

Celebrating Ethical Humanism 5/14/2000

I want to present today a wide ranging overview of what I like about Ethical Culture, often referred to as ethical humanism. As I prepared it, often letting it flow from my mind and my heart, I realized that it covers much ground. I hope you will indulge me graciously. We don't speak often of humanism itself, nor often of our basic values, in my opinion. So I had a lot I thought should be said. I alone take responsibility for these reflections. „

In 1876 Felix Adler ended one career as a promising young rabbi, and started the movement which is our home today, what we call "Ethical Culture." Let me read from his work directly:

"Now the daring thought that we had, in the beginning of the Ethical Movement, was to unite in one group, in one bond, those who had this religious feeling and those who simply cared for the moral betterment.... In the broader sense religion means zealousness and devotion to something supreme, in the special sense it means cosmic outreaching. Now I myself have always been a religious person in the second sense, and never a mere moralist. But I founded this Society with the express purpose and intent that it should not consist only of those who stood as I did, who had the same religious feeling and needs, but that it should be open to all those who believed in moral betterment, because that is the point on which we all agree. Our ethical religion has its basis in the effort to improve the world and ourselves morally." -- Felix Adler

The "common ground" in Ethical Culture which unites us all, is this emphasis upon ethics, without reference to traditional religious, or supernatural justification. No one is asked to renounce belief in god, or in a supernatural cosmology, or in the religion which they bring to Ethical Culture. While for some this is a religion, for others it is clearly a philosophical stance toward life, a search for ethics alone. Regardless of how or why you come to this movement, all we ask is that one places regard for ethics as primary, ethics as central, as the Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture states.

What I just said was "all that we ask." For some this would be a major stumbling block, this request to place ethics first, rather than theism, or cosmology. They would ask, how can we discuss ethics without discussing god, and how the universe came to be, and its ultimate purpose? For these people, ethics is justified by their grounding in the dictates of a supreme being. It is nonsense, as they see it, to ground ethics in something "mere humans" created.

In the long history of Christianity, there is a strong disdain for what "mere humans" can do. The story of the garden of Eden, of Adam and Eve's fall from grace is a tribute to this. They were forbidden to eat of the fruit of knowledge, but did so anyway. They

were then banished from paradise, where the tree of life remained, denied to us by our own “evil” act of trying to acquire knowledge. The New Testament is based in large part on our need for salvation, salvation from our corrupted nature. Without Jesus, we are condemned to failure in our moral lives, there is no hope. Why? Because “mere humans” do not have the resources to rescue themselves, only divine intervention can save us from ourselves.

David Muzzey, in his book “Ethics as a Religion,” states this more clearly than I can. According to him, Paul and the theologians of the early church held that man was utterly corrupt, and that only the blood of Christ would “save” man (p.37). Catholics and Orthodox protestants, historically, have held this belief. The culture that produced the likes of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato to name a few others, fell prey to the cult of savior-gods which spread like wildfire through the Roman Empire (p.159). The church silenced anyone who dared believe that mankind had the power to pursue moral betterment through good works. Pelagius was one example of this. He was condemned by Augustine as a heretic. The protestant reformers Calvin and Luther both subscribed to the doctrine of the utter corruptness of man. The more conservative of the Protestant denominations still advocate those position, but the more liberal have shied away from it. Nevertheless, they can’t altogether deny the concept, and it is there if you listen carefully. The more they move away from it, the more they sound like humanists, emphasizing human fulfillment, and ethics as primary goals for human life.

What I am trying to say is that from the ethical humanist perspective, humankind has the resources to better itself, and it% has done so. These resources are all we have to better ourselves, and our world. Far from being “damned” we are only recently emerging from our childhood to assert our powers to alter and change ourselves and the world around us. What is the basis for this power? It is knowledge.

We have emerged over the last few hundred years from a childhood where we created myths to comfort us, and answer questions about the world which we struggled to comprehend. For many these myths are still potent, and important in their lives. For others, they remain only a theoretical possibility. A recent poll highlights this. While about 95% of the people surveyed believed in a god, a supreme being, less than half said that this belief made a difference in their lives.

