

# *Unity and Diversity*

Platform address<sup>1</sup> to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, March 30, 2008  
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Unity and Diversity, I have to say, are old themes of Ethical Culture and one is seldom mentioned without the other. In one of his first key speeches about Ethical Culture, our founding Leader, Dr. Felix Adler, explained that it would be a religion of people with free minds who would be deeply engaged in good works. He said: “Difference is inevitable *and welcome* in thought, but be one with us where there is *nothing to hide*, in action.” And that’s when he coined the phrase, “Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed.”

The “diversity” he’s talking about in this phrase, refers, in the main, to the diversity in individual thoughts about and beliefs in god, gods or no gods. However, if you look into the beliefs of Ethical Culturists on that subject today, I doubt you’re going to find a lot of true diversity. It’s unlikely you’ll find that any of us worship a divinity – though we make it clear that in Ethical Culture, anything you care to believe on that score is totally up to you.

And as for unanimity in the deed – that doesn’t mean we all do the same deed, of course, it just means we all believe in the importance of good deeds, of service, of citizenship. We all know that the good life includes thinking of others and helping out when we can.

But that’s not the only way he spoke of unity and diversity. Adler also spoke of unity and diversity in a more sweeping way, a more universal way. In his book, “An Ethical Philosophy of Life,” he explained a theory of community in the chapter with the strange title of, “The Ideal of the Whole and the Ethical Manifold.” Sounds dreadful, doesn’t it ...

Allow me to digress a moment here about the word “manifold” – it’s over 1,000 years old and originally meant a document that was folded many times – the word has come to have dozens of meanings, all having to do with “numerous and/or varied,” and in machinery, it is a chamber having several outlets through which a liquid or gas is disbursed or gathered. I have to say it is not a word that has received a great deal of use in my personal lexicon. For me it was just a word my father and uncles bandied about during car talk – it seemed to be something connected to the muffler (muffler’s a much easier word – it does what it says: muffles sound). Anyway, both manifolds and mufflers were mysterious things attached somewhere on the bottom of cars.

But back to *Adler’s* manifold. It was a concept he thought should be kept in mind. It did not and does not exist in time and space. To use today’s terms, it is a “model” – his manifold represents an “infinite, ideal whole,” an “ethical universe,” that is made up of people – and each of us, every person, is a unique “ethical unit” in that universe of humanity – and each of us, every one, is absolutely necessary, with “*reciprocal interdependence*” to that universe and the other units within it.

With that postulate established, Adler lists three principles of ethics: (#1) Act as a *member* of the ethical manifold, (#2) Act so as to *achieve uniqueness* and (#3) Act so as

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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.

to elicit the distinctive, unique quality characteristic of another as a fellow-member of the infinite whole.

For #1, I think what he means by “acting as a member,” is that since we’re all part of the whole, we need to conduct ourselves keeping that “totality” in mind. And at the very same time, we need to do (#2) – do our own thing – be who we are – and find ways to use the lives we’ve found ourselves in and the experiences we’ve had to express ourselves – to use the singularity that *is* each of us – to be the unique person that we each are.

Now, as you know, that’s not easy. You run across enough sticky wickets in your life, and it is hard to express your individuality. It is hard to tell the truth as you see it. It is hard to say something that you know won’t be agreed with. It’s hard to stand out. But when it is called for, you should – because that very uniqueness that you have is something that the greater whole needs to be all that IT can be!

And this explains why #3 is so vitally important for the good of the manifold and for the good of each of us. #3, again, is to “elicit the distinctive, unique quality characteristic of another as a fellow-member of the infinite whole.” In talking of this, Adler warns of the dangers of slurring over “the indefeasible singularity of each member” of this manifold, and makes the very interesting observation that “the most completely individualized act is the most ethical.” *I think that might be open to question*, but I get his point, as he says that it is “of immense practical importance *to hold fast to diversity*, and at the same time stress the *unity*.”

As you can see, then, helping each other express him- or herself, refusing to jump to censure and judgment, looking to find the spark within – is, as he said, not only helping them, but helping us all.

The diversity of all these individualities, then, adds up to the “Manifold,” the “Ethical Universe.” The diversity we are to treasure and foster by recognizing the spark, the uniqueness, and by attributing worth to each and every person. The diversity that – according to Adler – saves us, because, as you know, Adler says in his rule of conduct, “In order to achieve our own truths, to become essentially real, we must seek to elicit the consciousness of everyone’s uniqueness and interrelationship with others.” To repeat and oversimplify, you must be who you truly are; and you must help others to be who they truly are.

As I said, though, this is Adler’s “model.” This is a construct he thought up. It’s nice, and it’s a way to think of ideal behavior that we can all aspire to, but here in the real world, diversity amounts to a lot more than simply the array of everyone’s talents and capabilities.

