

## *Two Possible Futures for Ethical Culture*

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I became interested in Ethical Culture's future when I began to study its past. About a year ago, Howard Radest, the author of Toward Common Ground, the history of our movement, recommended that I bring his book up to date. He had taken our story only to 1951, the seventy-fifth anniversary of Ethical Culture. Much had occurred in the movement since then, and it was my job to write it up. I did a cursory review of our last five decades, with an eye toward the arc of my proposed narrative. I immediately saw a problem. How, I asked myself, could I keep the story of our last half-century from being a tale of decline, if not failure? If that question sounds bald, consider the following.

Whatever metric we chose to compare our movement today to what it was in the fifties, we get the same sad result. Take membership. The AEU now puts national membership at 2,448, more than a 50% decline since the fifties. If we measure ourselves by our Sunday School enrollment, the results would be more disheartening still. Moreover, we have lost a number of properties, institutions, and programs that until recently advanced our cause and raised our profile in the community. The Weis Ecology Center is now run not by Ethical Culture, but by the New Jersey Audubon Society. The Brooklyn Ethical Culture School was closed down years ago. The Hudson Guild Farm, a property with which we had a long association and used for Ethical Culture events, has been sold to outsiders. Our programs on WQXR, which ran for a half-century, ended a few years ago. Even formal connection to the Ethical Culture Schools ended in 1995.

We should also add that the stature of the Leaders, if measured by their public prominence – recall that Algernon Black was Chair of New York City's Civilian Complaint Review Board and Jerome Nathanson, Chair of the New York State Committee Against Capital Punishment – has diminished in the last half century.

The cumulative effect of all of these developments is a reduced presence of Ethical Culture in American society. Even if our name is now known by many, our ability to exercise influence has declined.

Of course, a few Societies, Bergen among them, have flourished in the last several decades. But it is important to focus on the trajectory of the movement as a whole. Adler founded a movement, and a movement has ambitions – and resources – that individual Societies cannot have. It is the movement that hired the lawyers to contest legal challenges to our tax-free status as a religion and to contest the claim that one can be denied a government position if one does not swear allegiance to a deity. It is the movement that trains leaders, provides loans to individual Societies, provides seed money to get them started. Although we feel the tug of Ethical Culture most palpably when we are among the members of our own Society, the AEU never touching us so directly, we must remember that we are not a group of disparate islands, but a federation committed to

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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.

shared goals and ideals. If the national movement's resources and energies decline, so must its clout, and that affects us all.

How, then, can we think about our diminished state and retain some hope for the future? I ran that question by Howard Radest and Dr. Spetter, and they gave me very different answers. Each answer, in fact, suggests a different possible future for Ethical Culture, and my talk today explores what those two futures might be like.

Howard Radest argues that Ethical Culture could have a promising future if it allies itself with the larger Humanist movement. In a world where evangelicals are an increasingly dangerous power, Ethical Culture cannot afford to zealously protect its spiritual turf, to keep its distance from the larger Humanist movement of which it is a part. It must be less tribalist and more cosmopolitan. In joining forces with other Humanists, it can increase its numbers and influence. In short, it can have a future.

To fortify this argument, Professor Radest reviews the opportunities Ethical Culture has missed at coalition-building. He points out that a wing of Unitarianism known as the Western Conference, a force from about 1870 to 1960, expressed interest in joining forces with Ethical Culture. The Western Conference, located in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and points beyond, had differentiated itself from the more traditional Unitarians centered in Boston. The Westerners were politically progressive and given to a very loose theology that was essentially Humanist. The conference was eager to invite Ethical Culture into its ranks. Felix Adler rejected the idea.

