

Morality Over Religion

Bob Greenwell, Address to Ethical Society Mid Rivers

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Today I am going to tell you what Ethical Culture has come to mean to me. Ethical Culture is also known as Ethical Humanism. It's also known as the Ethical Movement, and this name particularly suggests its active component. It's taken me ten years to arrive at this point of understanding, and I hope it resonates with you, and in some way adds to your appreciation of Ethical Culture, and your commitment to it. I look forward to hearing your comments.

I've packed quite a bit into my talk, and so I want to give you an outline.

It has five parts. First, an Overview. Second, The Trouble with Religion. Third, I'll take a look at The Original Impulse of Our Movement. Fourth, the Relation of Morality and Ethics. Fifth, and last, I'll present some thoughts in conclusion.

Part 1: Overview

The Ethical Movement has a positive vision: the full play of simple basic goodness throughout the world, the full play of heart goodness, the full play of simple basic *morality*.

But there is a force in the world that militates against the full play of simple basic goodness. It is that the world puts religion over morality.

There is an inbred assumption of the primacy of religion over morality. This is a backwards priority. It is an inversion, or a perversion.

The trouble with religion is that it holds itself lord over morality, and it imprints this inversion on old and young alike. As long as religion is lord of morality, there will be people in every religion who turn against people of other religions, not on the basis of violations of simple basic morality, but on the basis of religious differences.

Religious differences can be matters of creed, cult, or code. Creed is the belief system. Cult simply means culture—how a group does things together, its religious language, dress, movement, art, music, rituals, and overall sense of belonging to the special group. Code is a religion's code of conduct--its morality as influenced by its creed and its cult. Any of these can be used to elevate religion over morality.

Ethical Culture has a positive aim--the full play of simple basic morality throughout the world. But to get there, the inversion must be set aright. Therefore, a primary motto for Ethical Culture is "morality over religion." This means the liberation of heart morality from creed and from cult. When this is done, a funny thing happens. You find that you arrive at a new form of religion itself! It's a religion that reveres above all simple basic heart goodness and fights for it, fights against the violent encroachments by creed and cult. Ethical Culture is a cause, and its cause is to put morality over religion, and to live that way.

Part 2: The Trouble with Traditional Religions

Religion has a positive role to play in people's lives. Why? Because religion is the external support for the need all people have for full internal development of themselves. External support is a natural, positive, and good thing, and people naturally want it, and want it badly. There will always be a market for religion. For this very reason, religion will always be a fertile field for charlatans and for people seeking adulation. Up to now, religion has been too easily manipulated and too easily distorted. People's desire for external support has led them to buy into the distortions, even when the distortions end up sabotaging people's own deepest needs.

Remember all those religious prophets who were predicting the end of the world in the year 2000? When it didn't happen, they came up with an explanation. It was because January 1, 2000

wasn't really the end of the millennium and the beginning of the new one. The true beginning of the new millennium would be January 1, 2001. Just you wait! It didn't happen then either.

This is part of the trouble with traditional religions, particularly those of the West—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They make cosmic predictions based on someone's personal revelation or insight. These idiosyncratic insights are not subject to honest verification by other people, and the predictions become part of a belief system, become dogma. Then the believers treat other people differently, not with simple basic human respect and *interest* but with a sadness in their hearts that the others are unbelievers. Hatreds between religions do not start as hatred, but as the more innocent sadness. But this sadness is not so innocent. It is putting righteousness over morality.

I have a friend, a very close friend, whose daughter married a born-again Christian and became one herself. Now she feels sad that her father and mother won't be in heaven to share the joy that she is going to feel when she goes there. She feels terribly sad. How could she not?

My friend's daughter now can't fully relate to him, her own father, heart-to-heart, because she has a belief that she has another more important Father in heaven. My friend says that the two of them try to have a good time together, on her rare visits, but her sadness about him, about his unbelief, gets in the way. No matter how hard they try to play and converse and joke as if things between them were just like they used to be until her college years, my friend says he can feel in his heart the distance. She is sad for him; she wishes she could do something to win him over; she feels guilty for not being able to do so.

When I was growing up, I worried a lot about my father making it into heaven. I didn't see him committing any major sins, but one time I asked him if he thought he would go to heaven and he answered, because he tended to be a modest man and never overrate himself, "probably not." I shrank from him in terror. A thought got computed in my brain so terrible that I didn't allow myself to think it aloud, but it was there—the thought that this must mean my father was somehow on the side of the devil. You're either with God and go to heaven, or you're with the devil. I was eight years old. I didn't have the resources to press Dad and get him to reveal a more authentic answer to my question, and so a wedge was driven between him and me. A totally unnecessary wedge. A wedge based on a belief based on a belief, not a belief based on dialogue and sharing of mutual human experience. From that time on, I felt I had to protect myself from him, lest I catch what he had, and not make it to heaven. I could no longer *fully* relate to my own father, heart-to-heart. I lost the full play of simple basic goodness with him.

