

Beyond God and Secular Humanism

Opening Words

"Love your intellectual enemies; keep an open and hospitable mind to opinions and ways of acting, thinking and feeling which naturally repel you. This is difficult behavior so it will help us to discipline ourselves if we reflect that the views most contrary to our own are nevertheless sure to contain some element of truth which we cannot afford to disregard, and which will serve the purpose of correcting and supplementing such truth as we may ourselves possess."

Felix Adler, An Ethical Philosophy of Life

Today I want to consider what Ethical Culture has to contribute to the public debate between theists and secular humanists. In recent years religious groups have made nearly all social and political events religious issues. I believe we are seeing these public stands by religious leaders because Americans are at a historical choice point where a new religious synthesis is needed to enable us to set our personal and public priorities.

Consider how many arenas the current debate has taken.
Morality: sexual behavior, abortion, birth control, pornography;
Crime: law enforcement, and capital punishment;
Rights: individual, minority, and community rights, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, church/state separation;
Foreign Policy.
Government: How we should deal with poverty, taxation, and government social services;
Schools: What schools should teach children about ethics.

Each one of these important and separate concerns are used as a battle ground for the more basic philosophic debate between fundamentalists and secular humanists. Beneath these issues there is a struggle over how human nature works and how to improve the ethical quality of our civilization. The passion in this debate runs so wide and deep because many of us realize that there is more at stake than winning or losing on any single issue. We are publicly shaping the future mind and spirit of our civilization.

Ethical Culture is at the heart of this debate both circumstantially and philosophically. Fundamentalist often claim that "secular humanism has been declared to be a religion by the U.S. Supreme Court." In fact what they are referring to is one footnote in one case brought in 1961 by a former WES member, Roy Torcaso, because he was denied a notary public for refusing to sign a theistic oath. To *Torcaso v. Watkins*, Justice Hugo Black added this footnote: "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are: Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism, and others."

We are also at the heart of the debate because Ethical Culture was founded in 1876 explicitly because Felix Adler saw that science and secularism were eroding public belief in the supernatural and that ethics therefore would have no philosophic or institutional support. The aim of Ethical Culture was to establish a base for ethics that would be independent of a faith in a Man-God and would integrate the progress of science and philosophy with the ethical and spiritual contributions of religion.

Even before the debate between theism and secularism was brought center stage by the media, it polarized people. Anyone articulating a synthesis position, as Ethical Culturists did in their early history, found himself isolated and attacked by both sides. Each side found reason to reject Ethical Culture as being too similar to its opposition. What is offered as the best of both worlds is easily rejected as the worst of both. Yet for me personally, Ethical Culture has offered a way to embrace and integrate my secular and spiritual inclinations. And now this public debate makes Ethical Culture an idea whose time has come.

There are three questions I want to address today. My main purpose is to propose a position for Ethical Culture in the debate between theists and humanists. But first I want to consider why despite our 100 year head start we are not more ready to participate in this debate, and second I want to review the public positions that Ethical Culturists have already taken in the controversy between fundamentalists and secular humanists.

#1: Why EC Hasn't Benefited Much From Our 100 Year Headstart

First. Within Ethical Culture there is a tension between our commitment to pluralism and our desire to take a clear philosophic stand. When I ask members what attracted them to Ethical Culture, invariable they mention: freedom of belief. No slogan is better known among us than Deed Before Creed. Justifiable we are proud of our openness to a broad range of people and ideas, but it also prevents us from forming a sharply focused, deeply held consenses.

Second. What makes it even more difficult is that when a group prides itself on the idea that everyone has a right to their opinion, it can easily fall victim to the distorted belief that every opinion is right. Unless a community institutionalizes people's curiosity, it becomes easier to settle for good fellowship and leave our search for truth and meaning aside to avoid the possible unpleasantness of disagreement.

