

Annals
of the
Ethical Culture Institute
at the
New York Society for Ethical Culture



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There is no question of being able to live in a world of our own any more. The world has grown too small. You cannot live just in the United States—you must be part of the world as a whole, and the sooner we learn this the sooner we will discover that we really have to know what brings war about—that war anywhere is a menace to peace everywhere.

Eleanor Roosevelt, *The Standard*, 1940

Welcome to Spring!

That is, welcome to Volume II of *The Annals* and our shift to labeling its issues with the seasons. While we might offer philosophical and/or poetic justifications for linking our work to the earth's journey around the sun and our human connection to these cycles (and flowers on trees), we will forego that pleasure and blithely move on.

The **Ethical Report** in this (did we mention “Spring”?) issue highlights the ongoing work of the NYSEC Archive Committee and volunteers from the Society and the community as part of the Adler Study Project. The Project is a multi-year effort to document and preserve the collection of rare and historic resources housed in the Adler Study at NYSEC. The report documents a milestone in that project and provides a useful tool for research as well as the interested but casual reader (why, yes, it *is* another bibliography).

Our **Ethical Focus** is once more on Felix Adler. Curt Collier looks at Adler's 1895 address on “The Ethical Education of Children” and places it in the context of Adler's evolving ideas about education. Joseph Chuman looks at Adler's ideas about evolution itself. Both look at previously unpublished works to bring new definition to our understanding of important elements of Ethical Culture's thought. As an added bonus to *Annals* readers, we provide another previously unpublished Adler lecture, “[Darwinism and Religion](#)” (given at Carnegie Hall, November 25, 1894), which, while not a source for Chuman's article, does seem to follow right along with his thesis.

We have taken a slightly different approach to **Ethical Expression** in this, our Spring issue. Our thanks to Kirk Ruebenson, intrepid photographer and avid historian late of Fieldston School, for following a thread that he pulled from Howard Radest's *Toward Common Ground* to locate transcripts of the interviews conducted as part of the Oral History Project. Among those transcripts is an interview with Dr. Ruth Pilpel Brickner, and it is her mention of her son's novel and its reflection of his education in the school that Adler built (so to speak) that provided us with a clear expression of Adler's insistence on the inherent worth of every human. Our source for this expression is, however, that novel, which we cannot reproduce in these pages. Instead, we have provided links to accessible online sources, which we hope you will follow to read this interesting ethical expression.

Finally, in **Ethical Notes and News**, we note our news and acknowledge the increasing number of people who have lent their time and talents to the support of the ECI's work, including those who have contributed to the making of this issue.

We welcome you to this issue of the *Annals*. We invite you to follow the links that we provide to online resources for further reading. We invite *your* further participation by letter (address to institute @ nysec.org), by your Ethical Expression(s), or by participating in our upcoming events.

Carolyn A. Parker, PhD
Editor



Ethical Report

Bookcase A: Being a Bibliographic Essay on the Adler Study at the New York Society for Ethical Culture

Carolyn A. Parker, PhD

The large lecture hall of the New York Society for Ethical Culture includes a modest-sized stage with a lovely proscenium that, in its early days, carried the motto: “Where men gather to seek the highest is holy ground.” Although the motto has since been removed, the sentiment still continues: The Adler Study is, for some at least, holy ground.

When NYSEC’s Meeting House was first constructed in 1909-1910, the fourth and fifth floors were not finished. The Society did not have sufficient funds for completion, so the decision was made to construct the building, finish the auditorium, and leave the upper floors as more or less empty shells until funds could be raised to finish them. Early plans nonetheless set aside space for a study for Felix Adler:

The two upper floors, while not entirely completed at the present time, are to include on the fourth story, (the one immediately above the Auditorium) a room or chapel seating about 200 persons called the "Marriage Hall," for ceremonies ; a number of Sunday School rooms and meeting rooms, and on the fifth floor studies for the Leaders and small section-rooms. On this upper floor there have already been fitted up three or four rooms ; a library and study for Dr. Adler and one for Mr. Chubb.¹

What is now called the Adler Study was one of three studies used by Felix Adler at any given time:

- His home study, holding the famous desk carved by Karl von Rydingsvärd;²
- His summer study, a building separated from his home in the Adirondacks and dubbed, fittingly, “The Eagle’s Nest” (Adler is German for “eagle”); and

¹ “Dedication Ceremonies,” p. 10. See also the Eighteenth Series of *Ethical Addresses and Ethical Record* (1911), p. 33 ff. (<https://archive.org/details/ethicaladdresses18ameruoft/page/n5/mode/2up>)

² Charles de Kay, “The Revival of Woodcarving,” *American Homes and Gardens* (January 1906), pp. 39-42. (<https://archive.org/details/americanhomesgar00newy/page/n50/mode/1up>)

- Room 514 at 2 West 64th St, Manhattan.

Room 514—The Adler Study of this discussion—contains a fireplace on the north wall, two high windows on the east wall (overlooking Central Park), and built-in bookcases on all four walls. An undated photograph of the space (below) shows it to be modestly set up for research, dictation (assistant’s desk on the right), and meetings.

Today, the room is carpeted, and all 10 bookcases are enclosed behind lockable glass doors. The room is no longer an office. Instead the space is used for Board meetings and Society programs; it is also rented to individuals and organizations outside of the Society. Nonetheless the room retains its association with Adler with his portrait now in the space shown behind the desk, flanked by two busts made from his death mask.

The bookcase behind and to the left of the desk is Bookcase A.



While this review of Bookcase A is intended to be both a milestone discussion of the larger, ongoing Adler Study Project and a snapshot review both of a portion of NYSEC’s larger collection of books by and about Ethical Culture and of the many reference resources used in the

preparation of lectures and publications, it also serves as a validation of the sentiment long removed from the lecture hall's proscenium arch. This room was—and on many occasions still is—a place where people have sought the highest, giving it, in that respect, status as a place of attachment or, in the older terminology, “holy ground.”

The Adler Study Project is a multi-year project of the NYSEC Archives Committee to preserve the contents of the room, a collection of books and journals which date from as early as 1762 to the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. This aspect of the Project includes cleaning, inventorying, organizing, and, if possible, digitizing the entire collection. Another purpose of the Project is to increase member and organizational appreciation of the role—both past and future—that this space and its contents can play in increasing our understanding of Ethical Culture and in meeting its purposes and mission.

Bookcase A has achieved something of milestone status in comparison to the remaining nine bookcases in Adler Study. In April 2024, NYSEC members Amy Schwarz and Danny Hanson began the work of photo-documenting the Adler Study. They took digital photos of the title page of every book in the room (and versos when needed to determine copyright and publication data). That work continued through October 2024, when all bookcases in the Study had been similarly photodocumented. Almost immediately, the work of turning those photos into bibliographic lists began, although to date, only four bookcases have been fully listed in that manner.

When the work began, Bookcase A looked as shown in the photograph on the right. Light from the east windows shone across the bookcase (contributing to fading and desiccating the covers). Books were standing aslant or sometimes lain on their sides (neither good for maintaining the integrity of the spine or the covers). Some past attempt at organization was reflected



in the collection of books related to the life of Abraham Lincoln on the top shelf, but the collection quickly passed from Lincoln to a mixture of philosophy and social science followed by sets of bound journals, themselves shelved out of order and with the occasional missing number.

Today, Bookcase A has been cleaned, and the books dusted.³ The journals and selected books have been moved to another cabinet, and those remaining in Bookcase A stand straight, supported by bookends. The window shades are now closed when the room is not in use.

The first assessment of the collection of books in Case A showed that they numbered 124 (not counting the journals which can be seen in the photo to occupy three of the six shelves). Of those, 44 were published before 1933, the year of Adler's death, indicating that the books in the case continued to serve NYSEC's Leaders in the succeeding years, the collection growing as more Leaders used the Study. Indeed, several books displayed bookplates showing ownership by Jerome Nathanson (NYSEC Leader 1940-1974) and John Lovejoy Elliott (NYSEC Leader 1894-1942). An equally significant number of books in the case (36) were written by EC Leaders and NYSEC members. These may be considered part of the "core collection" of EC writing; they have been removed from Case A and placed together with EC journals and other EC-related writings in a separate cabinet (Bookcase C, for now) and will be discussed separately as the Project continues.

One surprise among the books were three bearing an oval stamp which labeled them as part of the Henry J. Golding Memorial Library. As the work has progressed, many more books bearing this stamp have shown up in other bookcases. The plan is now to separate these "Golding books" into a single bookcase in the Adler Study, first, to honor the decision that created this special collection and, second, to support further study of Golding and his work.

