



Ethical Action Report

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Welcome to the Ethical Action Report 2.0

In this Report:

***Speaking of Ethics: Living a Humanist Life*, Joseph Chuman, Leader, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, NJ**

***Update from the United Nations: Progress of Women?*, Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, International Humanist and Ethical Union and National Ethical Service Representative to the UN, and Dr. Reba Goodman, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County**

***In honor of Eleanor Roosevelt: First lady of the world and Encampment for Citizenship supporter*, Hugh Taft-Morales, Ethical Culture Leader and Ethical Action Report Editor**

***Speaking of Ethics: Living a Humanist Life*, Joseph Chuman, Leader, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County, NJ**

Editor's note: Last month we got a preview of a book by Liz Zelman, a member of the Ethical Society of St. Louis. It examined the development of ethics from an anthropological perspective. This month, the Ethical Action Report is excited to offer a selection from the Leader Joe Chuman's brand new book, ***Speaking of Ethics***, available at the following URL: <https://wwwcreatespace.com/4423627>. What follows are excerpts from his introduction, "What is Ethics? Why does it matter?"

...[T]he moral person is the person who recognizes the importance of moral values and intends to act on them. In addition, because he or she cherishes such values, he or she will try to ensure that such intentions are expressed in behavior, even when it is difficult to do so. The moral person is one whom we recognize as a decent person, the person who manifests a high degree of integrity in both motive and behavior.

Often being moral in the way I am describing it – being truthful, fair, caring, loyal, and so forth – is not very difficult for us because there is not much at stake in behaving in these ways. But very often there is, and this is what makes the discussion interesting. Being moral becomes difficult, for example, when it comes up against what we perceive to be our immediate self-interest.

Editors note: Joe examines various conflicts that keep us from acting morally - the conflicts between self and others, between our competing values, and between intention and action. In light of Liz Zelman's

analysis of how tribalism keeps us from acting morally, I wanted to emphasize Joe Chuman's reminder of how our non-rational biological and psychological characteristics also get in the way of living ethically.

...I've become appreciatively aware of how easy it is to set behavioral goals for ourselves, and how correspondingly hard it often is for us to meet those goals. Anyone who has been chronically overweight knows how extraordinarily difficult it is to alter one's behavior, even with the best of intentions. This is because we human beings are not simply rational minds, but rather a complex of drives, urges, impulses, and needs that we cannot totally control because we are unconscious or just minimally conscious of them. Again, I may want to do the right thing – I may want to respond to my friend's letter in a timely way when she writes to me, or extend kindness and support to my aging aunt – but find that my best efforts are thwarted and blocked by impulses, obsessions, or just bad habits that get in the way.

I have long ago given up a romantic image of the essential rationality of the human being. We are far more than transparent minds. All of us, I believe, experience a battle between reason and passion, and our ability to be moral is to a considerable extent based on our ability to master in life a relative integration between these dynamic forces, forces we internally confront all the time. One does not have to be a neurotic or an addict to appreciate the insight of the New Testament to the effect that 'the good that I would do I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.' Nor does one need to believe in sin, original or otherwise, or be chronically overweight to recognize that the spirit is often willing but the flesh weak. Such, I believe, is the universal human condition that often creates a gap between our moral intentions and our moral behaviors.

All these considerations – namely, that people may sincerely see the same facts differently and so come to different conclusions from themselves, the problems people confront when values are in conflict, and the fact that we all labor under the limitations of our humanity, so to speak – should lead us to more compassion than condemnation of others.

But having said all this, I want to turn my discussion around to make the declaration that, despite mitigating circumstances of which we need to be mindful, none of this is an argument against the supreme importance of moral values, ideals, and standards, and the need to strive continuously to make those values more keenly felt in our own lives and the lives of others. Though we often need to be circumspect, cautious, and compassionate in our ethical evaluations, none of these concerns should lead to the notion that we can abandon moral values, moral standards, and moral judgments about right and wrong.

I would like to end with one final question. And that is, why bother? Why should I strive to be moral? Unfortunately nowadays this is neither a question with a self-evident answer, nor a stupid one to ask. There are, in fact, many temptations not to be moral.

We might argue that by striving to be moral, one will not achieve more wealth, or power, or even admiration in the eyes of the mass of humanity. So, why bother? I can think of at least four reasons.