Here in the real world diversity can make for conflict – even for those who have good intentions. It is a given that if you get two or three people together, you’ll get a diversity of opinion. Throw in an emergency, put those three people in a train stuck in a tunnel, add in a fire and smoke and a narrow escape hatch, and you can see diversity move right on into conflict. Or back it up into a situation without physical disaster but where egos are at stake, where somebody disrespects somebody else: there will be conflict, and the “ethical manifold” is the farthest thing from anybody’s mind.

Speaking of disrespect, we talked about it on the radio yesterday – when we were discussing “rankism.” Though Dr. Adler hadn’t heard that term, it is clear that he understood the problems caused by people throwing their weight, their rank, around. By treating people in such a way as to damage their dignity. By doing the opposite of bringing out the best.

On the other hand, during placid times, folks pretty much go along to get along. To a great extent, that’s what we have here at Ethical Culture. Relatively placid. Some differences of opinion, sometimes heated differences. But diversity of thought? Of general ways of looking at life? Not a lot. In fact, many of us say the reason we like Ethical Culture is because we can be with people of “like minds.”

But that expression “like minds” does give me pause. I sort of wonder if “like minds” is code talk for “like me.” I’ve been told that there are members of this society who feel that the only people this organization can appeal to are people “like us.” Like us! And what *is* “like us”? Well, if you look around, it is virtually all white and mostly old. (Frankly, you definitely are an old congregation when to qualify for your young members’ group you can’t be older than age 55.) I would venture the opinion that we are definitely lacking the diversity that exists in this city today. In our membership we don’t happen to have every ethnic group, we don’t have a good representation of the various “genders,” we don’t have a full range of economic levels, we don’t have all ages. Mind you, I’m not saying that’s intentional.

If we’re really serious about wanting “like minds,” such a mix of members could be a problem. Our “customer satisfaction” adviser for the Membership Cultivation Committee told us that before you set your plans to seek new members, you need to be clear on who your “target group” is – who are you aiming to draw into your membership? We told him, “everybody,” and he said, “It can’t be everybody.” He said there is no group or organization that truly wants or that could handle “everybody.”

Well, we didn’t agree with him at first. We like to think the New York Society for Ethical Culture is for “everybody,” but he is dead right. You *can* narrow down our “target audience.” You do it by saying, “We don’t want people who aren’t looking for civilized community. We don’t want people who do not accept our basic tenet, that every human being has value. We don’t want people who don’t buy into our concept that what you do in your life and how you treat people is important.”

It’s pretty clear that it follows, to put it *positively*, that what we are looking for is respectful people, concerned people, thoughtful people, and we’re looking for people who are looking for a community where they don’t have to believe in a supreme, supernatural being to be accepted. And, of course, the people we are looking for do not have to be of any particular skin color, or of any particular age, or of any particular status, or any particular ethnic group.

Well, suppose the Membership Cultivation Committee came up with some terrific plans. Suppose our plans were that we needed to *change what we do* to draw new people and when we made those changes, suppose people started flocking to the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Suppose we were to fill every one of the 800 seats in this auditorium

every Sunday. And suppose this filled auditorium had contingents of all the ethnic groups with all the beautiful array of skin colors and every range of income from poor to rich, and every age – the place, then, wouldn't be the same – our activities and classes and programs wouldn't be the same – there'd be new and different ones added to or even crowding out the old. Would that be acceptable to us?

Well, that's diversity. To have a Society that is vibrant and needed in this city, I think we'd have to, in effect, open it up, in essence, and cast it into the future. And to move on into this future, we'd have to renew our *faith* in the future of Ethical Culture itself. Faith not only in our religion, but also in the *necessity* of our religion. We have to believe that we need it and others need it – and that others beyond our days – way into the future – will need it.

However. However, it's pretty threatening to open the gates and let in all the people, AND to let in new ideas, new ways to do things. This is not easy when your life is running along on a familiar and comfortable path. It can happen, that without realizing it, we can turn away; and shut creative thoughts and “different” people out.

That is not Adler's way. He meant it when he spoke of diversity. All our leaders mean it when they speak of diversity. We need to mean it too.

Being receptive to growth and change and diversity takes determination. Being open to unusual ideas and new people involves holding back on rejection. It involves thinking, maybe this *could* work. In his speech on the Supreme Moral Rule, Felix Adler talks about having an ethical change of heart – of “learning the art of seeing the unexpressed in people.” He said, “Wherever there is someone whom naturally you would avoid, consider whether your unfriendliness is not due, consciously or unconsciously, to the fact that he possesses something which you do not possess – and then seek to gain from him the truth he has.”