The books remaining in Case A have been reshelved in the same order in which they were photodocumented, i.e., no particular order at all. (The numbers assigned to the photographs by Danny Hanson's camera are currently the only guide to location in the Study.) Once the entire collection has been processed in the manner of Case A, it may be possible to determine a more coherent organizing strategy both for housing the collection and for digitizing those works which have not already been digitized.

What, then, can we learn from Bookcase A and its remaining 87 books?

Twenty-nine of these titles were published before 1933 and may be considered to be resources available to Adler as well as other leaders. The oldest work in the case is Richard Rothe's

³ Many thanks to the volunteers who participated in the tedious and messy work of cleaning, sorting, and organizing in March: May Wu, Richard Somma, Kelana Jackson, Vandra Thorburn, Loretta Tolliver, and Aubrey Todd.

Theologische Ethik, a multivolume set published in 1869.⁴ The most recently published, in 1971, was Sherman Mandel's *Basic Problems in Behavior*.⁵ There are older books in the larger collection and, of course, much more recent books as well. What the numbers and the dates do not tell us is that this small collection, which represents less than 5% of the contents of the Adler Study, nonetheless serves as a window through which to view the broader vista of the growth and development of thought in Ethical Culture.

The first shelf serves as an example of the potential to be discovered in the Adler Study. This shelf holds most, but not all, of the biographies and historical studies of Abraham Lincoln to be found in the Study.⁶ The volume of volumes alone attests to significant focus on the 16th President as someone of interest for something more than his very significant role in American history. Indeed, although Lincoln's birthday has never been a federal holiday, it has been widely marked as a day of commemoration; accordingly, Lincoln has frequently been the subject of platform addresses by NYSEC leaders, among them David Saville Muzzey, Henry Neumann, Algernon D. Black, Khoren Arisian, Jr., and others.⁷ Even a small sampling of such platforms confirms the impression derived from the presence of these books in the Adler Study that Abraham Lincoln has served as a source of inspiration in Ethical Culture as a person who exemplified moral leadership, democratic integrity, and ethical struggle. It is also possible to see, in this part of the collection and other biographical sources in the library, a potential for biography as ethical instruction, i.e., looking at real people rather than mythical or fictional "heroes."

Similar observations may emerge as the Project continues and as more of the resources in the Adler Study are documented. Bookcase A, nonetheless, already suggests some areas for further exploration.

- Going along, as it were, with the Lincoln collection, Case A shows a strong interest in history, including European and American history, but also historical studies of religion and literature.

⁴Vols. II-III, Second edition (Wittenberg: Hermann Roelling, 1869). A bookplate identifies these volumes as Adler's personal copies. Volume I has not yet been located in the collection.

⁵ (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1971).

⁶ Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*, 4 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939); Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln: 1809-1858*, 4 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928); Ida M. Tarbell, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 2 vols. (New York: McClure, Phillips Co., 1900); Anthony Gross, *Lincoln's Own Stories, The Star Series* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., 1912); Carl Sandberg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years, Vol. 1-2*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1926 [1925]).

⁷ Muzzey, "Homage to Washington, mimeograph (February 19, 1950); Neumann, "Lincoln and America's Big Chance, *The Ethical Platform* (February 11, 1962); Algernon D. Black, "Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation--A Century Later," *The Ethical Platform* (February 10, 1963); Khoren Arisian, "The Humor—and Moral Legacy—of Abraham Lincoln," *The Ethical Platform* (February 8, 1970).

- Philosophy appears in both academic works and popular works written for the lay reader, although it does not dominate this particular, but random, group of works.
- The social sciences are well represented in this set as is psychology. Both areas reflect the frequent emphasis on the platform for understanding the relationship between science and ethical behavior.
- Case A also reflects a commitment to social justice and an awareness of the pressures of modern society on our ability to discern fact from fiction. This includes the study of social systems and how they might be reformed to support ethical living.
- Commitment to democracy and concern for peace are also evident in the titles in this bookcase. The rise of fascism appears as a contrast to both.

The richness of the Adler Study is well reflected in this small set of books, both as academic resources and as practical approaches to the lived experience of social problems and conflicts. While the Adler Study Project continues—noting that the Study itself cannot serve as either a lending or a reading library—we now have partial documentation of its contents that can assist the interested reader in delving deeper into the insights to be gained from one small sample of the larger collection. A preliminary bibliography follows.⁸ It serves as a milestone which will, in due course, be replicated for the entire collection. In addition, the bibliography provides its own version of a lending library through its links to the Internet Archive (shows as [IA] in the bibliography), which allows readers to access (and download) digitized copies of out-of-copyright books and, in some (limited) cases, to borrow (in hourlong sessions) copies of more recent books.

⁸ This “Bibliography of Bookcase A” has been alphabetized for ease of use. The bracketed numbers are those provided by the camera used to photodocument each book and can be used to locate the book on the shelves of Case A. Links to those books currently available in the Internet Archive are provided in brackets, viz. [IA]. Wherever possible, the IA link is to the edition found in the Adler Study; alternate editions are noted when the AS text is not available. Books published after 1930, if present, may not be available for borrowing. Initials in braces indicate prior ownership of the book, e.g., {JN} for Jerome Nathanson.

The Adler Study Project

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With assistance from May Wu and Rick Somma

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Ethical Focus

Wonder Before Doctrine: Felix Adler and the Formation of the Ethical Self

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In a cultural moment where many have stepped away from traditional religion but have not abandoned the desire for a meaningful moral life, the work of Felix Adler offers an unusually precise and still underappreciated path forward. Adler did not attempt to defend religion in its inherited forms, nor did he discard it outright. Instead, he asked a more fundamental question: what, at its core, is religion for? His answer was both disarming and demanding. Religion, he argued, is not primarily about belief. It is about orientation—about the cultivation of a way of being in the world that expresses itself in how we encounter others, how we act, and what we are willing to stand up for.

Such a reorientation becomes especially clear in Adler’s reflections on the religious education of children. From its earliest years, Felix Adler and the Ethical Culture movement placed strong emphasis on the ethical formation of the young. The founding of the Workingman’s School in 1880 reflected this commitment, though it also revealed an ongoing tension—one that Adler himself recognized—between preparing students for practical success and cultivating a deeper ethical orientation to life. Writing in *The Ethical Record*, Adler insisted that education must extend beyond the transmission of knowledge to include the formation of character. However, he also argued that character too emerged through lived experience. “By trying our theories, we test their validity,” he wrote, “action itself teaches us how we ought to act.”⁹

Adler published his widely popular book, *The Moral Instruction of Children*, in 1892. In prefacing Adler’s work, the editor of the series, W. T. Harris, places Adler’s work in the frame of “new” versus “old” education. According to Harris, “The new education . . . substitutes the

⁹ “Ethics and Culture,” *The Ethical Record*, I, no.1 (April 1888), p. 11.

internal authority of conscience for the external authority of the master.”¹⁰ Adler’s book focused on providing the educational materials for schools to use in this mode of education—to invoke, not to instill. The purpose of his book, based on a series of lectures first presented at the School of Applied Ethics during its first session in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1891, was:

. . . to give in outline the subject-matter of moral instruction for children from six to fourteen or fifteen years of age, and to discuss the methods according to which this kind of instruction should be imparted. ¹¹

In it, Adler argues that, ultimately, an ethical pedagogy is about cultivating an ethical personality, not simply a person who can recite back answers.

This, however, raises a further question: if ethical understanding emerges through action, what becomes of moral or religious education? Adler’s answer remains consistent with his broader pedagogical philosophy. An ethical orientation cannot simply be taught through instruction; it must grow out of direct experience, reflection, and participation in meaningful relationships.

Three years later, in his March 1895 address, “The Religious Education of Children,” Adler explores how this process might unfold. He argues that a religious orientation to life remains necessary, particularly in a culture increasingly shaped by material concerns—what he describes as the *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age. Yet he is equally clear about what such an education should avoid. Adler does not want children to be filled with notions of supernatural forces or “magical powers” that guarantee safety or resolve uncertainty. Instead, he seeks to cultivate a form of religious life grounded in reality—one that deepens a child’s sense of responsibility, engagement, and moral awareness without retreating into illusion.

