

# *What's the Big Idea of Ethical Culture?*

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In searching for the large ideas, indeed *The Big Idea of Ethical Culture*, I chose to do so—to the extent possible—through the eyes of the originator of those ideas. In founding the Ethical Movement in the 1870s, Felix Adler had no shortage of good, even great ideas that he incorporated into Ethical Culture. Some of them he mined from the past but more were original, drawn from his own intellect.

Adler was a religious reformer, an original thinker in a field that valued adherence and wasn't overly fond of creativity. So rather than attempting to modernize existing religions, Adler set out, while still in his early twenties, to form something radically new—something that would overcome and transcend the limits and divisiveness of the “decadent theologies” of his day.

That took courage, that took inventiveness, and that took large ideas—of which he had many. But what was his big, really big, idea? That's what I want to delve into this morning. I'll start by laying the groundwork and then focusing on two of his broader ideas that I think are particularly profound. And finally explore the underlying, the supporting idea of it all—the big idea of Ethical Culture.

In laying the groundwork, understand that Felix Adler was possessed of extraordinary insight and daring. He looked at the towering ideas and the intimidating institutions that promoted them with an intrepid intellectual curiosity. He cast the jaundiced eye of a skeptic upon them, and they withered beneath his gaze.

A contemporary of Adler's, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., who served on the Supreme Court of the United States for the first third of the twentieth century, once said, “To have doubted one's own first principles is the mark of a civilized man.” Well, by that standard young Felix was a most civilized man indeed. He doubted, he examined the tradition of his birth and the religions of his time and he found them wanting.

He also found them unappreciative of rational inquiry, and saw their attempt to squelch doubt as an effort to numb thought of any sort. That wasn't for him.

In looking back on that experience from a perspective of forty years, he asked in reference to the religions of the late nineteenth century; “Why not separate the dross from the gold, the error from the truth, explicating what is implicit in that truth, and adapting it to the needs and conditions of the modern age?”

He recognized that there was gold in them thar hills, but, in answering his own question, he also saw that the religions of redemption were themselves beyond redemption. “The answer” he said, “is that the truth contained in ... [today's] religion is not capable of such adaptability. [As] it claims finality.” They were inflexible, rigid in their stance that “gods or prophets said it, I believe it, and that's all there is to it.” That didn't work for Adler, for him there was more, much more.

And that insight is Adler's first large idea. Not the big idea, but a large idea nonetheless. The idea that the truth of any religious conception is transitory and must at all times adjust in order to remain consonant with “the conditions of the modern age.”

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<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.

For Adler, as for us, those conditions include the insights of science into the universe, and the acceptance that we are a part of rather than apart from the natural world. Those are understandings that the religion's of Adler's day, and most of the religions of our time, simply cannot accommodate.

The sense that our concepts rest not on even ground but on the undulating terrain of our understandings remains a distinguishing characteristic of the Ethical Movement. It is from this that the progressive, reconstructive nature of Ethical Culture emerges.

Opening the closed circles of thought and belief was a significant contribution to the religious tapestry. The realization and acceptance that "one era's truth is error to the next" bestows upon us the never-ending responsibility of re-examination and reform. We have been true to that obligation in moving past some of the "dross" of Adler's thinking—if you'll excuse my irreverence. But we have also been true in recognizing and valuing the gold, of which there is much in this precious treasure of ours.

That's the groundwork that's needed to proceed. But before we do a caveat. More so than most things that inform and guide our lives, Ethical Culture is organic. It has been expressed in eight commitments, ten powerful ideas, a concept map, each of which divide, analyze, and present the whole in a different fashion, and each of which is legitimate.

Ferretting out big ideas is not an exact science. In the best of circumstances it is more of an art and art, as we all know, is in the eye of the beholder. And the beholder, as we know, perceives the same art differently at different times.

So this is my take on the big idea of Ethical Culture this morning. Transient as it may be, it is more than mere opinion. It is a considered conclusion. But it is my considered conclusion and not the definitive position of Ethical Culture for all time. I share it with you in the hope of illuminating your understanding of Ethical Culture, not necessarily to convince you of my position.