You may think that I have contradicted myself, that I am now attacking belief in god, where I was saying earlier that ethical culture does not require atheism as a prerequisite for participation. Our perspectives on ethics, our debates, our dialogs, all of them are grounded in the here and now, in the use of reason, and science, to search out the ethical pathways which are open to us. The tools of science, and reason, along with compassion, and intuition are human creations or attributes which are both necessary, and sufficient for the betterment of the individual, and for humankind. All other considerations are personal in nature, and are of no interest to the movement. I call this “practical atheism.”

What I like about the Ethical Culture version of the larger humanist movement is this focus on ethics, rather than on a crusade against religion, or theism per se. I see this movement as steering itself correctly between the poles of theism, and atheism, the latter of which is often “evangelical” in its more secular humanist leanings. For the radical atheists, one must attack religion, and convert all away from it. Religion itself is the evil for these people.

I cannot share this view. Religion has done much good..., and much evil. So also has the atheistic inclined governments of Russia, and China, where traditional religion has both been strongly discouraged, but also which experienced a rebirth. I believe that those with power, and wealth will twist the best philosophies into the justifications for the actions deemed necessary to keep their power and wealth. Just look at what has been justified in the name of “survival of the fittest.” Contemporary culture has made this part of its sacred doctrines with little or no discussion or regard for other qualities which have enabled human beings to survive, such as cooperation, and sharing, mercy, and compassion.

What is there about ethical humanism which can prevent, or help us steer clear of such abuses of our basic values? My answer is “fallibilism,” a phrase used often by Olin Beall. The concept as I understand it is that no one person has absolute knowledge, and even the best and brightest make mistakes, and have limited vision. What we know of the world comes from our senses, including our acquired ability to read, enabling us to learn from the wisdom of the ages. So if we are so fallible, how can we trust our judgments, and our knowledge?

Humanism respects the principles of science in attempting to find truth, not eternal unchanging truth, but a limited truth which can be sustained by repeated testing and verification, and even altered over time. It takes into consideration that we are fallible as human beings, and attempts to compensate for it in its method. Indeed, only through repeatable experiments, where the same outcome is reached, can a hypothesis be regarded as closer to being considered like a truth. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, one does not have to believe the hypothesis to be true in order to determine if the data support the hypothesis. Skepticism is not just tolerated, it is encouraged.

In other words, I believe that in science, the truth is more important than opinion. Just because someone wishes something to be true does not make it true. This is clearly anti-authoritarian.

Ethics itself can gain from the scientific method, but must be grounded in the values which we call the Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture. Science is a valueless method; it seeks to be objective, declaring no, or admitting all biases prior to conducting experiments. Science without a grounding in humane values results in the experiments we saw in Nazi Germany on Jews.

In Ethical Culture, we attribute worth to all human beings. Another version of this, I think, is Olin’s insistence upon the inviolability of all people as a grounding for any truly

ethical philosophy. Our own Declaration of Independence states that all human beings are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Each of these perspectives underscore a view of humanity which is uncompromising of the value of human life. Humanists of all flavors accept this as a basic value. The justification for this ranges from the power of mere assertion, looking to our similarities as homo sapiens. It does not require justification from a transcendent being, or from a mythology interpreted as fact.

Humanists, both the secular, as well as the ethical/religious humanists also accept a view of humanity which embraces evolution. From the first humanist manifesto in 1933 to the 8th Commitment of Ethical Culture, there is unambiguous belief that the human species emerged from bio-evolutionary processes without the aid of a transcendent being directing those processes. Listen to the two examples I just referenced:

...from the first humanist manifesto, which was crafted by Unitarian ministers who considered themselves to be humanists...

- > FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing
- > and not created.
- >
- > SECOND: Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that
- > he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.
- >

From the 8 Commitments...

Life itself inspires religious response.

Although awareness of impending death intensifies the human quest for meaning, the mystery of life itself, and the need to belong, are the primary factors motivating human religious response.

A deist would feel quite comfortable with these statements, but not many theists would. In other words, a person who believes in an active, transcendent deity acting to direct its self made human beings toward fulfillment would find little compatible in this with his theology. So while we do not typically organize ourselves as atheistic, and antagonistic towards theism, we do not pursue any type of theism in our movement.

We come here to celebrate our common humanity, as we evolved and emerged from millions of years as more primitive life forms. We are here to pursue ethics from the common vision that humanity creates its own realities, and is therefore responsible for its own predicament, and therefore responsible for solutions which will improve life for all beings on this earth which is so fragile. We must use our limited, but growing knowledge gleaned from the scientific method to help us move outward continually beyond humankind's childhood. That childhood is one of insecurity, where we felt unable to depend upon ourselves, unable to trust ourselves, unable to celebrate in our own accomplishments.