I say there is one duty which we owe to our children—to tell them the truth. Not the whole truth—they cannot comprehend that, I admit, but whatever we say to them should be true to the best of our knowledge and belief. No matter how comforting a lie may be, you have no business to tell your child a comforting lie.¹²

Where most traditions begin with instruction—teaching doctrines, stories, and beliefs about God—Adler reverses the order entirely. He begins not with ideas, but with experience. The first task, he suggests, is to awaken a sense of wonder. A child should be brought into contact with the living world: the quiet persistence of plants, the sudden force of storms, the vastness of the night sky. These are not sentimental gestures. They are formative encounters. Before a child can

¹⁰ W. T. Harris, “Editor’s Preface,” in Felix Adler, *The Moral Instruction of Children*, International Education Series, Vol. XXI (New York: D. Appleton, 1892), p. vi.

¹¹ “Prefatory Note,” in Adler, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

¹² Lecture delivered to the New York Society for Ethical Culture (May 17, 1895) at Carnegie Hall.

meaningfully engage questions about ultimate reality, they must first feel that reality—its depth, its mystery, its capacity to evoke awe. Without this grounding, concepts arrive hollow, detached from the very experiences they are meant to illuminate.

Yet wonder alone is not sufficient. It opens the child to the world, but it does not yet orient them ethically within it. That work, Adler insists, belongs not to instruction but to example. A reverence for life emerges when a child witnesses adults who live with conscience—who take responsibility seriously, who act with integrity even when it is difficult, who stand up for others when it would be easier to remain silent. In such moments, the child begins to perceive that life is not neutral, that it makes claims upon us. Adler captures this relational dimension of ethics in one of his most cited formulations: the aim is “to elicit the best in others and thereby in oneself.” What the child sees, over time, is that moral life is not a set of rules imposed from above, but a pattern of engagement lived out between people. Reverence, in this sense, is not taught as a concept; it is absorbed as a way of being.

Only after these experiences of wonder and reverence have taken root does Adler turn, cautiously, to the realm of ideas. His recommendation that the concept of God be withheld until adolescence—until roughly the age of fourteen—is among his most controversial proposals, and also one of his most carefully reasoned. It is not, as it might first appear, an attempt to exclude religion from a child’s life. Rather, it is an effort to protect the integrity of their early development. Adler was deeply concerned that introducing theological concepts too early would short-circuit the very processes he believed were essential. Words, especially powerful ones like “God,” can easily become substitutes for experience. A child may learn to repeat them, even to rely on them, without ever having encountered the realities they are meant to name.

If education is to invoke, not to instill, what is Adler hoping to avoid?

The question raises two distinct concerns, both of which remain strikingly relevant. The first is the problem of externalized worth. When children are taught that their value derives from a divine source—that it is granted, judged, or secured by an external authority—they may come to see their own dignity as dependent on something outside themselves. Adler’s alternative is not to deny worth, but to relocate its grounding. Human dignity, in his view, is discovered within the fabric of relationships, in the mutual recognition that arises when we take one another seriously as ends rather than means. It is something encountered and enacted, not bestowed.

The second concern is more subtle but equally important. Adler feared that early theological instruction could foster a kind of moral passivity. If the world is presented as something already ordered—fixed by divine will, made as it is meant to be—then the role of the individual shifts toward acceptance rather than transformation. The task becomes one of accommodation, of fitting oneself into what already exists. Adler, by contrast, wanted children to experience the world as unfinished, as something that invites participation and can be shaped by human effort.

Ethical life, in this view, is not about aligning oneself with a predetermined order, but about contributing to the ongoing work of making that order more just, more humane, more worthy of reverence.

In this light, Adler's oft-quoted principle of "deed before creed" takes on a broader significance—it's not the profession of belief, but the performance of duty, which is the mark of the religious spirit. What he preserves from religion is not its metaphysical claims, but its ethical intensity, its insistence that life matters, that our actions carry weight, that we are accountable to something larger than our immediate interests. At the same time, he strips away the elements that divide: dogma, doctrine, and the demand for assent to propositions that cannot be universally shared.

For contemporary readers, particularly those who find themselves outside traditional belief systems, Adler's framework offers both an invitation and a challenge. It affirms the possibility of a deeply meaningful moral life without reliance on supernatural claims. It suggests that what has historically been called "religious" may, at its best, refer not to what we believe about the universe, but to how we inhabit it—with attention, with seriousness, with a commitment to the well-being of others. At the same time, it demands a great deal. Without doctrine to lean on, responsibility cannot be deferred. Without divine authority to appeal to, the work of ethical life must be carried forward through human relationships and institutions.

There are, of course, tensions in Adler's approach. One might reasonably ask whether ethical traditions can sustain themselves across generations without shared narratives or symbols, or whether delaying religious language risks leaving certain existential questions unarticulated during formative years. Adler does not resolve these tensions so much as redirect them. His focus remains fixed on the conditions under which ethical life can genuinely emerge. If those conditions are right—if wonder is cultivated, if reverence is embodied, if agency is preserved—then the concepts, when they do arrive, will have something real to attach to.

What Adler ultimately offers is not a rejection of religion, but a reconstruction of its foundations. He asks us to begin not with answers, but with experiences; not with doctrines, but with relationships; not with certainty, but with a disciplined openness to the world and to one another. In doing so, he places the burden, and the possibility, squarely where it belongs: in the lived practice of human life.

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Fundamentally our age has been and still is, in contrast with other eras, the age of individualism. And from the outset I have felt obliged to criticize the individualistic conception of freedom, together with the reactions to which it leads, as the chief evil we have to overcome with a new ideal. . . . The ethical viewpoint, as I see it, means linkage and interrelation. . . . As I see it the ethical problem is always to organize, in the true sense, those essential relationships between individuals and groups that are the very matrix of personality and human development unto freedom.

Felix Adler,
quoted in *Our Part in This World*, p. 42.

Darwinism and Anti-Darwinism in the Thought of Felix Adler

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Felix Adler was among religious thinkers troubled by the implications of Darwinian evolution. Though it would be hyperbolic to claim that Adler's philosophy was a response to Darwinism specifically, he felt the need to answer Darwin, both in his technical exposition and from the platform of the Ethical Culture Society. We might speculate that Adler would have developed his philosophy, which was foremost dedicated to absolutizing the worth of person, had Darwin never crafted the theory of evolution. But Darwinism was undoubtedly the most powerful expression of the mechanism and materialism emanating from Europe, against which Adler formulated his ethical idealism.

Evolution, both in its philosophical and scientific manifestations, characterized the zeitgeist of nineteenth century thought. While Enlightenment figures such as Condorcet propounded an optimistic theory of social evolution and Kant and Laplace held forth on the evolution of the cosmos in the eighteenth century, nineteenth century evolutionary theories were characterized by greater systematization, organicism and often reflected a unifying commitment to romanticism. Hegel's philosophy of the dialectical evolution of Idea toward the Absolute bore commanding influence in molding both an historicist understanding of intellectual development as well as a grasp of the progressive development of society through stages. Of almost equal influence in its time was the philosophy of Auguste Comte, which presented humanity as evolving via three distinctive eras—the religious, metaphysical and scientific. For Comte, the “laws of nature” were not religious, nor metaphysical, but “positive,” and such positivism characterized the most advanced stage of society. Later, Herbert Spencer's theory of social evolution, developed both before and after the publication of the *Origins of Species* in 1859, was to render him a virtual cult following in intellectual circles in England, and even more so in the United States. Spencer explicated what intellectual historian Maurice Mandelbaum refers to as “total evolutionism,” an all-pervasive system of laws that governs the development within societies as well as the progressive evolution through time of successive societies.¹³ Such perspectives were to animate the nascent social sciences, including social anthropology, which flourished in the years immediately after the publication of the *Origins*.

¹³ Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man, & Reason: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Thought*, (Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 90, <http://archive.org/details/historymanreason0000mand>

From the time of Newton it was assumed that God, the creator, had instilled nature with regular laws, the details of which could be discovered through empirical research, and from such investigation the laws themselves would be inductively sketched. In short, the divine hand was never completely absent from the workings of nature. On the biological side, such presumptions animated the work of Darwin's contemporaries and Darwin himself through his early and middle years. Two points are in evidence here: The first is that evolution was a component of the intellectual climate among Darwin's peers. The second is that in that era, variants of philosophical creationism characterized normative biology.