Fast forward, Professor Radest would say, to the early years of the Depression. In 1933, thirty-four liberal Humanists gave expression to their philosophy in a powerful document known as the Humanist Manifesto. It proclaimed Humanism a religious force that eschewed supernaturalism, and it suggested that ethics, like other human values, was the product of human cooperation, not divine will. Following John Dewey, who was a signer, it intimated that all truths were provisional in character. The Manifesto was concise, assertive but not strident, and advanced a religious Humanism that seemed consonant with Ethical Culture. Felix Adler, in the throes of an illness that would soon take his life, was not told about the document for fear that it might upset him. Although one or two Ethical Culturists signed as individuals, Ethical Culture chose not to be a part of the broad Humanist Movement that the Manifesto announced, at least not then. Adler, Joe Chuman has told me, would never have signed the Manifesto, for he was a philosophical idealist who believed in timeless, not provisional, ethical truths. Howard Radest may well be right in claiming that 1933 represented a moment of missed opportunity for us. Ethical Culture and this new liberal religious Humanism might have marched arm in arm, strengthening one another along the way.

According to Professor Radest, then, Ethical Culture can best carve out a future if we avoid the mistakes of the past, partner with other Humanist groups, develop strength in numbers, and become a force that can do battle with the religious right. This is an argument that must be taken seriously. But, it is also an argument that needs a careful critique. What difficulties does it raise?

The fundamental premise on which this argument rests is that Humanist principles do not in any way conflict with the principles of Ethical Culture. Is this true? Take for example the posture Humanism and Ethical Culture take toward traditional religions. Ethical Culture's view was given expression by Felix Adler in the 1880s in a paper called "Sketches of a Religion Based on Ethics." Writing of those who adhere to traditional dogmatic theologies, he says:

*With this class, we are not concerned. If they are sincere in their convictions, if the formulas of their faith give them a real support in life's troubles, it is well for them. 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 salute them as we pass them by.” This respectful attitude toward other faiths is a hallmark of our movement.

Modern Humanism, as represented by, say, the American Humanist Association, does not share our charitable attitude toward other faiths. Marlane and I attended an Ethical Culture assembly that was jointly sponsored by the AEU and the AHA, and we were not only embarrassed but angered by the strident anti-religious messages on the bumper stickers, buttons and assorted paraphernalia that the AHA's vendor brought to the Assembly. It is one thing to protest jihadists and another to make fun of everyone who walks into a church, mosque or temple. The idea that traditional religion might serve the needs of its adherents is not an idea with which all Humanists are comfortable. This attitude should make us think twice about Professor Radest's vision of a big Humanist tent in which Ethical Culture can find a place without compromising its principles.

But there is a second reason to wonder about his vision of the future, and it lies close to the heart of Ethical Culture. It is easier to see this point, if we begin with a working definition of our faith. My favorite short definition is the following 21-word description that Joe Chuman has proposed: “Ethical Culture is a religious and philosophical movement that seeks to make primary the ethical factor in all relationships of life.” If, as Joe suggests, we must apply ethical principles to all our relationships—with spouses, parents, children, friends, co-workers, employers—this private realm becomes an essential focus of our moral commitments. Of course, we also interested in justice in the larger society. We are citizens, and our relationships with our city, state and national governments engage us in passionate pursuit of just social policies. Morality, in both private and public realms, matters to Ethical Culturists.

Now, it has always struck me the broader Humanist movement has little interest in the private sphere. Humanists certainly talk about ethics. They argue that ethics derives not from supernatural sources, but from the cooperative efforts of human beings over millennia. They see such naturalistic ethics as a hallmark of their philosophy. But this is ethics in the abstract, not in the concrete. Think of the difference between understanding and explaining the phenomenon of love, and actually loving someone. They are very different. Believing in naturalistic ethics is not the same as a commitment to behaving ethically.

Suspecting that ethics in the private sphere is not one of Humanism's key concerns, I wanted to see whether my hunch was correct. I chose a period, 1990 to 1999, and reviewed every issue of the Humanist, the magazine of the American Humanist Association. During this period, the magazine had more than one editor, so any findings would not be the result of a single editor's idiosyncrasies, but would more likely be a result of the AHA's moral and intellectual predilections.

