

## A HUMANIST LOOK AT ETHICS

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Many years ago when I was growing up, it was generally assumed by those around me that there was an omnipotent God watching over us, recording every thought and deed as to whether it was good or bad. When we died, that record would be looked at and the decision made as to what our eternal life would be. Needless to say, no excuses would work. Furthermore, we also knew that thanks to the behavior of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden we were all condemned to a lifetime of sinful desires we shouldn't act on.

The concept of metaphor or symbolism for these beliefs was unheard of. No, these were the facts and we couldn't forget them because they were drummed into our heads every Sunday. And, as a method of ensuring proper behavior it was fairly effective. At least we knew what the score was and what the penalty for transgressing could be

Then, inevitably, as the years passed, many of us began to question these so-called facts. After all, if we now knew that the world hadn't really been created in six days, maybe these other stories also had an aspect of folklore. But then where was our moral compass? The thought of being responsible to no one was scary - where could we find a basis for ethical living?

One basis for our ethical development, without our realizing it, can develop from our everyday lives. Almost daily, quite casually we all talk about the actions of ourselves and of others - offering opinions about whether what they or we have been doing is good, right, and sensible (or perhaps very much the opposite). Buried in this "small talk," chit chat," gossip and mealtime conversations are implicit -- sometimes very explicit -- ethical judgments about the behavior being discussed. People and their words and actions are labeled "wonderful," "mean," "greedy," "generous," or hundreds of other qualities. Over

time, these discussions lead each of us to a sense of what the people around us consider to be good and bad, ethical and unethical, conduct. Unless we have strong personal reasons or other commitments to believe otherwise, most of us tend to "go along" with the opinions of those around us, rather than "bucking the tide" by independently evaluating the ethical aspects of others' actions. Thus often almost automatically, the social consensus can become the approved although unexamined, ethical standard. In an ethics lecture, George L. Head, a business executive, said, "that each person draws portions, sometimes bits and pieces of their personal ethics from an almost random variety of sources, such as their childhood upbringing, religious beliefs, discussions with family, colleagues, and friends, and the ethical teachings of whatever philosophers the person may have read."

In sharp contrast to the ethics of casual social consensus, the philosophers who have developed systems of ethics - such as Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Bentham, and others have developed basic principles from which they have derived systems of ethics. These principles fall into two general groups: those that are rules-based and those that are results-based.

Examples of rules-based ethics appear in the Bible's Ten Commandments, in many of the professional codes of ethics and in the Golden Rule. Results-based systems of ethics emphasize principles such as physicians never knowingly doing or allowing medical harm; doing the greatest good for the greatest number of people and Kant's principle of taking an action only if everyone could take the same action without bringing about more harm than good.

Felix Adler, the founder of the Society for Ethical Culture and a Humanist, believed that the nucleus of the spiritual life is to be found in the ethical relatedness of each person to others. It is because of our involvement in the lives of others that we are enabled to grow into moral and spiritual beings.

He said, "Ethical Humanists believe that religion has its foundation in human needs and sympathy. In brief, religion is a creation of human living, not a revelation from gods on

high. The sense of right and wrong emerges out of the process of living together as social beings. Humanity's social nature is the product of a long evolutionary development having its roots in the gregarious behavior of the species from which we are descended. In human beings the development of language and symbolic thought has given a whole new dimension of meaning to social feeling."

Adler recognized that moral customs and ideas of right and wrong vary widely from person to person and from culture to culture. Nevertheless, he said that a moral constant runs throughout the history of ethical religion and philosophy. That unvarying principle asserts that the individual human being is of infinite value and must not be degraded or abused. Sages and teachers of all ages have accepted this rule, whatever might be the differences in their theological arguments. In its usual form this "nonviolation ethic" is essentially negative. Do not do unto others what ye would not have them do unto you - but this leaves room for the temptation to remake others in our own image.

Ethical Humanism, then, stands in a tradition of cultural evolution that accepts all of history and moral experience as part of its unfolding story. "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Work out your own salvation," admonished the Buddha who said that if the gods exist, they are of no concern to us. "If you meet the Buddha on the highway, kill him" goes the Buddhist proverb. The harsh maxim drives home a vital truth: No holy prophet, messiah, Christ, avatar, or even a great god in heaven can do your spiritual or ethical task for you.

Looking out at this group of free thinkers, I'm sure that there are a variety of ways by which you have come to your own code of ethics. We can look to the 7 principles that we as UUs covenant to affirm and promote. The American Ethical Union lists these 8 commitments as a guide:

**1. Ethics is central.**

- The most central human issue in our lives involves creating a more humane environment.

**2. Ethics begins with choice.**

- Creating a more humane environment begins by affirming the need to make significant choices in our lives.

**3. We choose to treat each other as ends, not merely means.**

- To enable us to be whole, in a fragmented world, we choose to treat each other as unique individuals having intrinsic worth.

**4. We seek to act with integrity.**

- This includes keeping commitments and being more open, honest, caring, and responsive.

**5. We are committed to educate ourselves.**

- Learning how to build ethical relationships and cultivate a humane community is a life-long endeavor.

**6. Self-reflection and our social nature require us to shape a more humane world.**

- Our social nature requires that we reach beyond ourselves to decrease suffering in the world.

**7. Democratic process is essential to our task.**

- Democratic process is essential because it respects the worth of persons and implies a commitment to shared responsibility.

**8. Life itself inspires religious response.**

- Although awareness of impending death intensifies the human quest for meaning, the mystery of life itself, the need to belong, to feel connected to the universe, and the desire for celebration and joy, are primary factors motivating human "religious" response.

And remember the lessons of Robert Fulghum, the UU minister who wrote, "All I ever really needed to know I learned in kindergarten" said, "Share everything, Play fair, Don't hit people, Clean up your own mess, Don't take things that aren't

yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. And no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

There's nothing new about the humanistic ethic. It started many, many years ago when one tribe realized that they had a better chance of survival if they took care of each other and worked together. Of course their purpose was to be able to kill off the tribe in the next valley but the basic principle of looking out for each other worked. As time has gone by, we've been able to widen the idea of tribe or clan. We can now think of our neighborhood, our country, our nation as our enlarged tribe. However we have such fierce loyalties to our own clan that the next step of enlarging that circle seems difficult but not impossible.

So what difference does it make whether or not we try to live an ethical life? Sometimes we forget that we who are living today are only on one step of the evolutionary ladder. I just don't think that we're so wonderful that creation is going to stop with us. What we do with our lives counts. Some years ago our UU minister, Mary Scriver gave us a wonderful talk on "memes" those small everyday actions that can eventually change the culture - look at the change that has come about in the attitudes toward smoking starting with just a few people. Without our realizing it, I believe our actions, our conversations with others may help to nudge the evolutionary process in a good way. That basic code of taking care of each other and all that is involved in that process has brought us a long, long way and it can be a guide to the future if we follow it.

Here's a quote from Albert Einstein in his book, *Living Philosophies*:  
"Strange is our situation here on earth. Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why, yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose. From the standpoint of daily life, however, there is one thing we do know: that man is here for the sake of other men - above all for those upon whose smile and well-being our own happiness

depends, and also for the countless unknown souls with whose fate we are connected by a bond of sympathy."

I went to the Internet and asked for a poem on ethics. There were many more than I ever imagined but this one by Nicholas Gordon sums up all that I've been saying here.

Society is you and me.  
Everyone's a piece of they.  
Very much of what we do  
Ends up as words that others say.  
No I exists except as we,  
Though he and she are part of you;  
Each pronoun's only partly true,  
Each life becomes another's way.  
No one alone can simply be.