

Some Characteristics of the American Ethical Movement

Felix Adler□, An address delivered in South Place Chapel, London, June 7, 1925)

In undertaking to give a brief account of some of the distinctive traits that have developed in the American Ethical Societies during the past fifty years, I may begin with a few words about the impulse that led to the formation of the parent society in New York.

Perhaps a hundred people assembled one evening, May 15, 1876, at the time when the country was celebrating the hundredth anniversary of its political independence. The people who gathered had summoned me from Cornell University where I was at that time a very young professor of religious history and literature, in order to present to them the sketch of a religious society imbued with the spirit of religion without its dogmas. After the address, the first Society for Ethical Culture was established in New York.

The impulse that led originally to the formation of Ethical Societies sprang from the profound feeling that the life of man needs to be consecrated; furthermore that the consecration cannot be derived from doctrines which, however vital they may have been in the past, however true they may still be for some, have ceased to be so for oneself.

Among those who assembled that first evening, there was manifest a desire to separate the grain from the chaff, but also to preserve the grain, and not only to preserve but to plant it anew in the expectation of reaping a richer harvest. The majority of those present were men of affairs, were men and women of ordinary good education, some of them, indeed, of superior education--but the bulk of this first Ethical Society consisted of what would be called average people and especially of fathers and mothers who felt the need, both for themselves and for their children, of something to take the place of the consecrating influence of the old religions.

I cannot too strongly emphasize the fact that the movement did not start among the so-called intelligentsia, that it was not a rationalistic movement in its inception, that it was

not negative in its attitude, that the people interested in it were not concerned with such questions as the authenticity of the Scriptures, or of miracles, or the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity. Turning away from these matters, they asked with intense feeling, what consecrating influence shall we bring into our own lives, and particularly into the lives of our children? Indeed it was concern for the children even more than for themselves that led to the formation of these societies.

This desire for a consecrating influence expressed itself in the initiation of Sunday Services, which were marked by great simplicity. Simplicity should not be identified with bareness. Simplicity may indeed be empty but, on the other hand, may be pregnant with meanings that ritual cannot express or can express only incompletely. In the Sunday meetings of the American Ethical Societies there is no prayer, no ritual. There is music as a kind of frame, but the center of the service is the address. The conditions to which it is expected to conform, however difficult, however hard to live up to--never adequately lived up to but still implied--are that the speaker shall not indulge in random utterances just on the spur of the moment, that he shall give his whole life to the problems of ethical living, that he shall be steeped in the religious and ethical thought of the past, and that his object shall be to communicate light and heat to his hearers, that through their minds and hearts he shall endeavor to influence their will, shall quicken their highest aspirations, and thus seek to help them in the struggle toward spiritual freedom. An address that is a mere exhibition of the speaker's mind, a mere intellectual performance, however brilliant it may be, is not desired. The platform of an Ethical Society is itself the altar; the address must be the fire that burns thereon.

The real attitude of the Ethical Societies from the beginning was positive, not negative, not antagonistic. We wished to define our own goal, to mark off a path toward it. We wished to build for ourselves a spiritual shelter amid the immensities. But controversy was forced upon us. Like the builders of the second Jerusalem temple, we were compelled to build with one hand and to bear the sword, as it were, in the other. The Fundamentalists would not let us alone. Fundamentalism which is now experiencing an attenuated recrudescence, was at that time in robust possession of the pulpits.

It was not, as I have said, that we attacked them, but that they felt themselves obliged to attack us. For the attempt to lead the moral life, or even to try to lead a better moral life, without first accepting religious dogmas was to their way of thinking monstrous. If recognized as legitimate it would cut the ground from under their feet. Religious faith, they said, is the tree, morality the fruit. Without the tree there can be no fruit. Belief is the source, the fountainhead; morality is the stream. Without the source there can be no stream. It is not enough, they declared, to refrain from denying the existence of a personal Deity, or reward and punishment in a future life--these doctrines must be positively affirmed. To ignore them is the crime. For without the belief in these traditional teachings, yes, without the belief in the inspiration of the Bible, of the story of the Creation as told in Genesis, without the belief in Christ the Redeemer, etc., there could be no morality.

The position of the Ethical Societies connected with ethics the two notes of independence and reverence. The authority of the moral law is not borrowed; it is aboriginal and also sovereign. The ethical end is the sovereign, supreme end of life to which all other ends must be subordinated. Now fundamentalism attacked the independence of the moral law. The supremacy of it, on the other hand, the reverence due to it, was attacked from another quarter, namely from the side of moral skepticism.

In the next stage of our history, a second controversy was thus forced upon us, chiefly with the moral skeptics, those namely who hold, from a different point of view, that morality is arbitrary, not because it happens to express the mere fiat of God, but because it represents the mere convenience of men--or if not their convenience, their ignorant notions of social advantage, or their superstitions, or their class interests. "Morality is a convention" became a favorite phrase. A conventional rule is to be observed simply because it has been agreed upon, with indifference as to the nature of the thing which is agreed upon. The lifting of the hat in salutation is an instance. Any other sign or gesture, if agreed upon, would do just as well.

Aristotle wisely says that ethical habits must precede the recognition of ethical principles. The principle of living in promoting the best life of others must likewise be grounded in habits. The Ethical Societies therefore, are educational societies intended to create those habits through which the light of ethical principles shimmers, out of which the pure elixir of ethical principle may be distilled.

The last and most menacing tendency of our time to which the Ethical Society must relate itself may be called Voluntarism--marked by the exaggerated claims put forth on behalf of the individual will, the repugnance to binding ties. This tendency is for the moment everywhere in the ascendant. In literature it is illustrated by such names as Ibsen, Nietzsche, Anatole France, the admirable Romain Rolland, Shaw, Wells; in philosophy, Bertrand Russell and the Pragmatists. Gifted dramatists, poets, artists, social reformers, earnest educationists are among its protagonists. Its practical effects are showing themselves in the breaking up of families, in the growing change of opinion with respect to the permanence of marriage--a change advocated on the theoretical grounds that individual wills shall not be subject to binding ties. (Faithfulness, it is conceded, is perhaps better, but with the reservation that it shall last only as long as the relation continues to be agreeable to the individuals concerned.)

Voluntarism arises out of the overemphasis of one of the two poles of ethical experience--the incontrovertible value of selfhood--to the neglect of the opposite pole. It is easy to account for its temporary triumph. We are still in the period of revolt, partly against what remains of the feudal organization of society, partly against the smugness of the middle class. The habits which the experience of the sacredness of binding ties must create have still to be formed.

The problem of the Ethical Society, looking quite far ahead, is, how shall these habits be formed? What kind of binding tie shall be proposed? On what ground shall men be induced not so much to submit to it, as to desire a new constraint upon their wills? And by what educational methods shall the underlying habits be inculcated?

The new principle of constraint may be defined as the pull of spiritual evolution. Spiritual evolution is the progressive advance of mankind toward a state of things in which the light of ethical perfection shall be reflected from the face of human society; that is, in which all men shall live and move and have their being in mutually promoting the highest life of each and all. It means that the object of social reformation shall not be a mere change in the conditions under which men live, but a change in human nature itself. It means that we shall look forward consciously to the breaking forth of new powers in ourselves, to the release, through our own efforts, of capacities dimly latent in us.

Binding ties are imposed not from above (by fiat of God) but from ahead. The radiant future stretches forth its arms toward us, and binds us to be willing servants to its work, willingly to accept those limitations of the individual will which are indispensable in the service of a far-off cause, a service which at the same time disciplines and ennobles the individual himself. This, to my mind, is the solution of the problem how constraint upon the self is compatible with the affirmation of the self.