Indeed, Ethical Culture is interested not only in ethics, but also in the development of the potential of humanity to improve life for all, and equally important in the potential of each human being to develop her talents and to express her creativity. Bringing out the best in others is not just about making others more moral, it is about helping others develop their latent abilities so that they can experience all the joy and pride which comes from such development, regardless of how grand or how small that talent may be. The great vision of the Special Olympics is the joy of allowing those with more meager abilities experience the pleasure of attaining what was out of their reach, of moving beyond expectations.

The only transcendence which truly is agreed upon by all humanists is that which comes from this exceeding of expectations, from being able to transcend what one thinks one can do. This transcendence is what we must seek out in children. We want them to grow and learn to be all they can be, to transcend their present abilities by developing their own inborn talents. We should also seek out this transcendence from those who run afoul of the law. We must move beyond the use of vengeance, and punishment, and once again embrace the potential which exists in all human beings to do better, while simultaneously protecting society from those who ruthlessly seek out their own aggrandizement. It is that best in others which we must seek to elicit. It is a win-win strategy.

So we seek to move beyond fear, fear of hell, fear of damnation, fear of punishment. We seek to move beyond ignorance, to gain knowledge, to learn more about the world we find ourselves a part of, this web of life which we cannot escape, which calls upon us to protect it, or suffer our own downfall.

Ethical humanism, specifically Ethical Culture, while being noncreedal, is based on certain values. The Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture are not a final, unchanging set of commitments, or values. They are a living and growing statement of our core values. Many of us feel that there should be more, that there is more that reflects our concerns, and our evolving mission. Over time these commitments will be clarified, or expanded. That is the nature of our movement, respecting the growth of human knowledge, and our understanding of how we function as sentient beings.

One example which I think is gaining ground in the movement, is that taking care of our earth should be part of our basic value system. Earth lives in a balance which we upset at our own peril. Respecting it, and taking care of it must be adopted by us, and instilled in our children.

Let me read you one version of the Earth Pledge which I have framed in my house:

I pledge to protect the Earth,
and to respect the web of life upon it,
and to honor the dignity of every member of our global family:
one planet, one people, one world, in harmony,
with peace, justice, and freedom for all.

That is a vision I can live by, which I believe all humanity must learn to live by in order to secure its own survival. Indeed, the idea that survival is secured by one species eliminating all others for its own purposes is bankrupt. Each species on earth needs the others, and a balance must be found in order for all life to thrive.

This would seem to be a common sense vision for humanity, but all do not share it. It would seem universal, but we have those who tell us that we must not embrace diversity, and multiculturalism. Indeed even reason, and science are not universally acknowledged as beneficial, but are cast as evil, and demonic by many.

The Kansas school board for example is trying to stem the tide, is trying to roll back the clock on the progress of human knowledge. It attempted to cast evolution as pure theory, rather than as fact. While it is certainly a theory, it is not an unsubstantiated theory. They also ruled that the schools cannot teach any science which contradicts the creationist theory which insists that the earth is only a few thousand years old. This is not widely known.

These efforts will fail only if we adhere to our values, to our humanist values. We must embrace them, rather than take them for granted. We must affirm humanity so that we can continue our emergence from our own childhood. Ultimately we will succeed, as Galileo did, posthumously. Ironically, Galileo was told by the church that he could not teach his theory as fact, that the earth was not at the center of the universe; he could only posit it as an interesting theory.

The real question is whether we must live through book burnings, and a second dark age, or whether we will joyfully, and courageously embrace our humanity, a humanity which is all inclusive, a humanity which knows it is but a small speck in the cosmos, but which nevertheless values itself in all its diversity.

A while ago I mentioned that Ethical Culture could benefit from the scientific method. Specifically, we can form hypotheses, gather data, and then evaluate whether a given ethical position is consistent with data (read experience) or not. I certainly recognize that each person is different, and will therefore see and experience similar situations differently. This is why we must seek to build upon each person's view, rather than seek to eliminate conflicting viewpoints. Often, the truth, or as close as we can get to it, is found by comprehending and reconciling the differing viewpoints in an ethical conflict. Models such as the one which James Coley presented last year can be used to show how another person may have come to a choice different from our own, for reasons equally ethical. This increases respect for others, rather than setting up one person or group as morally superior than another.