Third. Ethical Culture needs a better sense of the limitations not only of faith but also of skepticism. One asset of Ethical Culture is that it encourages people to value highly

their skepticism as necessary for their intellectual integrity. The skeptic rightly refuses to accept an idea without measuring it and being open to other possibilities. But skepticism also can be a seductive trap, like shopping forever for the perfect gift but never being able to select one that is good enough. When the skeptic's satisfaction comes from finding imperfections, he therefore never chooses and ends up merely a spectator with no unique experience to contribute. It is easier to be clear about what you don't believe, but what counts, what shapes our behavior, our identity, our relationships, our culture is what we do believe. The skeptic who criticizes but takes no stand of his own is self-deluded because he is shaped anyway by his skepticism.

I cherish the openness and skeptical integrity of Ethical Culture, but after being a member for nearly 20 years do I have to act like I have come to no conclusions in order to prove to newcomers that they are free to believe as they choose? Or do I publicly articulate only the broadest common denominator ideas such as secular humanism? To make newcomers welcome ought I repeat the with the same passion the criticisms of theism that I felt when I first left the religion of my childhood even though I have since separated the wheat and chaff and long ago made peace? Certainly we all say no to these questions, but I find the tendency not to articulate our differentness is unconsciously woven into the fabric of our relationships.

What I want to emphasize is that for pluralism to be a strength, it must be vigorous. Recently John Hoad, leader of the St. Louis Ethical Society, expressed how pluralism is the one area of clear and obvious agreement among us. He wrote as part of our discussion of Ethical Culture and Humanism: "The genius of Ethical Culture lies in its basis of membership, which is a commitment to study, promote, and live by and apply ethical values. Period. No belief system added, there is no orthodoxy of creed, no notion of "ultimate reality" to subscribe to. That's why under its one umbrella there are those who (a) believe there is a God; (b) believe more vaguely with Adler that there is a Power at work in the universe for good; (c) call themselves agnostic on the ultimate reality issue; or (d) declare themselves to be atheists. Whether we could co-exist under one umbrella if we more frankly shared these differences is an intriguing question. (underlining added)

This underlined sentence indicates why Ethical Culture is not more ready with a unique contribution to the debate between fundamentalists and secular humanists. After the passing of the founding generation, we felt shame and embarrassment toward the ideas of our founders. We didn't even make systematic revisions. Instead we allowed our philosophic literature to go out of print, surrendered our original identity, and opted to associate with the broad stripe of humanism. We stopped articulating an ethical philosophy of life and settled for being a fellowship of (liberal) pluralists. In this climate Ethical Culturists have not been

doing the intellectual homework necessary to formulate our unique religious message, and therefore we find ourselves instead reflecting the mass culture of secular humanism that is around us.

To redefine ourselves what we need to do in the words of Dr. Hoad is "frankly sharing our differences." John suggests that to do so runs the risk of dividing us, but for Ethical Culture to become stronger we must risk alienating each other. This is the only road to true autonomy which acknowledges independence and belonging simultaneously. We are the religion that places no book, creed, or ritual above the free market of ideas. The task of Ethical Culture is to redefine our ethical philosophy in every generation by expressing our differing views with as much depth and passion as possible and seeking a synthesis that best represents the truth as we see it.

Adler foresaw the problem of a pluralism that would tend to cater to niceness and conformity. He advised that we build our relationships not on our like-mindedness but instead to seek out and appreciate our differentness. Our challenge lies in learning to disagree without being disagreeable.

Before Ethical Culture can be a serious participant in the public debate we need to hone our philosophic cutting edge until it's sharp enough to make an impression on the public mind. Fortunately this process has begun.

#2. What Public Positions Ethical Culturists Have Taken In The Debate Between Theists and Secular Humanists

I want to review the current position of Ethical Culture because in my view we are too much in the humanist camp.

The position of Ethical Culture appears clear and consistent prior to the early 1950's. For more than 75 years Ethical Culture leaders articulated a philosophy that could simultaneously be theistic and humanistic. Their moral idealism contended that ethical principles such as justice and love constituted a real force outside of human control. However, beginning in the 1950's a new generation of leaders began associating Ethical Culture with humanism both philosophically and institutionally.

One can only wonder whether Ethical Culturists abandoned their unique position partly in response to McCarthyism which could prey on a small movement with unusually liberal ideas about God and civil rights for women and blacks. I have seen a 1954 Army intelligence report that was gotten through the Freedom of Information Act. It condemns us for preaching integration and allowing woman to speak from our Platform. The New York Ethical Society certainly felt the intimidation of having its leader, Algernon Black, listed without cause by the notorious McCarthy

committee.