Evolutionary theories of the diversification of species were in the air when Darwin did his research and penned the *Origins*. In the eighteenth century, the French naturalist, Buffon, had speculated that species were not fixed, but varied as a result of environmental influences on their external forms. Jean Baptiste Lamarck famously postulated that animal species evolved through the inheritance of acquired characteristics. In the United States, the botanist, Asa Gray, a strict creationist, who corresponded with Darwin, accepted natural selection, but held that it was governed by a divine hand. The most famous American zoologist of the nineteenth century was Louis Agassiz, who railed against natural selection yet believed in the progressive emergence of new fauna. Agassiz held to a version of catastrophism in which natural disasters would cause the extinction of species, to be replaced by the almighty with more perfected forms. As is well known, the naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace developed the theory of natural selection both independently and simultaneously with Darwin. And Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, spurred Charles' interests through work that explained organic life according to evolutionary principles. A critical treatise, which laid the foundation for Darwinian evolution, was Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology*, published in 1832. The *Principles* compellingly advanced the case of a uniformitarian geology, signifying that changes in the earth surface occurred gradually over vast periods of time. Though Lyell's work profoundly influenced Darwin, Lyell remained a theist who believed that new species were created by divine agency.

Several key principles were operative in creationism as it pertained to the biological science of the day. Beyond the predication that the universe was brought into being by an act of the Creator was the doctrine of saltationism. While many of Darwin's peers could accept that small variations were brought about within species as a result of environmental pressures, they held that new individuals, who became the ancestors of new species, suddenly emerged as a result of divine agency. The second was finalism, or teleology, specifying that nature revealed an inherent trend toward a preordained goal or purpose, such as the attainment of perfection.¹⁴ These doctrines were corollaries to the most potent arguments raised by natural theologians, who based their convictions on the notion that a study of nature revealed clues to the existence and working

¹⁴ Ernst Mayr, *One Long Argument: Charles Darwin and the Genesis of Modern Evolutionary Thought* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 179.

of a divine creator and custodian. The most influential among these was the argument from design, most forcefully put forward by the British theologian William Paley in the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Contemporary zoologist Ernst Mayr explains that Darwinism centers around two major theoretical points. The first is descent of all life from a common ancestor, as opposed to distinct origination for each species. The second is the process of natural selection as the vehicle that propels the creation of new species over time. Moreover, inherent in natural selection is the competitive dynamic of the struggle for survival, which favors those changes that enable individuals to more successfully adapt, and thus achieve greater reproductive success, while those more poorly adapted to their environmental niche suffer extinction.

According to Mayr, although some of the creationists accepted aspects of Darwin's theory, a compelling way to define Darwinism is by contrasting it to creationist theories, for ". . . it was the adoption or rejection of Darwin's thesis of evolution by natural means that neatly separated the Darwinians from the non-Darwinians." Mayr goes on to say:

The theory of evolution by natural means was powerfully supported by the explanatory power of the theory of common descent. Indeed, it was this theory which even brought the morphological idealists into the Darwinian camp when they realized that this was the only reasonable way to explain the hierarchical arrangements of morphological archetypes. To be sure some morphologists, like Louis Agassiz, ascribed this order of nature to God's laws. But the natural explanation of common descent by Darwin and his followers was so much more convincing that Agassiz's interpretation fell on deaf ears and was no longer heard after Agassiz's death in 1873.¹⁵

The date, which can demark the triumph of Darwinism over creationism in the scientific camp, is significant, because it was at this time that Adler was completing his graduate studies at Heidelberg and Berlin. These were among the world's most progressive universities, where Adler was exposed to Darwinism as a natural science devoid of creationistic elements, for, unlike their American peers, members of the German academy increasingly accepted materialistic and non-theistic views of reality. Indeed, Benny Kraut confirms that while in Germany,

Adler suspended the question of the world's creation in time; it could neither be proven or disproven, and he deemed the issue religiously insignificant. He adopted Darwin's theory of natural selection as the operating mechanism of nature, and he enthusiastically endorsed the principle of scientific progress in the world.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 100.

¹⁶ Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 55.

The implications of Darwin's findings could not be more radical for theistic religion, perhaps even more so for liberal religious thinkers who were eager to hitch their theological wagons to the prestige and authority of nineteenth century science. What Darwin had done was to formulate a powerfully compelling, totally internal, organic and natural explanation for the emergence of species—including the descent of the human species from anterior ones—absent external or supernatural agency. The self-sustaining character of the evolutionary process obviated the presence of a divine designer as the introduction of chance into the mechanisms of natural selection undercut both determinism as well as teleology. As Mayr makes clear, though Darwin employs such terms as the “laws of science,” he was at variance from the way “law” was invoked by his theological peers. “Law” for Darwin did not mean laws implanted in nature by a supervening Deity, but regularities inductively derived from observations of how nature behaved. As Mayr states,

. . . Darwin's ‘laws’ were not the laws of the deists but were either simple facts or regular processes. No longer relying on universal laws, Darwin had no problem accepting statistical generalizations. It was a complete rejection of Cartesian-Newtonian determinism.¹⁷

The result was that the human being's privileged place in the natural order, based on his special creation in the divine image, and possessing a soul, was thoroughly dissolved. Moreover, Darwin's revelation that evolution required extraordinary waste as well as cruelty in the production of new species profoundly challenged the theological presumption of a perfect and beneficent Deity.

The power of Darwin's theory was inescapable and generated a flurry of religious responses. Among them was a retrenchment into biblical literalism and fundamentalism, which was to appear later in the century. Others held to the deistic notion that God created the universe while evolution was affirmed as a reasonable vehicle by which divine will unfolded. Still others incorporated Darwinism into philosophies of “cosmic evolution” while some responded by affirming the findings of evolution in the natural realm as they sought elsewhere to rescue the privileged status of the human person from the reductionist maw of naturalistic claims. The last of these general responses was the one adopted by Felix Adler.

Adler's Metaphysical Tightrope

As nineteenth century science, of which Darwinism was the most consequential expression, moved in a more positivist direction, Adler refused to throw the baby out with the bathwater. To be sure, Adler accepted the deliverances of contemporary science within the phenomenal realm, but was intensely concerned that science could not achieve what religion had historically

¹⁷Mayr, *One Long Argument*, 49.

accomplished, viz., provide objective sanction for grounding the absolute worth of the person. Nor could science provide the foundation required to sustain ethics.

Adler identifies the heart of the Hebrew religion, which he locates in the prophets, with the construal of morality as a holy thing, affirmation of the sacredness of the person, and the heralding of an ethic of non-violation. Jesus carried these central principles forward. As Adler notes,

From the Hebrew prophets we learn that there shall not be violation of personality or injustice, the positive commitment being mercy; from Jesus' teachings we learn that there shall not be impurity in the inner forum, the positive by-product being the doctrine of love.

Taking over the Hebrew heritage, Jesus affirmed that the spiritual nature exists in all human beings.¹⁸

Adler contends that both Judaism and Christianity, though incalculably significant in advancing the moral development of humankind, have run their course and speak with finality, and therefore are no longer adaptable to the changing conditions of modern times. Yet, Adler affirms that their precious insights as to the holiness of the person, though requiring reformulation, lies at the heart of religion and must be preserved. Constructing an intellectual defense of this preservation was the prevailing preoccupation of his philosophical project.

Yet, Adler confronts a dilemma, which is a particular instantiation of the problem of modernity. Adler, as noted, accepts the findings of contemporary science, which has rendered historical religion anachronistic and no longer credible with regard to its supernaturalistic claims as well as to the legends, dogmas and creeds based on those claims. Yet, science, with its appropriation of positivism, has purged reality of its spiritual dimension and with it the inviolate and holy character of the person, which religion has traditionally and theoretically vouchsafed (e.g., man created "in the image of God"). Moreover, the determinism of contemporary science reduces the human being to merely a confluence of molecular dynamics and therefore robs the person of freedom, which is a necessary corollary to morality. Darwin, again, provides the most potent challenge to the indwelling of the spiritual, and thereby, special, character of the human person.