One reason is that if I am moral, I will be rewarded with heaven, and if I am not, I will be punished in hell. For centuries, I suspect that this was the prevailing motivation for the majority of humankind to behave in conventionally moral ways. But of course it cannot be a motive for those who do not believe in heaven or hell or in a God who directs you to one place or the other. But even if you do believe in heaven and hell and a God who dispatches you there, I still don't think that fear of punishment or desire for reward is a very mature rationale for moral behavior.

A more compelling reason, I think, comes from understanding that a society in which there were no moral values would not be a very pleasant society to inhabit. If we lived in a world in which people routinely lied, cheated, stole, murdered, and didn't care about each other very much, it is hard to imagine how we would find much peace or happiness there. It would be a condition that Thomas Hobbes described as a 'war of each against all.' It is a condition that wouldn't work to anyone's satisfaction, including our own.

But even this is not enough to compel me personally to be moral. One could argue that it would be nice to live in a society in which most people acted in a trusting, honest, compassionate way, but why should I? In fact, I might conclude that since most people are ethical, this provides a better opportunity for me not to be.

After all, the society as a whole isn't going to be damaged noticeably if a few people are dishonest and totally self-interested, so why shouldn't I take advantage of the situation? And maybe I should.

But on the microcosmic level of interpersonal relations, this type of amoral reasoning breaks down. This is so because I believe that our most deeply held longings for love and for intimacy are based on our ability to live moral lives or sincerely strive to do so. I truly believe that without moral commitment, especially to truthfulness, there can be no trust, and without trust there can be no love. Truthfulness is the foundation for trust, and trust is the only ground out of which love can be nurtured and sustained.

But there is one more reason, even beyond this one, which partakes of a sublime intuition. And that is that in striving to be an honest, sincere, compassionate, and caring person, I am striving to realize and fulfill what it means to be a human being in the highest sense. That in my efforts to relate to others honestly, truthfully, and compassionately, without artifice or manipulation, I am somehow touching the wellspring of my being. It's an intuition, as Spinoza put it, that virtue does not bring us reward but is itself its own reward. It is the realization that in acting ethically toward others, I am fulfilling my humanity, my most distinctive nature as a truly human being.

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*Editor's note: The next two articles in this May 2014 Ethical Action Report are dedicated to the work of the American Ethical Union's representatives at the United Nations, our affiliated organization known as **National Ethical Service (NES)**. Since its formal association with the Department of Public Information in 1947, NES has supported peace-building principles in collaboration with the Missions, UN agencies and other non-governmental organizations. Its mission is to promote a consciousness shift toward our comprehensive interconnectedness through emergent holistic systems such as peace building, universality in human and earth rights, and pluralism based in transparency and accountability. Most active in NES include Kay Dundorf (Riverdale), Sylvain Ehrenfeld (Bergen), Martha Gallahue (Essex), Kurt Johnson, Lucile Kleiman (NYSEC), Jackie Pope (NYSEC), Emily Newman (FES, NYSEC), and Lucy Schmitz (Essex). Read more about NES at their website at <http://nationalserviceaeu.org>.*

Update from the United Nations: Progress of Women?, Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, International Humanist and Ethical Union and National Ethical Service Representative to the UN, and Dr. Reba Goodman, Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County

According to a Chinese proverb, "women hold up half the sky." Unfortunately, this fact is not reflected in the experience of many women. As volunteers for Ethical Culture's voice at the United Nations, National Ethical Service, we offer you insight into the status of women worldwide.

Over the years some women have made much progress. However, for many women inequalities still persist regarding access to education, health care, and political and economic opportunities. A number of current evaluations demonstrate the situation. Nearly 70% of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty are women. Nearly 70% of the world's illiterate individuals are women. Women contribute about two-thirds of the hours worked, but earn only one-tenth of the world's income. Women own only 1% of the world's property. Women are paid an average of 30% less than men for comparable work. The most devastating fact is that worldwide one in five women will become a victim of rape or attempted rape.

Recently, a major report from the *United Nations Population Fund* reported in detail the changes in the condition of women over the last 20 years. Some of the news is encouraging. Worldwide women have made great strides in literacy. Women now have fewer children due to the greater availability of contraception. Furthermore, they are less likely to die in childbirth and have an increasing life expectancy. In fact, in general both for women and men, the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen dramatically from a stark 47 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 2010.