What are some of the practical rules I believe I have discovered via my own experience? I will list four:

1) Attainment of our ethical goals, of reaching a state where compassion and justice are in a state of harmony, is not possible. It is also not desirable. Why??? My problem with this is the word "attainment." I have found that the pursuit of ethics leads to the greatest benefits for myself, and for those around me. Trouble starts when someone claims to have reached a final state of knowledge, awareness, etc. which they claim enables them think and act without fear of criticism, or worse, to act with impunity. Beware of any who make such claims, they will lead you further from true enlightenment, and ethical behavior than their words would have you think.

As I have said, human beings are fallible. We fail in spite of what we may know or suspect is right. We may fail in our will, or we may have divided loyalties, or we may simply make a less than optimal choice. If we embrace this fallibility, then we can work together on solutions to our problems, finding the best that we can collectively muster. This requires a healthy openness to others as a prerequisite for our own pursuit of ethics. It also requires humility.

2) The pursuit of ethics requires first that we understand others, and judge only behavior. Many folks think that judgment of others is the ultimate state of applied ethics. That is a dangerous fallacy. Ò

We should always be careful to judge actions, rather than people. If no one is perfect, if we are all fallible, what is the point of judging someone? Well, I admit that safety is one acceptable answer. We may find that someone consistently acts in ways which abuse or threaten those around them. It is reasonable to say that based on that behavior, we will not trust that person. Yet, we may still seek to use our powers of empathy to figure out how such behavior may seem the right thing for that person. We may even try, quite carefully, to get to know the person better, that we may comprehend his unique circumstances.

Judging people often results in those dangerous feelings of superiority. It casts that note of finality on the other person. It tends to rule out reconciliation, and healing.

When we learn to judge actions instead, we can learn to be aware of how we could act in the same way, because we understand what leads up to a given behavior. We can then learn to use our powers of perception to watch our own behavior, rather than feeling smug about the lack of character in others.

I am reminded of the massacre in Chiapas, on Christmas Eve several years ago. Men, women, and children were slaughtered by paramilitary agents. The descriptions were truly horrifying. I reacted in part by thinking of the perpetrators of this as inhuman, as beasts, not fit to be called humans. Then I heard an analysis of the event by someone with more wisdom and compassion than I had. He was trying to comprehend why this act was committed, what circumstances could lead someone to act with such barbarism. There were elements of fear, of drug use, of indoctrination/brainwashing by government agents. Trying to understand how this can happen will lead to greater

understanding of the real problems, whereas condemnation alone will fail to shed light on the full human tragedy.

3) Judgment of actions should only come when one has taken the time to evaluate the differing perspectives, understanding as many angles, and viewpoints as is humanly possible. Knowing more about a moral problem or dilemma almost always assists in coming to a more ethical decision or action.

Now truly we don't have time to take every situation we face, and explore all the possibilities of responses, and then select the one which best fits the values we share. What we can do is to lead a life of reflection. We can take the time to consider where we may have erred, and then decide what we may do differently in the future. I do expect that those following this goal of reflection will tend to make better decisions than one who acts impulsively.

4) Last, but not least is a rule I learned from Ken Eill. Indeed we are creatures of survival. We all may be pushed to a state of affairs where we will act to preserve our own lives, even if that may not entail behavior deemed "ethical". However, most of us are not in that situation. Therefore, we can choose not to act in those ways. We can choose behavior which affirms other's dignity and right to life, liberty, and happiness. We can both acknowledge our own survival needs, and endorse pursuing an ethical way of life. Let me give you an example. If I were living in an impoverished community, and had to fight others for the small food supplies that came trickling in, I would do so, especially if not acting would result in my children suffering more malnourishment. I don't live in that situation, so I don't have to act as if my survival depends upon acting in pure self-interest.

What are your personal ethics? I hope that we begin to build up a set of working hypotheses to help us all expand our own pursuit of ethics. What is different for us, is that I posit these as ethical theorems, hypotheses. Their efficacy will be built upon shared experiences, and reflections, rather than on justification from a supernatural source, from one exempt from revision, or challenge.

In summary, ethical humanism, in the form of Ethical Culture, is a vital part of my life. It is that which guides me both in my daily life, as well as in my reactions to the larger world. I treasure this community for what it offers to me and to my family.