This tension, which drives Adler's thought, is manifest in the following passage from his *Reconstruction of the Moral Ideal*:

Now no intelligent person will publish himself an obscurantist and a fool by disputing the teachings of science. The problem is to extricate oneself from this heavy burden that rests upon self-consciousness, without stultifying the mind by subterfuges or evasions. The

¹⁸ Felix Adler, unnamed manuscripts, 1918, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, 35-36.

truths of science must be received as such, but a way must also be found of not only vindicating, but enhancing the spiritual prerogatives of man, of establishing as a fact that there exists in him a spiritual nature which exalts him, which gives him a unique place in the scheme of things. Seen from one point of view he is like Hume's oyster, or like oxen or sheep, a mere product of physical evolution; known from another point of view, he is far more than a development of the inferior life-forms. He is a witness of the infinite striking into the finite world. A reconstructed ideal must make good this proposition, must relieve mankind of the pain, the depression, due to profound self-depreciation and self-contempt.¹⁹

While Adler has to be addressed on his own terms, I think it would not be wrong to conclude that the "profound self-depreciation and self-contempt" he feels as being a "mere product of evolution" is akin to the angst experienced by more conservative religionists when they confronted the implications for the status of the human species as a mere by-product of nature, specified by Darwinian theory. Indeed, I have located platform addresses in which Adler acknowledges that contemplating our ancestors as hairy monkey-like creatures with tails is a source of personal revulsion.

Adler walks a narrow metaphysical tightrope: he cannot look to traditional religion to ground the sanctity of the person because contemporary science has rendered theistic religion no longer credible. But he cannot look to science either, based, as he believes it is, on an atomic determinism, since science has abolished the human species' special status within nature. In short, science, founded on naturalism, denies man's spiritual nature, has erased his soul, and with it an objective ground for ethics.

Able to look neither here nor there for the foundation Adler most requires, he takes what I refer to as "an introspective turn" and invokes the categories of neo-Kantian idealism, which he had adopted in his student years, and which remained the basis of his ethical theorizing for the balance of his career.

Adler's Anti-Darwinism

While in Germany, Adler studied directly with several luminaries of the neo-Kantian movement, especially Hermann Cohen, the founder of the Marburg school, and Friedrich Lange. According to Benny Kraut ". . . the impact of their teachings on him . . . was nothing short of revolutionary."²⁰ Starting in 1860, the neo-Kantians sought a revival of Kantian philosophy as a reaction against materialism and empiricism. They also differed from the post-Kantian romantics in their emphasis on concepts rather than intuition. While Adler rejected Cohen's socialism, he

¹⁹ Felix Adler, *The Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal* (D. Appleton, 1924), 16-17.

²⁰ Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture*, 48.

gained from him, and especially Lange, a repudiation of philosophical materialism, which placed Adler firmly in the idealist camp.

Adler wielded his ironclad commitment to idealism as a scalpel to critique the limitations of empiricism and naturalism, most fervently in the field of ethics. Adler was assuredly a non-naturalist, who repeatedly contends that one cannot derive ethics from non-ethical sources. While technically not a metaphysical dualist in that he asserts that mind and body are connected (though the nature of that connection is unknown and unknowable), he is assuredly an epistemic dualist. Following Kant, he asserts that there is a categorical divide between the realms of reason, logic, mathematics, and, especially, ethics, on the one hand, and the empirical, or actual, realm, on the other. The former are built upon the “functional finalities” which are processes by which the mind creates reality. Since there can be no reality ulterior to mind, the deliverances of mind are “objective,” “ideal,” “infinite,” “absolute,” “perfect,” i.e., “real.” This reality is therefore “supersensible” in that it both transcends and functionally organizes our sense experience.

Adler’s commitment to the ideal/actual divide is expressed in the following passage, which can serve as a generic prologue to his critique of Darwinism:

. . . even if the principle of brain action were perfectly understood; even if the circuit were in every respect complete; if an impression coming through the eye or the ear could be traced through the entire series of its metamorphosis; if it could be shown how it leads to recollection, reflection, inward struggle, final decision, and issues in consequent manifestations of speech and action, if the molecular movements in the brain, corresponding to every possible emotion of thought were ascertained, we should still be as far as ever from an explanation of what mind is. It is one thing for a stone to be hot; it is another for me to be hot. The stone is hot, whereas I am hot and, in addition feel that I am hot. The feeling of heat is itself not heat, and is something radically distinct. Materialism can simply prove that, as far as we know, mind is linked with matter. But it does not demonstrate the mind to be the outcome of matter.²¹

It is this categorical distinction between mind and matter that frames Adler’s critique of the limitations of Darwinism. Generally speaking, as implied, Adler accepts Darwinism as a scientifically compelling explanation for the physical evolution of the human species, but he categorically rejects the Darwinian presumption that the physical brain holds sway over the mind’s functioning. In an address “The Ethics of Darwin,” given in 1889 or 90, Adler contends as follows:

For it is quite possible that so far as our bodily structure and functions are concerned we may be descended from an ape-like progenitor, and yet that does not exclude the

²¹ Felix Adler, “Substitutes for a Personal God,” n.d., Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

possibility that as the structure of the brain becomes more complex, entirely new faculties may arise, of which there is no trace in the lower order of organisms. In other words, the fact that our physical nature is developed from that of the apes does not prove that our intellectual and moral nature is developed from theirs.²²

Note that with his assertion that in the human mind there is “*no trace* of the lower order of organisms,” Adler is able to preserve that categorical distinctiveness of the human being from the balance of nature.

In its final capacity to create reality, the mind serves to severely delimit the scope of what is empirically acceptable. Adler states at one point:

. . . since science is incompetent to serve as a guide for conduct, we must take our cue from the teleological spiritual ideals, using our scientific and psychological knowledge as best we can, and gaining from our failure ultimately to manage our physical and emotional experiences so as to make them conform to the spiritual ideal, a more confident faith in the ideal itself. The belief in the real cannot be shaken. If the world as it is does not tally with the ideal of perfect reality, the world as it is is so far unreal.²³

Such is the idealist’s creed, which he applies to Darwinian evolution to evince its shortcomings. Adler’s critique of evolution ranges from the highly abstract, almost abstruse, in his technical papers, to the accessible and almost lyrically in his popular addresses.

In a brief paper entitled “Weak Points in the Theory of Evolution,” Adler asserts the dominant power of mind to create reality, suggesting that the theory of evolution itself is a product of mind and cannot thereby exceed its parameters. In this paper his approach is strictly logical and rational.

. . . not only do our moral ideals create environments which have not previously existed and are thus, in part at least, the authors rather than merely the products of environment—but apart from this, the whole theatre on which evolution takes place—space and time, the elementary environment, are themselves products of mind. The evolutionary theory reasons in a circle in making mind the partial creator, the product of what it has created.²⁴

Falling back on the Kantian assertion that a self-contradiction cannot be true and what is not logical is not real, Adler concludes that evolution cannot have created the mind, since the theory

²² Felix Adler, “The Ethics of Darwin,” c1889, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

²³ Adler, unnamed manuscripts. Box 45.

²⁴ Ibid.

of evolution itself is a product of mind, and the notion that it would create itself is an unwarranted vicious circle.

Adler is also logically troubled by the fact that Darwinian evolution is non-teleological. To Adler, it operates as a directionless mechanistic process, which also produces new individuals by chance that are then positively fitted to their environments. As he notes, this is a theoretical weakness in the theory in that “two negatives are supposed, in this instance, to make an affirmative, and teleological adjustment is declared to be the result of chance operating on chance.”²⁵ However, Adler’s most serious and far-reaching criticism of Darwinism is with Darwin’s ethics. He categorically objects to Darwin’s location of the genesis of morality in the animals, thereby denoting that there is continuity between animals and man in the moral sphere, and that evolutionary theory can illuminate the source of ethics.

Adler here states a logical and formal problem with Darwin’s moral claims, which he substantively builds upon elsewhere. Throughout his corpus he invokes, with a Platonic resonance, a hierarchy of faculties; our physical needs and functions comprising our lower faculties; our intelligence, aesthetic capacities and ethics, our higher ones. Again, Adler sees a rational contradiction in evolution in that adaptive intelligence “is a means in the procuring of pleasurable sensations.” This is logically unadvisable, according to Adler, in that it subordinates the higher to the lower, rather than the reverse, which is what his ethical theory proffers.²⁶

We get to the heart of the matter when we look substantively at the moral dimension. Here the dualist character of Adler’s philosophy describes the fault line between his ethics and Darwin’s. Adler says:

Our bodies we freely give over to the evolutionist,—they are a part of nature, subject to the same physical, chemical, mechanical laws which obtain in the rest of nature,—but when anyone tells us that the soul of man, or by whatever name we choose to call the higher part of him, is nothing but a more developed ape’s soul, we express a profound repugnance toward such an assertion, and are disposed to resist and to protest.²⁷

In his address on “The Ethics of Darwin,” Adler employs his usual approach of positing his own views by setting up foils. In the address, he begins by praising Darwin, his character, his overcoming the vituperation that had been hurled at him, and the brilliance of his inductive powers and his scientific abilities, which have enabled his theories to triumph. Adler readily concedes,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Adler, unnamed manuscripts. Box 80.