Ethical Culture's attitude of open inquiry takes us past the idea that human thought and conclusion stand on a solid rock of certitude. That rock has the maddening habit of crumbling beneath our feet so Adler placed his views on a stable but floating platform of concepts developed through reflection and a careful review of human experience.

This attitude was radical in the late nineteenth century. But, like most leading edge thinking, it's become more prevalent. It's said that Ethical Culture is hard to explain, difficult to grasp. It is not. It is radiantly simple to the open mind and courageous constitution. Here's how existential theologian Paul Tillich expressed it the better part of a century after Adler's founding of our movement. "Being religious means asking passionately the questions of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers," that's the open minded part, but he went on, "even if the answers hurt." That's the courageous part!

Being willing to receive answers even if the answers hurt. For some that openness, that receptiveness is easy and requires only the gumption of intellectual pursuit. But for many more it means rejecting the beliefs of parents, family, loved ones, and that often invites the scorn and rejection of respected friends and colleagues. That can be isolating and that can be frightening.

Adler stood up to that challenge, as have many of you here today. The power of his ideas gathered about him a supporting circle. And he in turn founded this place, and others like it across the country, where we can offer and benefit from the same support he

experienced. He built a place and a movement within which we can experience each other and together carry forward his ideas.

Here are two that I think embody much of his thinking and serve to illustrate my notion of his really big idea.

The first is his concept of the centrality of ethics, the second is his improvement on the Golden Rule. The first more or less leads to the second.

Bear in mind that Adler's thinking was complex and, being organic in nature, often seems convoluted. Add to the difficulty that he was a lecturer. He spoke much but wrote comparatively little. So his ideas are gleaned in bits and pieces from his different articulations of them. Thus they are not brightly separated but rather intertwined, each an expression of at least one and sometimes several others. So picking two is not a crisp approach but one that looks at other thoughts through these two.

Accordingly, the centrality of ethics involves at least two other concepts that together point the way toward the big one.

For Adler, philosophic pursuit was an expression of a deep longing. For him, as for us, the most central human issue in that longing involves creating a more humane environment—a better world. The approach that ours is a lived attitude, one in which ethics is central, assumes two things. Or, in the context of our consideration this morning, incorporates two other ideas; those of choice and worth.

Ethics begins with choice, recognizing the need and our ability to make the choices that govern our lives. From the Humanist perspective, “not choosing” doesn't exist because not choosing is itself a choice—a choice that impacts our lives. The choices we make, through action or indecision, affect the fate and fortune of our future. Therefore, learning to become better choosers is central to ethics just as ethics is central to our lives.

Learning to be better choosers is a subject that could draw us down the side road of education and our lifelong commitment to self improvement. But that worthy excursion would be a distraction to my major thesis this morning so it will be left for another time.

The choice we make that completes the ethical equation is the choice to treat each other as ends, not merely as means. Within the Ethical Culture context, the first ethical decision we make is how to relate to each another. The Ethical Movement asks each person to make the following choice: I choose to attribute worth to myself and to others. For the philosophic naturalist, choosing to attribute worth is an existential act and not a statement of ultimate reality.

It is the meta-choice we make when we first set foot on the ethical path. It is the foundational choice of how to relate to one another that is necessary in order to further our goal of creating a better world for ourselves and for others. It is a form of unconditional positive regard. One that can be lost but one that need not be earned.

The statement “I choose to attribute worth to myself and to others” is used as an axiom, springboarding us into more ethical relationships. To enable us to be whole, in a fragmented world, we choose to treat each other as unique individuals having intrinsic worth.

It is the nature of groups to attribute worth differently based on attitudes of inclusion and exclusion. Groups, or even various subgroups within a group, tend to view themselves as superior and thus claim rights and privileges they are unwilling to cede to

others. By choosing to attribute worth and exhibiting an unconditional positive regard toward others, we add weight to the case for ultimate inclusiveness.

The worst atrocities in history have emerged from creating exclusive partial circles of worth. Unless we advocate the treatment of all people as though they have the unremovable quality of worth, our entire ethical system unravels. That's why I consider the centrality of ethics, encompassing the concepts of choice and worth as it does, to be one of Adler's foundational ideas.