(*Footnote: During this same period, the federal government took a series of legal actions against the Washington Ethical Society which ended in 1956 with WES winning an appeal to the DC Superior Court (Chief Justice Burger) on the grounds that Ethical Culture is a religion. Who would have guessed that fundamentalists would someday raise as a minority rights issue the objection that humanism is a religion masquerading as secularism?)

Seemingly we were on safe ground protected both as a religion and well ensconced as part of the rising influence of a wider, cultural movement toward humanism. Two leaders of the NY Ethical Society Jerome Nathanson in the 1950's and twenty-five years later Edward Ericson were asked to write chapters about Ethical Culture that were included in the reference book "Religions Of America". Neither submitted anything about Ethical Culture but chose instead to identify with what they called the "unchurched" of America.

The tendency to move toward humanism must have seemed even more appealing once humanism won a string of legal victories that chased God from schools and other public places and made humanism the fad of the sixties. Undoubtedly it seemed good and right to position us on the growing edge of American liberation values. Certainly "The Religion of Duty" would not have been a popular title in the last 20 years.

The Current Public Position of Ethical Culture

In the current debate Ethical Culturists have defended secular humanist positions without seizing the opportunity to express any unique Ethical Culture message. So far Ethical Culture leaders have addressed civil rights issues, church and state issues, and critiqued fundamentalist positions, but no public statements have made the distinction as Justice Black did between Ethical Culture and secular humanism. In the New York Times one Ethical Culture leader defended the proposition that "morality can exist without religion," leaving unraised the question of why he chose to be a religious leader.

Perceiving the need to better define and express Ethical Culture, the professional Ethical Society leaders are now exchanging ideas about the distinction between Ethical Culture and humanism. Among the responses that I have received, Dr. John Hoad, leader of the St. Louis Ethical Society, wrote in agreement with a previous statement by Arthur Dobrin, leader of the Long Island Ethical Society: "I agree with Arthur Dobrin, writes Dr. Hoad, I would opt for recognizing that the prevailing philosophy of Ethical Culture is "humanist" and then refuse to allow that term to be monopolized by those who don't want any open-endedness in its definition in the direction of religion."

I do not think that this sentence adequately describes Ethical Culture. I believe Ethical Culture cannot do itself justice by identifying either with humanists or theists because both have a valid claim to Ethical Culture. We could just as well change the one word "humanist", in quotes, to the word "theist", in quotes, and write the same sentence: "I would opt for recognizing that the prevailing philosophy of Ethical Culture is "theist" and then refuse to allow that term to be monopolized by those who don't want any open-endedness in its definition in the direction of religion."

This sentence more accurately states the position of Ethical Culture during its first 75 years. Dr. Adler identified himself as a reformer of theism not a humanist. He wrote, "If it be atheism to deny the existence of their man-god of the idol which they have set unto themselves above the clouds and which they blaspheme by calling that idol the highest than we are atheists, along with the best of the theists in history. But if there be another standard, a higher standard where by to measure religious truth...if God and good, and good and God, be one, if there is no God save as he dawns on us in the act of doing good, then religion must teach people to know and do good for its own sake. I believe that in furthering the law of righteousness I also am hallowed in the service of the unknown God."

Fifty years later American historian and Ethical Culture leader David Muzzey in his final book "Ethics As A Religion" declares his belief in an ethical concept of God by which he means "the existence of a moral law as permeating and indefeasible as the physical laws of nature." "It seems to me," he writes, "that there can be no objection to the use of the word "God", if we bear in mind what kind of God we mean. " "Is this ethical concept of a God less real, less inspiring, less reasonable than the orthodox concept of an absolute creator and ruler of the universe?"