It would be a superfluous task to explain to an intelligent audience at the present day Darwin's title to greatness in his special line of work. I do not feel myself in the least competent for such a task, nor do I deem it incumbent upon me to undertake it.²⁸

Yet, the auditor awaits the predictable inflective moment, and Adler doesn't disappoint.

But because Darwin was great in his own specialty, is he therefore to be esteemed great in specialties far remote from his own? Because we recognize his authority in zoology, in botany, in geology, are we therefore to attribute a like authority to such opinions as he may have chosen to pronounce on questions of ethics . . .? What he has written on this subject does not show that he has made a profound or subtle analysis of the phenomena of the moral life, and he was evidently not acquainted with some of the principle theories of ethics which have been put forward by the great thinkers of the past."²⁹

Darwin's mistake was to commit the naturalistic fallacy, the implicit contention that evolution can be the bridge that takes us over the gap separating the "is" from the "ought." In concrete terms, Adler focuses on Darwin's contention that our ethics develop from, and are expressions of, "social instincts," which are observed in animals, and which themselves are founded on "sympathy." Adler concurs with Darwin in his appreciation that we are social creatures and that we can immediately feel the feelings of others as our own, but sympathy, Adler contends, cannot explain moral principles, the moral laws. It can only work in the context of immediate relations and not at a distance.

Darwin, Adler tells us, posits two natural instincts which are in conflict with each other—the social instinct, which is an inheritance from our animal ancestors and which leads to cooperative morality and serves as the source of conscience for Darwin, and the selfish instinct, such as hunger, passion, the desire for vengeance and the like, which is often temporarily stronger. As Adler states of Darwin, "the social instinct is a kind of dynamo in which are stored up the sympathetic feelings of our primitive ancestors, and of all the generations past."³⁰ A pang of conscience emerges when the selfish instinct violates our social instinct as a jolt of "emotional electricity" from which "we receive a shock whenever we do something wrong."³¹

Darwin's moral theory, as Adler presents it, falters on two grounds. Adler contends that the predication by Darwin of a cumulative and latent social instinct is implicitly unscientific in that it cannot be found and can be readily explained by the pleasure we take of the company of others in the current moment. He asserts that

²⁸ Adler, "The Ethics of Darwin."

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

instinct is a convenient word which has been made to cover up a multitude of gaps in knowledge. Who knows what an instinct is? Heredity, too, is a convenient word to cover up a multitude of the gaps of knowledge. The laws of heredity are still exceedingly obscure.³²

With the luxury of more than a century of hindsight, we might conclude Adler is violating his own stance of humility by wading into a field in which he himself is not expert. In the 1880s, heredity was indeed a nascent science, and current research points to the notion that Darwin's speculations about the heritability of instincts are closer to fact than Adler's broadside negation of them. However, the central problem is vesting ethics in nature. If we do so, Adler contends, moral responsibility is removed from our ethical decision making. Those of a more tender nature will permit the sympathetic instincts to hold sway; those who are emotionally not impressed by the suffering of others, and lack the moral imagination to feel the emotions of the other across a distance will turn away.

For Adler, this will not do. In the following exposition of his position, the transcendent, non-natural, derivation of his ethics becomes clear.

And to account for this verdict of morality, we must have recourse to a higher principle than that of sympathetic feeling, a principle high, high exalted above the ordinary instinct whereof Darwin speaks. A principle which Darwin did not recognize in his anxiety to connect man with the lower animals. A principle, or a set of principles, that are founded on human reason. There is in us a principle of justice which bears certain analogy to the mathematical principle that the whole is greater than any of its parts. And there is, above all, a principle of perfection in us, which leads us to reach forth in an endless pursuit toward the absolute true and good; a principle of perfection which leads the man of science to seek abstract knowledge for its own sake, and this devotion to abstract truth for its own sake, which is certainly one of the highest virtues. I do not see how sympathy can explain in the least; a principle of perfection which leads the moral reformer to press the claims of moral righteousness upon mankind, no matter whether in the conflicts and struggles which such reform necessarily provoke, the peace and happiness not only of himself but of whole generations of men may be sacrificed. And again, this devotion to the cause of abstract righteousness, for its own sake, sympathy cannot explain in the least. And so I am constrained to state my conviction that the heights of a genuinely ethical theory, Darwin did not attain: that his contribution to ethics as a science is not likely to be remembered.³³

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Contemporary research into the science of morality, emerging from such thinkers, as E. O. Wilson, Marc Hauser, Robert Wright, Richard Dawkins, Anthony Appiah and others, who seek to derive ethics from a natural foundation and have worked in the spirit of the evolutionary framework laid down by Darwin, have proven Adler's prophetic judgment on Darwinian ethics to have been mistaken.

Adler's critique of the limitations of Darwinism point to a nagging paradox in his theory of knowledge that is difficult to resolve. As noted, he throws off the yoke of the traditional religions because he sees them as fixed and closed systems, which, in particular, inhibit development and progress in the ethical field. Although he critiques Kant for allegedly basing his ethics on a recondite physical and mechanistic foundation, Adler invokes Kant's commitment to transcendental freedom as the arena in which to locate his reconstructed ethical theory. In a paper, "A Critique of Kant's Ethics," Adler writes,³⁴

The idea of freedom takes us outside the phenomenal world into the region of things per se or of noumena. Freedom, be it distinctly noted, is vested in the noumena. What is called psychological freedom is a transparent piece of self-deception.

Following Kant he says, ". . . genuine freedom . . . is self-activity of the reason . . . the rational substance in us acting on its own motion, causing to emerge of its own accord the commanding motives that ought to sway our will."³⁵

Adler finds freedom in Kantian idealism and its transcendentals, yet one senses that his own ethical ideal hovers over the empirical world setting a priori limits on the expansion of the sciences and the truth claims derived from them. In coarser terms, his ideal template can serve as an impervious refuge and defense that negates the moral claims coming from the empirical realm no matter how strenuously argued or compelling the evidence. This raises the question of what the relation is for Adler between empirical facts and the ideal, which serves as final arbiter. For one thing is certain: Adler was a prodigious surveyor of the social sciences, who kept abreast of new findings of the day, and who read broadly and critically. He often commends acquaintanceship with new knowledge in the psychological sciences and pedagogy.

The resolution of this paradox merits further investigation, but I would provisionally conclude that Adler combed the empirical world with a view toward discovering a convergence between the empirical sciences and the transcendent ideal. In short, his theory of knowledge presupposes a slow, evolving movement of thought and knowledge toward the framework posited by the ideal, and the mining of the science was done, at least, in part to confirm this grand convergence.

³⁴ "A Critique of Kant's Ethics," in *Essays Philosophical and Psychological in Honor of William James by His Colleagues at Columbia University* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 316-17, <http://archive.org/details/essaysphilosoph00unknuoft>.

³⁵ Ibid.

Adler's Ethical Teleology

Beyond affirming evolution in the biological realm, we can locate Adler in the broad tradition of philosophical evolution and was a commonplace in nineteenth century thought. Clearly Adler's acquaintance with the higher criticism of the bible, the effort to analytically dissect scripture in order to ascertain the appropriate chronology and authorship of texts, led him away from theistic religion. Apiece with the higher criticism were several left-Hegelians who were committed to the process of biblical deconstruction. Although Adler eschewed Hegelianism, he was clearly influenced by the zeitgeist shaped by Hegel through direct and indirect study with Hegel's disciples. Among the most influential and radical of the so-called Young Hegelians was David Strauss, who applied Hegel's notion of the evolution of spirit to Christian texts. For Strauss the point of Christian scripture was not its historicity, about which we could not be certain, but its metaphysical truths which are conveyed through myth. Myths themselves are fitted to the needs and consciousness of the people of the times in which they live, and as such, myths evolve. This evolving process is well summarized by philosopher A. Robert Caponigri:

To understand Christianity it is necessary to penetrate to the metaphysical truth which is expressed in that mythical form. Since that mythical form is the product of the human imagination at a specific period of history under specific historical conditions, it is equally a mistake to view the mythical form of expression as exhausting the truth which it conveys. With the movement of history, the human imagination does not lose its power to envelop in myths the truths of religion rooted in the needs of human nature. To appreciate the truth of the Christian message it is not only possible but necessary to find new expressions of it according to the situation of man in successive historical periods.³⁶