Let me leave the centrality of ethics there and go on to Adler's improvement on the Golden Rule, the supreme moral axiom of Ethical Culture: Act so as to elicit the best in others and thereby in thyself. Each time I pause to consider this, I find more depth and meaning to it.

Every religion needs a prime moral maxim and each has one. The Western, monotheistic or Abrahamic religions usually refer to it as the Golden Rule.

Those of us who wear their Ethical Humanist identity openly often find ourselves in philosophic conversation with those who hold traditional religious views. And at some point in such conversations, someone almost always says, "Well, we all believe in the Golden Rule." Like that's some, generally understood and accepted maxim the world over.

I relish those moments because it gives me a chance to present Ethical Culture on their terms and in language they recognize. They're seeking common ground, and indeed there is much of it in our shared concerns for the world in which we live. But I just can't cede agreement when it comes to this central axiom.

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 takes 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." While remaining creedal, it does take deed into the account of creed, and it recognizes you. But it still calls on me to determine what you might desire.

In reformulating the sentiment hinted at in these adages, Ethical Culture improves on 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 Ethical Culture. It brings you into my ethical circle. No longer am I the sole arbiter of what's right and good for you or for me, but must take you into account in determining together what's best for both of us.

There's a reciprocal aspect to that, a sense of reciprocity, an understanding of mutuality. And that's the big idea of Ethical Culture. That through the practice of ethical relationships a sense of togetherness, a sense of mutuality, a sense of reciprocity arises.

That's expressed so many different ways in our culture today—we're all in it together, what goes around comes around, our actions have consequences. Some of those consequences are immediate and some delayed, some magnified and some dissipated, but

our actions have real and direct consequences. Not always equal and opposite, life is not a physics experiment or a mathematical equation. Sometimes things get way out of balance. But the way we act, the way we relate to each other, the way we interact, shapes the world in which we live.

Without this concept of reciprocity the centrality of ethics collapses and our moral axiom, like others before it, becomes hollow rhetoric.

My thesis is that reciprocity is the motivating idea to which all our actions are related, and thus the big idea of Ethical Culture. It is the platform upon which all its other ideas rest.

Okay, that's the philosophic part. I've taken two powerful ideas of Ethical Culture and condensed them into one big idea, that of reciprocity, or mutuality if you prefer.

Now let's take just a minute to test that big idea by unpacking it in a practical sense to see how it plays out in our lives—to see if that thought readily informs and motivates our actions in a positive way. A philosophy—a worldview, a lifestance, a religion, call it what you will—one that doesn't animate our lives toward the good, toward the better isn't of much use to us. This one does and that's why it's so precious.

Adler described Ethical Societies as communities “dedicated to moral striving.” Notice he didn't hold the primary purpose of an Ethical Society to be social service or social action but moral striving. That said, Adler understood deeply that moral striving has meaning only in a social context.

The smallest number in relationships, in ethics, in moral striving is two. The smallest number in social service or in social action is two. The smallest number in reciprocity or mutuality is two. It all begins with two, with you and me, and radiates out into the world from there.

The genius of Adler's big idea lies not in its plurality, in the two-ness of it, but in his understanding that reciprocity does not begin with you and it does not begin with me, but rather it arises – between us.

Inherent in this is a profound sense of interdependence and interconnectedness. The recognition that we cannot do without each other—I without you or you without me—and the understanding that if either of us were different the world would be different. It is through this sense of ourselves as part of an organic whole that we reinforce the attribution of worth to every individual.

It also means that if I change, you change. And if I can act so as to help you change for the better—to elicit the best in you—I will become better myself not as a result, but as a consequence of the act of helping you be better as a consequence of eliciting the best in you. 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. That's reciprocity.

Cultural greatness almost always emerges from one, easily grasped idea to which all other ideas are related. Reciprocity is ours. It has been expressed in many ways in popular culture, but it has not been linked to personal growth or social involvement and improvement. Properly articulated, the concept that reciprocity is a powerful agent of cultural change could be the next great contribution of Ethical Culture.

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