Traditional religions are a problem to the human family: they block people's connecting heart-to-heart.

There's another problem with traditional religion. You don't hear this one very often. It was something that was uncovered by the well-known social psychologist Milton Rokeach during his long years of research at Michigan State University. He talked about it in his book *The Open and Closed Mind*. From what I've been able to find, his discovery has not been disconfirmed by any research since. He did a huge survey of people in the seven major religions of the world, people who seriously practiced their religion. Then he compared them to people who had no religious orientation at all. He wanted to find out which group was more compassionate. Obviously, the religious people, right? Yet the results were the same for all the major religions: the nonreligious were more compassionate! That is, the average religious practitioner was less compassionate than the general population. However, within each religion, there was a core group, 8% was what he measured, who were more compassionate than the general population.

8% more compassionate, 92% less. Hmmm. On balance I'd say this strongly suggests that religions are an obstacle to the development of compassion. First, simple sadness gets in the way—sadness that other people don't have the great good that true believers have. Over time, however, it becomes obvious to true believers that some people are *obstinately* refusing to open their eyes. Worse than that, these unbelievers are not only hurting themselves, but they are hurting the spread of true belief. Sadness turns to anger, and anger can turn to righteous rage or cold hate.

There's a third strange fact about religion. There's a feeling called "elevation" that psychologist Jonathan Haidt has investigated. People in all religions experience this, but the Eastern religions have emphasized it. It's a feeling of awe and of bonding with everything, and of love, but it is also a feeling of non-action. You bond, you melt with, but you don't do anything about anything, you don't do

anything for someone. You simply marvel at what is, whatever it is. You may feel compassion, but you don't act on your compassion. Enlightenment is non-active. There are the 8% exceptions, but in general, enlightenment is exalted over simple basic goodness. So in India the caste system stumbles along, despite the deep religiousness of that culture.

Religion, because of its dogma or because of its dreams, gets in the way of simple basic morality. It gets in the way of a helping hand, a kind word, a simple rescue of someone under attack, or simple good humor between two people.

But there's a fourth problem with religion that goes even deeper. It is insidious. It's the problem that sets religion apart from all the other ways people find to not honor their own heartfelt morality. The problem is: When religion puts itself over morality, it sets morality up to fail.

Once people get the training to put some religious idea or religious group over simple basic morality, it's a very short step to putting some other idea or group over morality. Instead of the *religious* idea over morality, you put the idea of getting rich over morality. Instead of creed over morality, you start living by greed over morality. Or you can substitute an ideology-over-morality for religion-over-morality. As for loyalty to a religious group over morality, you might substitute loyalty to a family or a small group over morality.

From day one of infancy training, we booby-trap our children with the assumption that some idea or some cultural practice is to be placed over morality. Either you keep your childhood faith and its religion over morality, or you hit adolescence and make that turn toward independence. In this moment of liberation, however, instead of realizing that it's time to turn things upside down and put morality over religion, the young person has been trained to automatically search for some *new* idea or group to put over morality. The liberated young person, feeling so adult, leaves behind the childhood faith, but carries forward the childhood assumption of religion or some religion-substitute over morality.

Oh how everyone thinks they respect and honor morality—but they don't!

Traditional religion, which quietly and subtly subjects morality to the warping influences of creed or group culture, is trouble. It's not just something for us personally to avoid. It's a root problem for the world, something for us to change. This is the Ethical Movement's cause: to turn the world upside down, to everywhere bring morality up over religion. This might be called the master cause. Without this aim, the aim of all other worthy social causes in the world must fall short of their own aims.

Part 3: The Original Impulse of the Movement

Let me talk a little now about the original impulse of the Ethical Movement—a little history. In 1877, Felix Adler, at the first anniversary of the start of the Movement, looked back and asked, "What was it that induced us to enter upon so perilous and...uncertain an enterprise?" And he answered, "We felt a great need." [This talk of Adler's is the last chapter in the book *Creed and Deed*.]

We felt a great need, he said, to stop the war of religion against the highest intelligence of the day. Religion wasn't just something we could choose to opt out of and go our own way; current religion was noxious; it was at war with intelligence. We felt the need to do something.

In addition, Adler says:

We saw that millions are annually lavished upon the mere luxuries of religion, gorgeous temples, churches, and all the elaborate apparatus of salvation; we... reflected that if one tithe of the sums thus set apart were judiciously expended upon the wants of the many who are famishing, distress might often be relieved, sickness averted, and crime confined.

