society. “He saw that ethics was not simply

about doing good things. He saw that the *process* of doing good things was at least as important as the result.”

That’s something that must be ever present in our actions, the insight that the *why* is at least as important than the *what*, and that the process that connects the two is more important than either. That’s a tall order, a demanding criteria that distinguishes us from others, particularly those who hold that the ends justify the means.

Not so for the Ethical Humanist. Without the affirmation of the worth and dignity of others, without the appreciation for our interconnectedness that leads to the understanding that our actions matter, we become simply the sum of our actions—an agency of social cause. As noble as that is, it is not, in and of itself, Ethical Culture.

And that segues us nicely into social action itself. There are many, many different takes on just what that means. I once asked a man whom I greatly admire and whose social activism is undeniable and enviable, What is social action? He couldn’t describe it, but he said with a grin, “I know it when I see it.” That didn’t work for the Supreme Court of the United States in referencing pornography and it doesn’t work when considering social action.

To me, social action is that which we do for others through aid, assistance, or advocacy. It arises from our ethical center and is directed toward the personal growth of individuals and the moral betterment of society.

By aid I mean financial or material aid to those in need. By assistance I mean actually lending a hand to those unable to help themselves. And by advocacy I mean speaking for those who do not have a voice in the public square. That’s pretty challenging for a group such as ours that has had its voice muffled by a din of fundamentalist chatter.

This Society and its members are involved in social action via all these avenues. As I point out just how bear in mind the significance of our ethical impulse that distinguishes us from others involved in the same activities, and why our learned Leaders would say that without it it’s simply not an expression Ethical Culture. Our inclination to help and to serve others arises from our ethical center. And I mean that in an individual as well as an organizational sense—in applies equally to every member and every Society of our Ethical Movement.

With that in mind, let’s take the three components of social action I mentioned earlier—aid, assistance, and advocacy—in that order. Again, this is not an exhaustive but an illustrative list.

Being the kind of organization we are, we more often seek rather than offer financial and material aid. But that same ethical core that attracted us to Ethical Culture and that motivates us toward the well being of others compels us to offer aid with our treasure as well as our time. It is my own personal desire that a bit more of that treasure would find its way into the Society’s treasury. But that’s a subject for another time, and I’m sure you’ll be hearing that plea often from others. In fact, later this morning you’ll have a chance to respond to that plea.

Assistance? Hands on help for others? You need look no further than the many longstanding and worthwhile projects of the Society’s Social Service Board. Through their efforts, this Society has been offering shelter to homeless women for twenty-five years. They maintain a supervised visitation program so children from troubled families can have a relationship with their parents in secure circumstances. And that is just one

example of their dedication to support needy children by fostering their development in educational and organized social settings.

And advocacy? The Public Issues Committee has recently led us in formulating positions on the war in Iraq, stem cell research, global warming, and child healthcare insurance. And they proceed to address paid family leave, sick leave, non-mandatory overtime, and flextime for workers in desperate need of our help.

This all comes together for the betterment of those with calloused hands—those who work in the fields, factories, and file rooms of America—those who live from paycheck to paycheck and are so preoccupied with financial survival that they have no time for the leisure of life available to most of us here this morning.

Rising up from our ethical center we can change that! We have before and we can again. It is not just we who look back wistfully at a glorious past. Our nation longs for the day when we earned the world's respect, when this was a shining land of accomplishment where all things seemed possible. But, as Mikhail Gorbachev said, "If what you have done yesterday still looks big to you, you haven't done much today."

We're a much-sobered nation today, one in which many see the American dream crumbling along with our infrastructure. Much of our national accomplishment of yore was at the expense and exploitation of others. That's still true today though the exploitation is taking place largely out of sight in other nations far from our shores or with people from those nations who have come here without permission and find themselves without rights. They huddle out of sight in hopes of being able to remain in a nation that has lost its way.

Drawn to a national ideal that is today diminished, they remain, warmed by the faint glimmer of that ideal. An ideal evident today in the high-minded rhetoric of those who seek to lead but not to be found in their personal behavior or in our national actions.

That has come at the expense of our national reputation. We owe more to those who built this nation—both the selfless and the exploited. Their heritage is our trust.

And we owe more to those who built this Ethical Movement—both the founding and the expanding generations. This Society and this nation need to recognize and return to the principles that made them great. Otherwise both will continue to ebb and wane as others of different, questionable motivations and lesser standards rise.

Let me give you an example of just what it means to approach social justice from an ethical perspective. Recently in Olympia, Washington, lesbian and gay couples swarmed the office of the secretary of state seeking to be among the first to register under the state's new domestic partnership law. That's a step in the right direction, to be sure, but same-sex couples so registered do not have all the rights that married couples do, do not share in the full benefits granted their heterosexual counterparts, and certainly are not afforded the same respect from society.

It reminds me of the great pitcher Satchel Paige's comment when he heard he was going to be admitted into the new Negro League wing of the baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Not the Hall itself, but a special, segregated wing. "Today baseball has turned (me) from a second class citizen into a second class immortal."

That's what we're doing in this nation today. Taking small steps when giant leaps are called for. Ours is a vastly improved society when compared to that of our founding era.

But, while embracing our fair share of that accomplishment, the centrality of our ethics bestows upon us a sense of responsibility rather than leisure.