I found almost no articles about ethics in the private realm. There were articles about freedom of choice, animal rights, euthanasia, environmentalism, issues not without implications for individuals; yet they were presented always as social issues about which one needs to take a stand, rather than issues that speak to our private lives. There were a few minor exceptions, of course. By and large, however, one can read this magazine and wonder whether its readers have a personal life. Don't humanists have children they

worry about? Parents that they must care for? Why doesn't their concern for ethics, so persuasively claimed to have naturalistic roots, apply to private matters? In one of the very last issues of the magazine that I looked at, I did find an article that struck me as close to the heart of ethical culture. It was a discursive essay entitled, "Compassion as a Means to Freedom." There were plenty of articles that claimed that we should see the compassionate side of a given issue, but only this article on the importance of compassion itself. Why?

Members of the American Humanist Association might claim that the subtitle of the Humanist provides an answer. "A Magazine of Critical Inquiry and Social Concern" is how the subtitle reads. If that is what the magazine is about, why expect a large number of articles about personal life? But, I would ask, why is that what the magazine is about? Why is the subtitle not, "A Magazine of Critical Inquiry and Individual Conscience?" No, the answer lies elsewhere.

I suggest that the absence of articles on personal ethics reflects an intellectual emphasis in Humanism different from that found in Ethical Culture. The preeminent idea in Humanist thinking is rationality. That's why Humanists love to expose other people's superstitions and illogical claims, religious and otherwise. The preeminent idea in Ethical Culture is not rationality; it is goodness, or virtue. Ethical Culture Societies are essentially places, as Adler put it, for moral striving. This makes them different from many Humanist groups.

If we uncritically ally ourselves with Humanism, ethics might drop out of Ethical Culture. This would be tragic. We have a precious mandate: to study, teach and practice goodness. If we were to sacrifice this, our movement would become empty.

Perhaps we can build a future by coalescing with Humanist groups. But, until we see Humanists develop a great commitment to ethics, and this will be evident when they create workshops on Humanist ethics and develop a literature centered on this concern, we should proceed with caution.

Inevitably, we will need to work with different Humanist groups for common purposes. But this is not the same as planning our future around such collective activities. We must be mindful of our own traditions and our core ideas as we think about which groups we might embrace in coming decades.

Of course, immersing ourselves in organized Humanism is not the only future we can envision. Dr. Spetter suggests something different. Our future, he argues, depends on revitalizing the ideological core of our movement. We can succeed, says Dr. Spetter, if a few Leaders keep the ideas of our movement alive. It will not be organizational development that will help us, but a revived message, clear and persuasive, that would be delivered in papers and addresses by a few Leaders. It will be up to them to explain how our ideas inform our activities in the community, up to them to make our message compelling to a new generation. Is this vision credible? Does our message count for that much?

Well, here I would like to connect future and past by drawing on some archival materials. At the end of the 19th century, when Ethical Culture was in its adolescence, the statements of purpose written by local Societies were lucid, powerful, and commanded attention. Here for example are the opening lines of a statement from the Saint Louis Society composed around 1900:

*An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of inducing people to think about conscience, duty, justice, the cultivation of the higher nature, working for others, about High Conduct in all its phases, Morality in all its aspects. It exists supremely to emphasize the importance of Ethics.*

*An Ethical Society exists for the purpose of persuading people to do more than they are doing toward making themselves better men and women and toward improving the rest of the world.*

Now, compare that with a statement of purpose adopted in 1980 at the AEU Assembly, a statement that has been reprinted ever since on Sunday programs throughout the movement:

*Ethical Culture is a humanistic, religious and educational movement inspired by the ideal that the supreme aim of human life is working to create a more humane society.*

Which statement conveys best what we are all about? In the first, the words are simple and concrete. In the second, the words are abstract and ponderous and leave us, when we arrive at end of the sentence, still wondering what Ethical Culture is. This is just one example – I could produce many more – of the muddying of our message in recent decades. If Ethical Culture is a path, we have been much better at describing, as John Hoad has said, what is *not* on our path than describing the nature of the path itself. Talking about what that path is, clarifying it, developing the central ideas that make Ethical Culture worthy of our allegiance is the preeminent task of our professional Leaders. It is hard to overstate the importance of being clear about what we stand for.