Undoubtedly, Felix Adler was intimately familiar with Strauss' theory of religion, but a more direct source was Abraham Geiger, Adler's rabbinical teacher with whom he studied at Berlin. Geiger was the major luminary of German Reform Judaism. Geiger was profoundly influenced by Strauss' work and applied the latter's critical approach to religion to Jewish texts, including the bible. According to Michael Meyers, a historian of Reform Judaism:

The cumulative effect of Geiger's critical work was thus to historicize and therefore relativize every sacred text of Judaism, biblical no less than rabbinic. Each reflected its own age of origin, none stood above its historical milieu, none could serve as unassailable norm. Whatever history had produced, the ongoing history represented by present and future could alter or even abolish. But recognizing historical relativity did not necessitate rejection. Every element of tradition could claim *relative* validity as a

³⁶ Aloysius Robert Caponigri, *Philosophy from the Romantic Age to the Age of Positivism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 131.

revelation of the religious consciousness within the community of Israel at a particular point in its development. If it still possessed viability in the present, then it was worthy of reaffirmation.³⁷

It is my speculation that Adler fully absorbed from Geiger the notion of the evolutionary unfolding of religion and, moreover, that its symbolic and mythic expression is transient and fitted to the times, while cloaking what are enduring and absolute truths. Reform Judaism of the nineteenth century was restructuring and defining itself around the principle of “ethical monotheism” as its distinctive characteristic and message to humankind. It would not be inappropriate, I believe, to contend that Adler took his lesson of evolving religious consciousness from Geiger and defined Judaism out of its specific Judaic character into what was soon to become Ethical Culture.

Perhaps Adler’s most accessible exposition of the evolving nature of religious symbolism is found in his essay on “Changes in the Concept of God” in *The Religion of Duty*. Herein he renders his own version of the transient and the permanent.³⁸ He contends that concepts of God are but the symbols of transcendent ideals that stand behind them. These symbols change through the ages. In historical times, the highest was represented by an individual, a father, a king. But in our current era a new symbol is required. As Adler says:

Humanity, as we know it, is ever imperfect. We need some larger outlook, to have set before us an ideal of perfection, toward which our labours may be directed. What shall be this ideal of perfection? Seeing that a metaphor, a symbol, is necessary, what religious symbol may be employed? I have said that we cannot conceive of the moral ideal as embodied in any individual whatsoever. The moral ideal escapes the bounds of individuality. The elements which it includes are too manifold to be represented by a single individual, no matter how sublimely idealized. The moral ideal is the social ideal.³⁹

For Adler, the symbol of the ideal is the multiple Godhead, the impersonal Ethical Manifold, or spiritualized humanity raised to the degree of infinity. “Human society,” he says, “made perfect is the sign or symbol in religion, which I think, will serve our purpose; and the vision of a spiritual millennium may take the place of the man-like image above the clouds”⁴⁰

It should be noted that Adler's observation of the evolution of the spiritual ideal is not merely descriptive. His idealism manifests an ethical teleology. In short, our lives are lived between the

³⁷ Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*, with Internet Archive (Oxford University Press, 1988), 93, <http://archive.org/details/responsetomodern0000meye>.

³⁸ Cf. Theodore Parker, whose famous sermon on the “The Transient and Permanent in Christianity” (1841), was also influenced by Strauss’ interpretation of religion.

³⁹ Felix Adler, *The Religion of Duty* (McClure, Phillips & Co., 1905), 67, <http://archive.org/details/religionofduty0000adle>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 69.

actual and the ideal, the imperfect and the perfect. And the ideal, according to Adler exerts a pressure, an influence, which prompts human society to move closer to it. This movement is twofold: There is an evolution toward the recognition of new religious symbols better fitted for a new age. Note the confidence that emerges from tagging one's outlook to the sturdy bedrock of the ideal.

I believe that a new religion will come in time, but I do not believe that the time is near at hand. I see the seeds of it germinating even now, but I do not believe that we can anticipate the slow progress of growth. . . . It may take centuries for the new religious idea to win its place and work itself out. I even confess to have certain presentiments, or perhaps I might use the stronger word, convictions, as to what the new religion will be. I believe that it will be impersonal rather than personal religion. Using the word Deity in its widest sense, I should say that Deity will be conceived of not as an individual being, but as an infinite unity that informs and is inseparable from infinite multiplicity, the whole that is present in every part.

I myself pledged to new religious ideas. I seek to preserve in the world the knowledge of what was best in the religious past, holding fast to that as a precious legacy. I also seek to sow as best I may the seeds of what religion is to be. But I am conscious that the new religious ideas are as yet too abstract and difficult to be available for any except the few. In my religious teachings, therefore, I address myself only to the few. But in the Ethical work I address myself to all.⁴¹

Beyond changes in religious expression, Adler reveals himself to be situated in the progressive optimism of the nineteenth century, but with major reservation. The ideal exerts a pressure not only to transform religion so as to create new forms, it also plays a progressive role in prompting us toward ameliorated conduct. So he can say, “. . . there really exists that which corresponds to the moral ideal, that there is a Power back of the effort toward righteousness, which gives effect to it, beyond our finite power.”⁴² Following Kant, he informs us that a moral “ought” implies a “can.” However, I think we would be wrong to interpret Adler as a utopian, for just as he envisioned an evolution in religious thinking, so his own thought evolved through his long life and career.

Adler's confidence in the moral improvement of the human condition is more representative of what Horace Friess⁴³ identifies as his first stage. The second stage is characterized by a reverence for “the Moral Law” and powers that drive us to seek righteousness. By the time he reaches his third stage, in which he outlines the specifics of the Ethical Manifold, Adler appropriates an

⁴¹ Adler, unnamed manuscripts. Box 80.

⁴² Adler, *The Religion of Duty*, 39-40.

⁴³ Horace Leland Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies* (Columbia University Press, 1981), *passim*, <http://archive.org/details/felixadlerethica0000frie>.

abiding appreciation of what he refers to as “the tragic view.” We are prodded to move toward the ideal, but our condition as empirical beings, ensures that we will not achieve it, perhaps not even move closer. Rather than a palpable moral improvement, Adler’s latter vision of human moral evolution is one of a deepening spiritual apprehension. It is spiritual transformation, not empirical change that sketches his final outlook. In an undated paper entitled “The Factors That Determine the Ethical Evolution of Mankind,” Adler states the following:

What should be said is that a prompting is present, an ethical, spiritual prompting in the individual member of society, to produce such changes in himself and others as will approximate the empirical human group more and more to the absolute ideal of the organic whole.⁴⁴

Adler’s ethical *telos* does not lead to a linear transformation of the empirical human condition, but rather to a transformation characterized by a heightened awareness that society and we who are members of it comprise a spiritual universe and that we are better off for our grasp and appreciation of the ideal.

This has taken us far from Darwin’s naturalism and the ethical theorizing that emerges from it. In biographical terms, it clarifies how Darwin could consistently move toward agnosticism later in life, while Adler’s mature years were characterized by an increasingly intense focus on spiritual ideals that enabled him to move far beyond agnosticism. Perhaps Adler’s final position on the question of moral evolution is best summarized by Horace Friess:

It must be stressed that what his ethical religion attributed to people was a universal foundation for development in ideal relatedness rather than exemplary attainment of it in finite life. Indeed, he increasingly insisted that finite society must be “frustrated” in respect to realizing the ideal relatedness. Yet his idealism continued to rank the need for social improvement above individual hero-worship. Can it be validly claimed that life gets nearer the Ideal? This truly remains questionable, said Adler, but such frustration can be accepted as a necessary price for a truer vision of what the ideal dimension of reality is. And such truer vision is itself to be prized as a factual index of closer approach.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Both Adler and Darwin were moderns, who were committed to the scientific spirit. Each embraced the zeitgeist of the nineteenth century in their appropriation of both progress and organicism, which animated much of the era’s thought.

⁴⁴ Felix Adler, “The Factors That Determine the Ethical Evolution of Mankind,” n.d., Box 80, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library.

⁴⁵ Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture*, 230.

Darwin, emerging out of the British empiricist tradition, moved away from theism toward positivism and, ultimately agnosticism, a position he shared with many intellectuals of the Victorian period—John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, Mathew Arnold, Thomas Huxley, Thomas Hardy, and George Eliot, among them.