That is, we felt a great need, driven by simple basic morality, to see to the wants of the many, to relieve distress, to avert sickness, to reduce crime.

We also felt a great need for reform of political, business, and cultural life, for we had come to a “stern conviction that there are certain hideous shams allowed to flourish in our public life.” Today they are flourishing still.

Finally he adds:

Then also the question, how best to educate the children to a worthy life, confronted us. The doctrines of religion as commonly interpreted, we could no longer impart to them. Did we attempt to do so, they would be likely to discard them in later years, and would in the mean time be seriously injured in their moral estate by the struggle.

Having now described the great needs driving them, Adler goes on.

A few of us therefore took counsel how these objects might be attained, and we determined to take a step in a new direction....

Upon what platform could we unite? To formulate a new creed was out of the question... And yet it was plain that to be strong and to exert influence, we must effect a firm ... enthusiastic agreement upon some great principle.

And what was that principle that would give us strength and influence? It was, he says, that we were to be

a new movement for the moral elevation of the race.

Now I have read that statement many times before. But only recently did a whole new meaning leap out at me. Before, the phrase “moral elevation of the race” sounded priggish, esoteric, somewhat arrogant. But this time I got it. When Adler said “the moral elevation of the race,” he didn’t mean that we morally enlightened ones, shrewd and knowing in all the intricacies of ethical theory, would elevate the poor benighted masses so that they too could behave morally. Not at all! The phrase “of the race” was to be taken as a possessive, in the same way that “car of mine” means “my car.” By moral elevation of the human race Adler meant that the human race is in possession of something, namely basic morality, and the crucial thing is to elevate it. Moral elevation means *elevating morality*.

Here is the real turnaround. Here is the revolution in religious thought. Religion doesn’t inform morality; morality informs religion. Here are Adler’s original words:

...a new movement for the moral elevation of the race. Now the basic facts of man’s moral nature, though insufficiently illustrated in practice, are universally admitted among civilized human beings. Concerning them there is and can be no dispute. Here then appeared the solid principle of our union. The *moral* ideal [not some other ideal] would point the way..., the *moral* ideal would permit us to preserve the sacred right of individual differences intact, and yet to combine with our fellow-men for the loftiest and purest ends...

This feature, if any at all, lends character to our movement, and by it would we be judged... We put the moral element prominently forward and behold in it the bond of our union, the pledge of our vitality.

Phrases like “the moral element” can start to sound stuffy until we recall the revolution he is calling for. Later in this anniversary address he uses a more compelling phrase:

While all men may not be capable of the highest order of intellectual action, all men are capable of heart goodness, and goodness is the better part of religion.

Heart goodness. By “the moral element” we do not mean moral philosophy or moral preaching but simply the heart-connection of everyday life, or simple basic goodness.

Part 4: “Morality” and “Ethics”

When people hear the phrase, “simple basic morality,” they intuitively get what it is. When they hear “ethics,” it’s less clear. Clarity is gained when we make a distinction between simple morality and complex morality.

Simple morality is what human beings hold in their hearts, intuitively. (There are cases where this has been burned out or cut out by trauma or sadistic training, but we focus on the normal person with the normal amount and degree of tough experiences.) The word “simple” in “simple morality” does not mean surface or superficial or easy. That’s why I say “morality of the heart.” The heart is deep, and the heart is the generator of courage.

“Ethics” is heart goodness applied to complex issues. How do we apply heart goodness? By using the heart’s own tools. And what are the heart’s tools? They are tools that do not pre-judge the outcome in favor of one person over another or certain groups of people over others. They are tools that are universally recognized as fair. They include reason, scientific evidence, reports of experience coming from multiple sources, dialogue, empathy, and respect.

Complex morality is derived. It is derived from the values of simple morality. Since complex morality is derivative, it must always be held secondary to simple basic morality. Simple basic morality includes attitudes like respect for everyone. Complex derivative morality includes positions on such complex behavior as abortion, war, killing in self-defense, and capitalism.

Simple morality stands on its own. It is not derived from anything else. How then can we first find and then clarify simple basic morality? How can we find or know the morality of the heart?

The answer is as simple as the morality itself:

First, listen to your heart. The mind is busy and pays little attention to the heart’s quiet murmurings. Some people call it “conscience.” Some call it “spiritual intuition.” But I like to keep it closer to concrete experience and say “Listen to you heart.” Over time you will start to hear.

The second way to know the morality of the heart is by joining with others and investigating what moral values rise up consistently around the world. Find the universal moral sentiments that are simple and not culture-bound.