The first leader of the St. Louis Ethical Society, Walter Sheldon, wrote in 1899 in his book "The Story of the Bible from the Standpoint of Modern Scholarship:" "I may as well own that beliefs about God have a fascination for me. I like to meet with them in poetry, in the Bible, in the early classical literature; and whenever I come upon those beliefs my attention is held at once.What makes the study of beliefs about God so interesting is just this: By means of those beliefs we are able to trace the steps of the moral sense. If atheism has spread from time to time in various parts of the world, I venture to say it has been owing less to the influence of natural science than to the fact that the beliefs about a deity have been so slow in keeping pace with the growth of ethical feeling. Usually when the God-idea does catch up with the most advanced ethical thought, some kind of a theism or belief in God comes back once more." (J. Hoad, "The Function of 'God' In Human Evolution", 1981)

Why is it that Ethical Culturists have abandoned their fascination with theism, their desire to update theism, their passion to reclaim the ethical essence of the religious tradition away from the more superstitious elements? Why have we abandoned our dream of restoring the ethical grandeur to religion in favor of embracing secular humanism whose spokesmen see no good in the concept of God?

My own belief is that the mission of Ethical Culture is to be a bridge between the best of theism and humanism. To do so we must identify with both and not one over the other. Certainly it is consistent with our history to allow those who wish to consider Ethical Culture theism, and believe in a force for good, to work alongside those who prefer to see ethics as humanistic principles without feeling themselves visitors to the humanist camp. Nor need humanists be guests in a theist community, for the intellectual and spiritual goal of a clearly conceived Ethical Culture is to create a synthesis where humanists and theists understand and are at home with one another.

Now let me address the main point to which I have been leading.

#3: What position might Ethical Culture take in the public debate between theism and secular humanism?

I disagree with fundamentalism so completely that I feel a temptation to list my criticisms of it. Certainly the phrase "secular religion" is an oxymoron that smacks of Orwellian newspeak. One can document that fundamentalists use civil rights as a cover for missionary campaigns to convert public school students to their religious views.

However, it would be unfair of me not to acknowledge the truth of one central point that fundamentalists are repeatedly making: Secular humanism does represent a different world view and thereby competes with theism. Although I regard the competition quite legitimate and have no personal complaints, it would be ingenuine for me not to admit that it was indeed the scientific training of my public schooling that enabled and encouraged me to think through the fallacies of supernaturalism.

What fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell and Judge Hand are telling secularists is that because our nation is based on the separation of church and state, the state has evolved a secular, non-religious, humanistic metaphor which actively competes with the theistic metaphor.

In the public debate which is contrasting the traditional theist and secular humanist metaphors, both find the other wanting. They are fighting their battles by using current events, legal issues, legislative agendas, foreign affairs,

politics, and Jim Bakker's bedroom preferences to establish their metaphor in the public mind.

The theistic metaphor being advanced by the fundamentalist asks us to live in a world ruled by a man-God who is all knowing, all loving, and all powerful, and who has created heaven and earth, men and women, and given us sacred commandments by which to live. God watches over us, intervening from time to time, rewarding and punishing us both in this life and hereafter. The fundamental choice in life is whether to be a soldier of God or a slave of the devil.

For a variety of reasons some of us opt out of the man-God metaphor. But because the human brain operates by metaphors, when we step out of one metaphor, we step into another. A person can choose to not live within the metaphor of theistic religions, but when we leave we take on a new definition of self, society, ethics, and the purpose of life, and a new sense of what the quality of life means.

Our new metaphor may liberate us in some ways, confine us in different ways, but we continue to make assumptions about who we are, how we should behave, and why our life has meaning. If our new metaphor is too vague, not sufficiently explicit to answer these identity and behavior questions, people can't face conflict and stress without becoming despondent, adrift, depressed, and dysfunctional. Life needs the guidance of purpose and hope or it seems not worth living. We get our inspiration, direction, our sense of identity, purpose, and appropriate behavior from our metaphor.

One of the benefits of belonging to a religion is that the congregation and the minister are reminding you of your metaphor, your identity, and what behaviors will bring you spiritual satisfaction. A good religion examines the common dilemmas people face and offers hope and guidance. Outside of the religious institution the assumptions and principles of our metaphor can easily become unconscious and forgotten because we spend little time examining and reminding ourselves. Secularists in fact seldom discuss their metaphor, and virtually never study it except in the crisis of therapy.