Adler remained rooted to the Continental idealism characteristic of his native Germany. In his own words, he sought to create a philosophy which would be “ultra-scientific without being anti-scientific.” While he embraced contemporary science as worthy of our trust in the empirical realm, he averred that science, or any outlook grounded in naturalism, could not provide the certainty, especially the ethical certainty required. He held with great seriousness the ontological claims of the idealists as to the ultimacy of the categories of mind which structure and create reality. This enabled him to subsume all science under such categories and obliterate scientific claims which looked to naturalism as the source for mental functions, inclusive of reason, logical relations and ethics.

This near-dualism in Adler’s thought enabled him to take a two-fold position on evolution. Though his commitment to science in the empirical sphere led him to support evolution as a biological theory of speciation inclusive of the descent of the human being, he categorically rejected Darwin’s claim that linked physical evolution to the generation of ethical principles.

In the realm of ethical evolution itself, Adler posited the notion that the idea of perfection, created by mind, propels individuals toward ethical excellence. At the same time, the unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the actual generates existential frustration and places a governor on our empirical capacities for moral improvement. Hence, for Adler, ethical evolution is relegated to the spiritualization of the person through heightened appreciation of the reality of the ideal, as one finds oneself within an infinite community of spiritual souls.

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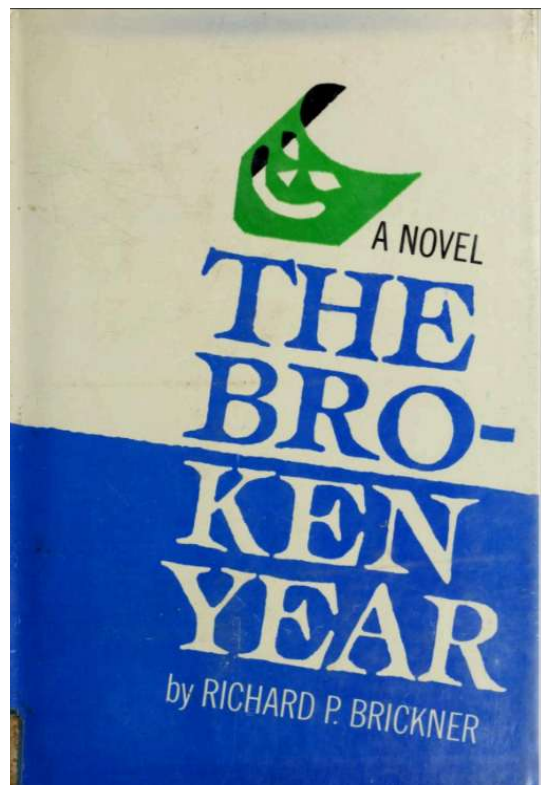
Ethical Expression

The Broken Year

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The Broken Year is a novel written by Richard Pilpel Brickner, published in 1962, long after his graduation from Fieldston Ethical Culture School. While Brickner himself is said to have rejected his years of education in EC schools, his mother thought those years shaped him more than he realized.



Stepping back a few years, we find the Pilpel family much in evidence in the founding and development of Ethical Culture. Emanuel (Emil) Pilpel and his wife Cecile (Brickner's maternal grandparents), were early members of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. Cecile Pilpel (listed as Mrs. Emanuel Pilpel) was one of the speakers for the ground-breaking ceremony for

NYSEC's Meeting House in 1910⁴⁶ and active in the founding and development of the Child Study Association. The Pilpels' daughter, Ruth (Brickner's mother), along with her siblings and several cousins, attended the Ethical Culture schools. Ruth Pilpel married Richard Max Brickner in 1925, and their two sons, Richard and Robert, also attended the Ethical Culture Schools.

Dr. Ruth Pilpel Brickner and her husband were both psychiatrists. She, along with Matthew Ies Spetter, co-founded the Riverdale Mental Health Clinic. Because of her family's long association with Ethical Culture, she was among those interviewed by Frida Moss for the Oral History Project carried out by NYSEC in the early 1960s.⁴⁷ In her interview, Dr. Brickner discussed a number of topics, including Felix Adler and other early leaders of the Movement, and her own attendance at the Ethical Culture schools. She referred to concerns that some had voiced about the schools being too much like an "ivory tower," neither reflective of the realities of the "outside" world nor quite as egalitarian as one would expect. Dr. Brickner cited her son, Richard, as one who held the view that the school erroneously shielded its students from "real life" and the hardships that would confront them after graduation. Her son, she noted, went so far as to emphasize this failure of his education in his novel—*The Broken Year*.

What this scrap of history does not tell us is that Richard Brickner suffered a life-threatening injury in an automobile accident while attending Middlebury College and, as a result, spent the rest of his life in a wheelchair. *The Broken Year*, while not strictly autobiographical, includes many elements that parallel or reflect Brickner's own life experiences, offering, among other things, painful insight into the objectification of those who are disabled.

The novel begins with the main character, Eric Green, immobilized in a hospital bed after falling headlong down a staircase. With flashbacks to a childhood filled with attention-getting antics, most of which seemed to anger the father whose attention Eric sought, the story proceeds through Eric's youthful friendships and budding romance(s) only to crash against the abrupt interruption of everything by his fall. Eric's struggles to regain control of his life and his body parallel his struggles with relationships, including friends, girlfriends, family, and the professionals who try to help him regain physical agency.

The novel is, of course, full of issues for our ethical consideration: disability, race, sex, class, and more. Ethical Expression, however, seems clearest in the exploration of human relationships and the understanding of human worth, one's own as well as that of others.

⁴⁶ "The Ethical Society Meeting House in New York: History," *Ethical Addresses and Ethical Record*, Eighteenth Series (1911), p. 38. (<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433070253822>)

⁴⁷ The Oral History Project included a number of interviews of members of several northeastern Ethical Culture Societies, which were used by Howard B. Radest in research for his book, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969). Moss interviewed Dr. Brickner on April 2, 1963. The full transcript of the interview is currently stored in the NYSEC Archives. This and other transcripts are now being digitized with the support of Fieldston Historian, Kirk Ruebenson.

While clearly a mother proud of her son's writing (and its status as the basis for a made-for-TV movie)⁴⁸, Dr. Brickner, still a psychiatrist, commented that the years that her sons spent in the Ethical Culture Schools, while not the in depth exposure to Ethical Culture that might have come from attending the Society's Sunday School, "had a powerful crucial influence in their lives despite the second son's sense—and he's a boy who, although he protests about this, has used this conflict in such a powerful way that I can only feel that it, too, was a source of strength for him."

If not available in your local library, *The Broken Year* can be borrowed at the Internet Archive along with other Brickner novels.

- *The Broken Year* (1962): <https://archive.org/details/brokenyearnovel00bric>.
- *Bringing Down the House* (1972): <https://archive.org/details/bringingdownhous00bric>.
- *Tickets* (1981): <https://archive.org/details/tickets00bric>.
- *After She Left* (1988): <https://archive.org/details/aftersheleft00bric>.

Brickner's autobiography, "*My Second Twenty Years: An Unexpected Life*" (1976) is also available at the Internet Archive (https://archive.org/details/mysecondtwentyye0000bric_e1y8). For more about Brickner, see Stephen Kessler's memorial article, "An Unknown Writer: Richard P. Brickner (1933-2006)."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ "The Broken Year," *Alcoa Presents*, broadcast April 4, 1963. *IMDb* (https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0507736/?ref=tttep_ep_27) accessed April 11, 2026.

⁴⁹ *The Redwood Coast Review* (Fall 2006), p. 2. https://www.stephenkessler.com/rcr/article/unknown_writer.pdf.

Ethical News and Notes

ECI News

Webpage: NYSEC's website has a fresh new look, and so does the ECI webpage. Visit us at nysec.org/institute to find out more about the Institute and read past issues of *The Annals*.

Call for papers: The ECI calls for papers for *The Annals*. The Summer issue will focus on anniversaries, including the 150th Anniversary of the founding of the New York Society for Ethical Culture and of Ethical Culture Movement. Articles on other topics are also welcome. Please consult the [ECI Guidelines for Submission](#) when preparing your manuscript.

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- ❖ **You**, our readers.

Volunteer Opportunities

Documenting the Adler Study: Volunteers are needed to continue the documentation of the Adler Study collection. All of these activities can be conducted remotely via the internet. Activities include: Development of bibliographic entries for each book, using photographic documentation. Documentation of the digitization of individual works and their availability in online repositories. To volunteer, please contact the Editor at institute @ nysec.org.