Adler kept insisting that we look beyond the surface, and he said that “then when you are able to establish a habit, when you truly wish to see the human and beautiful things in others, then you are a *different* person.” *You* are a different person – in effect you've brought diversity into yourself. You have had the ethical “change of heart” that Adler treasures. He sees that change of heart, that opening up to receive, to let in, to connect, as the basis of Ethical Culture.

Mark Nepo, poet and philosopher, understands. He talks about that change too. He says: “To *listen* is to continually give up all expectation and to give our attention, completely and freshly, to what is before us, not really knowing what we will hear or what that will mean. In the practice of our days, to listen is to lean in, softly, with a willingness *to be changed* by what we hear.” “To be changed by what we hear.”

And that means to learn. That means to encompass new ideas, to internalize diversity. Break old habits of thought. Develop new ideas. All of which are needed if we are to expand and grow. If we were to *listen* as Nepo says, and be changed – it would put us in closer, more productive connection with others, and that would make Adler very happy as it would prove that his magic manifold does exist. We'd have the interdependence

throughout our diversity that he envisions. The sum of us would truly be more than the parts.

Adler was concerned about finding that interdependence, that connection. He got pretty passionate about it. Here's how he said it: "The superficial morality of the day says, pay your debts and be helpful and give to the poor, that is morality. That is absurd. That is not morality at all. If that were its morality, a movement for ethical culture would be the most revolting, the most insipid, the most revoltingly insipid thing that could be conceived. A movement for ethical culture is a movement to get at the bottom of things, to get at the interior life, to get at unity, to put an end to that discord of which we are all aware."

And so we come to the essence of his concept – through diversity to unity. *Not only* the simple *unity* implicit in Adler's admonition, "So act or live so as to bring out the best in others and thereby in thyself." *But* the *unity* of us all when we open our hearts and connect at that deeper level, when we reach that inner humanity that we all share.

This is the *unity* that forces us to action, the kind of action that is central to our movement's history, action that Ethical Culture Leader Algernon Black said should be an essential feature of each society. As Marc Bernstein has said, "Algernon Black had little sympathy for Societies that became places for intellectual discussion only, or places that existed simply to make people feel comfortable. Since it has no theology, Ethical Culture is measured by what it does, and how it serves others."

This is the *unity* that was discussed in the talk given at the beginning of this month by Senator and candidate for the Democratic Party presidential nomination Barack Hussein Obama, in his speech that began by quoting the Constitution, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." (There's your "unity.")

He said in that speech, "I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together – unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction – towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren."

He also said, "We need *unity* ... we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems – two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all."

These are the problems that we all need to help solve, each one of us – the ethical units in Adler's Manifold. We can all come together and find that necessary unity.

So, today, we see that the Ethical Manifold isn't the only "model" that expresses the importance of *diversity* and how it leads to unity. We see that we cannot have one without the other. Not only in the mysterious manifold, but in real life – and since diversity-to-unity is the basis, the root of *our* religious commitment, it becomes bright and clear to me that Ethical Culture must be one of the key players in meeting the challenges Obama talks about.

As he said, “if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.” And *I* say, retreat is not in the cards for us. Not if we follow our leaders. Not if we listen to Felix Adler or Algernon Black. Here’s a poem, “Live Your Best Life” by Mr. Black:

This is a call to the living,  
To those who refuse to make peace with evil,  
With the suffering and the waste of the world.  
This is a call to the human, not the perfect.  
To those who know their own prejudices,  
Who have no intention of becoming prisoners of their own limitations.

This is a call to those who remember the dreams of their youth,  
Who know what it means to share food and shelter,  
The care of children and those who are troubled,  
To reach beyond barriers of the past  
Bringing people to communion.

This is a call to the never ending spirit  
Of the common man, his essential decency and integrity,  
His unending capacity to suffer and endure,  
To face death and destruction and to rise again  
And build from the ruins of life.

This is the greatest call of all  
The call to a faith in people.

Barack Obama tells of “the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning.” Let that not be true here at the New York Society for Ethical Culture.

As the religion that says you can believe or not believe, as you see fit, and be one of us; as the religion that straddles the gap between the atheist and the god-fearing, the agnostic and the worshipful, the pagan and the pious; as the religion that says you must seek out the best and you must serve others; Ethical Culture is firmly established, as my son has pointed out to me, as “the religion of the future.” But more than that, it is the connection to the future; the bringer-together of all the diverse people and groups, of past and future, of young and old, of high and low, rich and poor – we are a place to help bring about the more ideal, the more perfect union – not only of the people who come here, or of the people of our community, but of our country, of our world and of our future.

Unity from and through diversity? Look for it in Ethical Culture. Look for it here.