I raise this issue among us because it is my guess that nearly all of us here are living within a secular humanist metaphor, that is our major education comes from secular schooling; our successes are concerned with family, career, and politics; and we get our values from the norms currently popular in our culture. The fundamentalists are asking you and me whether our metaphor adequately provides for the ethical and spiritual quality of life. They accuse us of taking a permissive or passive attitude toward traditional ethical conduct. They charge that the secular humanist metaphor lacks ethical content and provides for the material but not the spiritual needs of people. They challenge humanists to explain (1) how secular

humanists will go about providing for the ethical education of citizens, and (2) how it defines the ideal life.

(*Footnote: For opening words I used Felix Adler's advice, "Love your intellectual enemies," because I do believe that fundamentalists are raising some important issues even if we don't like their solutions. In a recent debate/discussion, I accused fundamentalists of stereotyping by believing that humanists must be without ethics. My point was conceded but returned with the observation that secular humanists stereotype by believing that theists must be without intelligence.)

Beneath these two questions about ethical and spiritual ideals, the fundamentalists are raising an even more basic philosophic issue: Do we hold any values higher than the principle of agreement? The US Constitution which guarantees life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the Bill of Rights, and the laws of the land, and our customs and etiquette get their power from social contract. Is there any transcending reality that requires any behavior that is not covered by agreements?

Do secular ethics have any more force than rules of etiquette or custom? If you are at home having dinner with someone and you use the wrong fork, you violate etiquette. If you deceive and act meanly to the person you are having dinner with, have you violated more than a social agreement? Intuitively the answer seems to be yes. What if you and your dinner partner made some agreements that would allow you to use any fork and to occasionally be deceptive (I don't want to know the truth unless it's nice.) and to occasionally be mean (Venting anger is inevitable.) Is there some way in which human beings ought to be treated which cannot be agreed away because there is some consequences hidden or obvious, which have reality of their own, which effect human nature, whether you are conscious of them or not? Is there some ethical reality beyond the immediate material reality that still effects you? Is there a supersensible reality that one either aligns with or pays the consequences? Are our ethics made of convenience or must they reflect natural principles which govern our wellbeing?

The secular humanist certainly has a list of values which are desirable, but is the purpose of his values to achieve anything more than material wellbeing? Where and when does secular humanism address the welfare of the human spirit? Does not the quality of one's relations determine the quality of one's life? What do we really have to give anyone except our spiritual state of being? Where does a non-religious person study to gain spiritual wisdom? Where does a secular humanist get his or her inspiration? Some secularists seem content in the name of pluralism to diminish the role of religion. Do human beings need spiritual communities? Where are the spiritual communities outside of the man-god religious congregations?

Although Ethical Culture, in its original formulation, is distinct from both theism and humanism, it addresses both the lack of spirituality in the secular metaphor and the problem of supernaturalism in the fundamentalist metaphor. To articulate the Ethical Culture alternative, it is useful to consider Judge Hand's definition of humanism in the Alabama textbook case because it states the essential polarity, the publicly perceived thesis and anti-thesis, between humanism and theism: "Humanism is the belief that people are capable of living ethically without a belief in God or the supernatural."

The key to the conflict is whether people can live ethically without a belief in the supernatural. Therefore the synthesis requires a new conception of supernatural which expresses the best intentions of both humanist and theist. Of course, neither camp is likely to surrender its vested interest. But one can hope that a true synthesis might take hold and gain influence with future generations. And the millions whose experiences have lead them to a similar conclusion only await the opportunity to be represented publicly.

I am a person who has lived part of my life believing in God, and then for many years not believed in God. As a student of Ethical Culture, I have come to a third position which serves me as a synthesis.

I now believe that to live ethically we need to take a more careful look at the word supernatural, and rather than simply reject it, we need to replace it with the more accurate word, supersensible. We need to consider whether beyond the material dimension in life there are spiritual qualities which are essential for our survival and well being.

It is in explaining the difference between the supersensible and the supernatural that Ethical Culture has its contribution to make. Supernatural means outside of nature, a miraculous power that intervenes in our lives without natural explanation. Supersensible means that there are powers that intervene in our lives that we cannot perceive with our senses, that is we cannot see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. The word supersensible is intended to acknowledge the essential power of religion while avoiding the supernatural fallacy. Felix Adler wrote, "I do not encourage relapse into supernaturalism. The supernatural ... is an attempt to represent in nature or in sensible guise what is supposed to be beyond the senses; and the naturalistic representation of the supersensible is then taken not metaphorically but literally."