Many people have offered lists of moral values, and most of us can resonate with most of them. Just consider these:

- Kindness and fairness
- Self-discipline in service of excellence
- Compassion
- Sharing
- Perception of reality as it is (otherwise known as truth, honesty, integrity)
- Modesty
- Caring
- Non-aggression
- Cooperation
- Fortitude, Self-Control
- Fidelity, Keeping Promises
- Courage
- Joyousness
- Humor
- Gratitude
- Forgiveness

Basically, all virtues that have been held up in high esteem by most people most of the time are what make up the basic morality of the heart. [The 24 virtues categorized in the APA’s handbook *Character Strengths and Virtues*, by Peterson and Seligman, are a good start.]

Adler made the claim that the basic facts of human moral nature are universally admitted among civilized human beings, and that concerning them there is and can be no dispute. Is this really true? People argue from cultural anthropology that moralities vary. But I want to argue that Adler is right. Moral disputes occur in the realm of complex issues, such as abortion or animal welfare or vegetarianism. Ethics is the mind thinking through issues, in service to the heart.

One principle stands out from the fact that the simple moral values take precedence over the complex moral values. It is the principle that wherever the heart is violated, either because of disconnection between people, or because of infringement on a person's autonomy, that is proof that something is wrong in the more complex position. If two people fight over religious values, such as whose God is superior, that is proof right there that the religious values harbor some fallacy or delusion. When the heart connection between any two people is blocked by a disagreement over beliefs that cannot be resolved by dialogue, that is proof that the disagreement itself is wrong. Dialogue, not dogma.

Part 5: Conclusion: The Challenge of Being a Cause

From its original impulse down to today, Ethical Culture is the movement to elevate simple basic morality to the highest rank of values for all people. More specifically, it is the movement to elevate simple basic morality over religion. The twist is: "Morality over religion" is our religion. But it is more than that. It is our cause. And if there is ever a conflict between Ethical Culture as champion of simple basic morality and Ethical Culture as a religion, morality wins.

What stands in the way of elevating simple basic morality to the highest rank? All organizations and institutions and passions and beliefs that place other values higher. Ethical Culture, to pursue its own mission, must act, nonviolently and lovingly, to change organizations, institutions, passions and beliefs that place other values higher. It is not that Ethical Culture must "oppose" other religions or institutions, but rather that Ethical Culture must engage them and make every effort to bring them to realize that placing simple basic morality first is in their own best interest.

In an extreme case, where a religion or organization is in the act of injuring others and is impervious to all appeals to cease and reconsider, then "protective use of force" becomes allowable and obligatory. We may find ourselves out somewhere demonstrating and chanting "Morality Over Religion!" - "Morality Over Religion!"

There is room on earth for many religious forms, but no room for any that subordinate simple basic morality to anything else. People are to be lovingly rescued from such religions.

What does all this mean that we should do?

I have come to believe that appealing to people's simple basic goodness is the best way to connect, is the best way to get beyond the barriers of belief that we erect between each other. Once we connect in the heart, with a mutual awareness of each one's fundamental longing for simple basic goodness, then we can talk, then we can work out disagreements and come to agreement on how to relate to each other in particular circumstances of life.

Is this idealistic? Yes.

Is this realistic? Yes.

The deepest realism knows that in their heart of hearts, people desire good. When people learn skills that allow them to tap into their deepest desire, and skills that enable them to free up the same desire in others, the desire finds ways to express its ideal in the real.

We are realistic in knowing that changing the world will take a long time. We are realistic, also, in knowing that individuals do change, often in an instant, and that groups do change as well.

We are realistic in recognizing that new skills are being developed that are having remarkable successes. One group is NVC, Non Violent Communication. NVC is having success in mediating between groups formerly violent toward each other, in teaching hardened criminals new attitudes, in teaching children positive ways of talking before negative ways become ingrained. Another group is Crucial Conversations. This group is having empirically demonstrated success in corporations and large institutions, showing that when people learn how, both the quality of the organization in terms of

community and success in terms of productivity and sales goes up. It's inevitable that at some point these two approaches will be integrated, with other new insights added, and the rise of simple basic goodness over all other values will receive a great boost.

For right now, we train ourselves and develop ourselves. Then we approach others with skill. Our personal lives improve. And when we encounter people who throw up barriers of abstract and convoluted beliefs, who want to start with their beliefs, rather than start with heart-connection, we are not helpless. We don't have to despair. We won't have instant massive success. It's a long vision. But in the practice of heart-connection with skills, our own hearts will grow.

We each have our own preferred zone of comfort. The easier path is to emulate liberalism's inclination to live and let live. The easier path is to cultivate our own garden, while letting others suffer in the gardens they don't know how to weed. But there is a higher zone of comfort to which we aspire, the zone of satisfaction in being part of the movement to set the upside-down world upright, and let the play of simple basic goodness, throughout humanity, throughout the world, begin.