At first glance, Dr. Spetter's vision of our future seems elitist: it depends on the activities of a few Leaders. But this is a little misleading, for Ethical Culture's rank-and-file can play a number of roles in this process. First of all, whether or not this vision of the future is what we choose would be a decision made, not by the Leaders alone, but by the membership and the Leaders together. This decision could come after a series of open discussions of the question held in small groups throughout the movement. When the Bergen Society wanted to chart its long-term direction, it went through such a process. Second, as I will suggest in a moment, should the membership help chose this future for Ethical Culture, it could play a key role in the planning that would enable us to achieve it.

In thinking about planning, we should take a lesson from our political adversaries, the Republicans. In a 2004 essay, Lewis Lapham explored the origins of the Republican ascendancy in American politics, and he traced the roots of their success to the response to a 1971 manifesto written by Lewis Powell, a Richmond corporate lawyer, soon to be named to the Supreme Court. Alarmed by the liberal takeover of the country, Powell laid out the course the Republicans would have to take to win the country back. "Survival of what we call the free enterprise system," he wrote, "lies in organization, in careful long-range planning and implementation, in consistency of action over an indefinite period of years, in the scale of financing available through joint effort, and in the political power available only through united action and national organizations." The money soon flowed, and the right-wing think tanks that enabled Republicans to produce the books and pamphlets and send out the policy experts that would help their party win the war of ideas were soon established or revived. The Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, the revitalized American Enterprise Institute – think tanks that sponsor so many of the right-wing programs in the media – date from this effort. Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Lapham argues, gave testimony to the power of the Republican's ideological juggernaut. We have seen how the rest of story has unfolded.

However we dislike their policies, Ethical Culturists can certainly learn something from the Republicans' strategy. If we wish to rebuild the ideological core of the movement, Ethical Culturists must make a commitment to long-range planning like theirs, and here, the rank and file could be helpful. If we want Ethical Leaders who can deliver our message with authority, we must recruit prospective candidates who show the promise to do this. It means that we need to know what we are looking for. The Leadership Committee of the AEU has not always operated with a clear sense of what it wanted in a Leader. The membership helps staff the Leadership Committee, to say nothing of the AEU Board, and a cadre of new figures on the committee inspired by a new vision of the future could help make that future a reality.

In addition to the issue of recruitment, planning will be needed to give those current Leaders who can develop our message the freedom to do so. We must reduce some of their other responsibilities, so they can travel to make the speeches and have time to write the op-eds that will get our message out. This will take planning, planning that requires the involvement of the membership. So, the rank and file can help us decide whether we want to concentrate on rebuilding the ideological core of the movement; should they help chose this future, they can plan for its realization; in addition, the rank and file must do the work once our message has been reinvigorated. If we need Leaders to deliver our message, we also need a membership that will apply that message in living their lives, creating social programs, and building ethical communities.

So, Dr. Spetter's vision is less elitist than it appears to be. But, it is not without its difficulties. Above all, it assumes that there are a number Leaders who can develop and communicate Ethical Culture's core ideas with genuine power. Although we have Leaders who speak persuasively about many subjects, not many successfully elaborate the core ideas of Ethical Culture in their platforms. We only have one Joe Chuman and not enough prospective Joe Chumans in the pipeline. So, the vision of a future based on a renewed Ethical message strikes me as problematic on practical grounds.

Perhaps some combination of the two visions I have discussed will prove workable, or perhaps an entirely different one will suggest itself. Of one thing I am certain, however: We need to wrestle with the questions of our future, plan for that future, and execute that plan. Ethical Culture rejects the idea we are subject to great forces over which we have no control, that we should passively accept life as we find it. Rather, we believe that we can and should play a role in changing the world. We need to take this attitude and apply it to the future of our own movement. I recall Jean Paul Sartre saying that there have been rosier ages, but that this one is ours. Well, there have been rosier periods in the history of our movement—all the more reason to work to assure its future. We must do so, because Ethical Culture is vulnerable, because it is precious, because it is ours.



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