She was known everywhere due to her travels and prodigious work. She wrote 8,000 columns, 580 articles, 27 books, and 100,000 letters, delivered 1000 speeches, appeared on 300 radio and television shows, received 35 honorary degrees, and helped create our modern global human rights framework. Her work domestically tried to bring out the best in the United States. How better to teach the world than through example? In her autobiography she explained,

It seems to me that America's objective today should be to try to make herself the best possible mirror of democracy that she can. The people of the world can see what happens here. They watch us to see what we are going to do and how well we can do it. We are giving them the only possible picture of democracy that we can: the picture as it works in actual practice. (1961, p. 401)

To promote learning and practicing democracy, Eleanor teamed up with Ethical Culture Leader Al Black and Anita Pollitzer on the *Encampment for Citizenship*. Founded in 1946, the Encampment's mission was to prepare "young people to be informed, responsible and effective global citizens through experiential learning and living in a diverse, democratic community." This boot camp for democracy provided college and high school students the opportunity to develop the skills, confidence and knowledge to become responsible world citizens and leaders. Participants worked with each other and nurtured face-to-face friendships so fundamental to the spirit of democracy.

The inclusive democracy at the camp appealed to Eleanor. As chair of its Board of Sponsors from 1946 to 1962, she praised it for preparing future citizens "for thinking in terms of all people and not in terms of a selected few. Not only we in the U.S., but people all over the world, need young people trained to be good citizens with an ability to think with an open mind."

The Encampment offered a transformative summer experience to teens through a democratic residential program that taught critical thinking and social action. For over 50 years it nurtured more than 5,000 activists, like D. C. Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton.

After going out of existence for a couple of decades, a new version of the camp is back in operation thanks to a series of alumni reunions that Leader Anne Klaeysen hosted in New York. Last summer there was a 2-week camp in Virginia and this coming July the University of Illinois in Chicago will host a 3-week version. For more information, visit the Encampment for Citizenship website at <http://encampmentforcitizenship.org/>

Perhaps Eleanor's most lasting contribution to our world was through her work as chairperson for the Human Rights Commission and the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Her approach to this declaration began where Mrs. Roosevelt often began – with people here and now. As she told the UN General Assembly in 1958,

Where after all do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: The neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. (Remarks at the United Nations, March 27, 1958)

The rights enumerated in the UN Declaration are based on an ethical commitment to the inherent worth of each person, a value central to Ethical Humanism. The Declaration insists that, "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." You don't have to earn these rights – they are a part of your very existence from the day you are born. Some may claim these rights come from god. Others claim they are wrapped up in human nature. What is important to Ethical Humanism, however, is not why we defend inherent worth, but the fact that we do... whatever our reason!

We in Ethical Culture can be proud that we honor the legacy of "our first lady of the world" by continuing to work in international arenas for worth and justice. I thank all those who work with National Ethical Service for bringing the voice of Ethical Culture to the United Nations today. I am certain that Eleanor Roosevelt would approve!

Ethical Action Spotlight

I thank Joe Chuman, Sylvain Ehrenfeld, and Reba Goodman for contributing text and ideas to this month's EAR. Let's continue the dialogue in our national movement – submit comments, articles and suggestions for future EAR editions! ~ Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader, Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia and Baltimore Ethical Society.

The Ethical Action Report 2.0

As Ethical Societies around the country continue their 2013-2014 program season, the EAR is evolving to try to be more useful to you and to generate more constructive, engaged dialogue about “deed before creed” throughout the movement. We hope this new format offers stimulating ideas and practical hints that make ethical action more effective and rewarding at your societies and in your lives.

EAR 2.0 hopes to offer:

- More in-depth analysis of particular social justice issues.
- Stories of ethical action projects that worked well at one of our societies and might enliven your home society.
- Discussion of ways to frame Ethical Culture's commitment to Ethical Action
- Excerpts from recent Ethical Culture platform addresses or statements from around the movement about civic, social, or ethical issues.

Join the fun! Offer your thoughts and news items for the June edition.

- Write about an issue with which you are familiar due to your professional life or private interest.
- Share news about an interesting ethical action project at your society, current or from the past.
- Write a “letter to the EAR editor” addressing any articles in this or future issues, or about other issues relating to our commitment to action.
- Do a historical reflection on an Ethical Action moment from Ethical Culture's history.

The pieces can range from 250-1000 words, and if you submit them early, the editorial volunteers can help polish your offering. Feel free to float your idea by me at HughTM@gmail.com or send something to me by the 15th of the month prior to publication. All final copy has to be sent to me no later than the 25th of the month.

Sincerely, Hugh

Hugh Taft-Morales - Ethical Culture Leader and *Ethical Action Report* Editor

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To share your views on national legislation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) go to:
www.secular.org

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