Therefore supersensible refers to a dimension of reality that influences human life but lies beyond our immediate senses. Seventeenth century philosopher Renes Descartes held the view that the mind was like a mirror that reflects the world. Therefore the goal of education is to clean the mirror to better reflect reality. A century later Immanuel Kant contradicted this

theory be describing thinking as an activity. The ability to think requires tools. The tools of thinking are concepts. If reality were jello, concepts are the molds which give shape and meaning to life. If we change our concepts, life appears very different. For example, if you believe that rocks are hard, you live in a world of rock houses. If you believe that rocks are made of particles that are moving and moveable, you see reality and its possibilities differently and live in a world of steel and glass skyscrapers.

It's possible to operate a steam engine without having the mechanical concepts (tools) necessary to build that steam engine or the concepts of thermodynamics necessary to design it. The driver of a steam engine may not have the conceptual tools to see the principles of physics, chemistry, or mechanics at work, but they none the less profoundly effect his daily life.

Similarly we understand our personal world by means of concepts. If our concepts only capture a small dimension of life, if our concepts don't include all the ingredients that serve to provide for our survival and wellbeing, then we feel powerless to deal with some situations because we lack what John Hoad calls the "conceptual leverage."

Let us consider the effect of supersensible reality on the human spirit and human relations. What conceptual tools are necessary to perceive the supersensible dimensions of human life in the realm of ethics?

This is my statement of Ethical Culture faith. I can sufficiently establish, at least to my own satisfaction that ethical principles such as justice, love, truth, and charity have real power in the world. I invite you to decide whether you feel and observe ethical principles at work influencing you and people around you. I believe that ethics is a real power which we must learn to understand by trial and error and which we must align with or pay the consequences. However, the personification of this force for good does not exist except as a poetic metaphor. God is a person like justice is depicted as a lady balancing her scales. Like Felix Adler, I conclude that good and God, and God and good, are one.

To improve the quality of human life we need to better understand the ethical as well as the physical laws of nature. As balance in nature has its "laws", human nature operates by supersensible principles. As physical health is an ideal condition of well being that allows a person to function at his or her best, spiritual health is a state of mind and a quality of personal and social relationships which elicits the best from people. By studying behavior and noticing ethical mistakes and successes, one can perceive active principles that define the balance point of spiritual reality. When people violate the principles of ethics, negative consequences destroy our spiritual well being.

I believe that these ethical principles are a spiritual ideal which operate independent of the individual human will, that is whether or not the violation is intentional and whether or not the consequences are perceived. When followed, they maximize the quality of human life. When people and societies ignore ethical principles, life feels hard, like struggling upstream. Not because it is materially harder but because we lack the spiritual will to cope. Simple tasks drain the spirit, difficult problems seem impossible. Spiritual pain arises from ethical error, otherwise known as sins, literally meaning mistakes. As the Bible warns, "The wages of sin are death." When one violates physical laws by over-farming cropland, the cost in lost yield will eventually be paid. Similarly people who abuse people, break ethical laws, and inevitably feel spiritually abused themselves. They fear retaliation. They damage the people around them. They fail to elicit the best and encourage the worst in other people and thereby themselves.

In contrast, a knowledge of ethical principles empowers people. What people have experienced through history and called Divine Power results from aligning oneself with ethical principles. What greater energy have you known, what greater confidence, pleasure or love than to experience the inner harmony of one's spirit and the harmony of one's private and public relationships? Even stumbling blocks provide inspirations when understood as stepping stones to this higher purpose. History's best theists have been known for their good works. They have testified that thinking and acting rightly generates religious experience, a sense of God active within the self.

The religious message of Ethical Culture is to unite theists and humanists in a reverence for ethics.

Closing Words

Sacred Circle

He drew a circle that shut me out.
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.
Edwin Markham (1852-1933)

Donald Montagna
Washington Ethical Society
Platform: April 5, 1987