The nineteenth century British poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold said, “The freethinking of one age is the common sense of the next.” We have seen that with Felix Adler’s revolutionary thinking of the nineteenth century, much of which became the common sense of the twentieth. We must in the twenty-first century apply our own creativity and ethical energy to continue that that evolution.

In describing Ethical Culture in London in 1925, Felix Adler said, “...Without an intense moral faith there can be no moral fervor, and if there is to be a new upward turn in ethics and religion, if Ethical Societies are to multiply, they cannot...do so (merely) by instituting forum lectures, by devising a ritual, or even by...(their) good works, however indispensable these may be. The Movement must give birth to personalities who have attained for themselves an abiding ethical faith, and are aflame with it.

The following year he stressed this charge that the responsibility of an Ethical Society is to ignite in others a flame of abiding ethical faith. In an essay entitled *Personality*, he held that the “spiritual object” is to produce in our members “the will to do one’s part in such a manner as to enable (others) to do their part with the greatest possible excellence.” That’s the social application of the ethical essence of Ethical Culture.

In explaining what he meant by personality, Adler said, “Personality, so far as it is attainable, consists in this attitude of mind, nay, of one’s whole being, towards the being of others.” That’s a far cry from the individualists whose “voluntarism” Adler saw as an overemphasis of “the importance of selfhood to the neglect of the social pole of moral experience.”

He went on to caution that “The natural object is commonly considered the product, the personal relations the by-product; (but) from the spiritual point of view the reverse is true—the personal relations are the true product, the natural object is the by-product.”

Remaining firmly rooted in our ethical center and letting our social service radiate outward from there, we see that personal relationships – the laboratory of ethics – are indeed the true product and that their natural object—the personal growth of others and the moral betterment of society—is their natural result.

Ed Ericson, whom I quoted earlier, said in that same greeting that Ethical Culture “represents something entirely original and irreplaceable in the American religious spectrum. ... Without the Ethical Movement, there would be a hole in the tapestry of religious thought and life.”

That is an unimaginable loss that we cannot allow to happen, and a loss we can easily prevent by regaining our focus. We and others will benefit enormously when we do.

There’s no small number of those who see Ethical Culture as only a piece of what it is. Even some of our members think we’re simply a philosophic group, or a social action organization. Given our past accomplishments and our present efforts, that’s understandable for those viewing us from a distance. And given our propensity to slice difference as thinly as possibly, it’s no wonder that those who only partially grasp what we’re all about would see us as a debating society.

But we’re so much more than that, so much more that either of those aspects, so much more that both of them together. In fact, we’re more than the sum of all our parts. As a

religious expression of Humanism in which ethics is central, our substance spreads out from a central place into unknown areas of human endeavor.

I recently stumbled across a small collection of the insights of one of my predecessors here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. *The Faith of John Lovejoy Elliott*, the immediate successor to Felix Adler, was assembled and published by the American Ethical Union in 1948, six years after his death. I want to close with some of his thoughts.

“Religion is a sense of connectedness, to make free in (people) the product of their mind and will.” Mind and will. That’s also expressed in the Ethical Culture School banner that hangs right here on Central Park West, “Turning thought into action.”

Elliott spoke directly of that ethical process in saying, “The conception that (humanity) is the bearer of the highest life is the distinguishing teaching of the Ethical Movement and marks us out from the past. Its center is the religious vision which shows us the spiritual life as an ethical energy manifesting itself in every (person). This vision is our foundation stone.”

It is that foundation stone, he went on to say, that makes Ethical Culture “profoundly radical in its method and aim.” Note that he didn’t reference our already considerable social contributions or philosophic involvements, but rather the ethical energy that fuels our goals and how we go about achieving them. That’s our ethical center.

He expressed that distinguishing characteristic so eloquently in talking about how we go about ethical action from an ethical perspective. “When you sit down face to face with your boy or your girl,” he said, “with your partner, your friend or your (spouse), or with someone with whom you are trying with all that is in you to teach and to help, you do not sit there as a father, or a (spouse), or a friend.” Or, I would add, as a social worker or community volunteer. “You sit there,” he explained, “as one human being prepared to give every bit of help you can give from the heart, mind and knowledge and experience, all you know and all you have culled from all that you have tried to do.”

*All.* With *all* that is in you, you offer *all* that you have. That’s ethical energy. That’s Ethical Culture. And that’s what distinguishes this precious gift of ours from others who share our social aims.

As we go about identifying the cultural challenges of our time, plan how to approach them, and organize to address them, let us not be over focused on ethical ends to the exclusion of our ethical means and ethical motivations.

Aflame with an abiding ethical faith, and with our ethical energy evident in our every action, let us proceed from our ethical center, through our relationships with each other, into a world in great need of what we have to offer: The understanding that ethics is central in all we do and that others are as deserving as we are.

The large is merely a reflection of the small. Our global aims must be a reflection of our personal lives. What we do in our everyday actions makes a direct and profound difference to the world in which we live. That connection is the corner stone and guiding light of Ethical Culture, and it is the ethical center of social action.



A member of the American Ethical Union and the International Humanist & Ethical Union

2 West 64<sup>th</sup> Street • New York, New York 10023 • 212.874.5210 • [www.NYSEC.org](http://www.NYSEC.org)