Annals

of the

Ethical Culture Institute

at the

New York Society for Ethical Culture

Volume 1/Issue 1

May 15, 2025

Welcome!

Welcome to the **Ethical Culture Institute** @ NYSEC and this first issue of its newsletter. The title–***Annals of the Ethical Culture Institute***–is ambitious and aspirational. So is the Institute, which was established by the **New York Society for Ethical Culture** on February 26, 2025.

The *Annals* will be published semi-monthly in odd-numbered months (except July). Despite the name, which might imply a largely historical orientation, each issue will include resources for the study and practice of Ethical Culture, some new, some much older. This will help fulfill one of the purposes for which the Institute was established: *To preserve and disseminate the intellectual heritage of Ethical Culture through archives, libraries, publications, and other means so that the founding principles and history of thought guiding the Ethical Culture Movement may be made known to all who seek this knowledge. . . .* We at the Institute look forward to sharing the knowledge that we are finding in the course of our studies and research with all who wish to join us in taking a deeper look at Ethical Culture.

In the Beginning...

Carolyn A. Parker, PhD
Senior Research Fellow

This first issue of the *Annals of the Ethical Culture Institute*–including both its contents and its timing–is intended to serve as a part of the celebration of the founding of Ethical Culture that will be carried out by NYSEC over the next twelve months, leading up to the 150th anniversary itself. As we begin this 150th year of Ethical Culture, the Institute presents–and invites you to read–these milestone addresses by Felix Adler:

- **The Temple Address** (October 10, 1873);
- **The Founding Address** (May 15, 1876);
- **The Inaugural Address** (October 19, 1876).

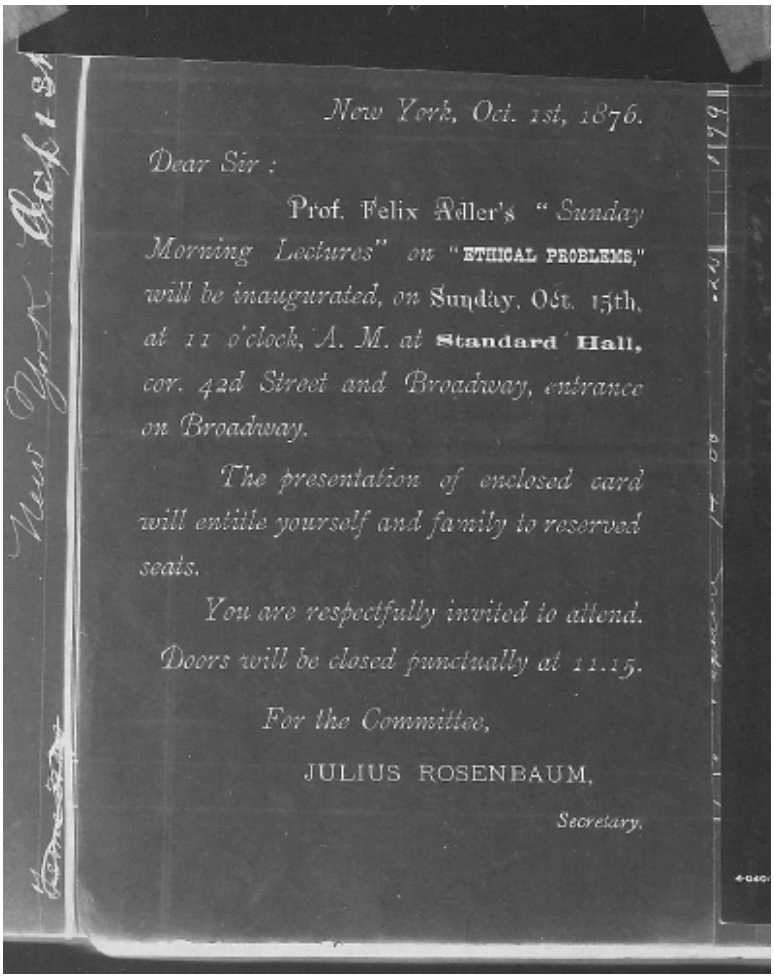
May 15, 1876, is typically given as the beginning–the founding–of Ethical Culture. That, indeed, was the date on which a young Felix Adler delivered a public address–which is often called the Founding Address–at Standard Hall to an audience of about 100 men and women. That address, however, did not just happen, and the events leading up to it might also be considered as part of the beginning of Ethical Culture. One of those events was the address that Adler delivered at Temple Emanu-El not quite three years earlier. We might also consider the Inaugural Address given at the first meeting of the first season of the newly formed New York Society for Ethical Culture in the fall of 1876. Together, these three addresses represent milestones in the founding of Ethical Culture and an opportunity to place that founding in the context of contemporary events.

In reading the Temple Address–"Judaism of the Future"–consider the theme of Reform as well as Adler's foundational reliance on science. Note also the intergenerational dialogue that Adler (then only 23 years old) began with his audience as well as his challenge, particularly to the young men, that they would carry the burden of the task that he was laying out. Adler had just returned from completing his PhD in Germany, training for the rabbinate, which gave him a basis for comparing the growth of Reform in Europe to the greater possibilities for Reform in America. He gave a poignant summation of Jewish history and heritage, but he called for a new temple for a new epoch. Key words in this lecture include "free religion," "radical, " and "humanitarian" as he calls for a Judaism that is inclusive of all humankind, not exclusive only for a "chosen" few.

The Temple Address and its reception among the members of Temple Emanu-El, marked the end of Adler's career as a rabbi and set him on a firmer path toward Ethical Culture. With the Founding Address–titled only "Address of May 15, 1876"--Adler laid out the personal and social reasons for forming a Society (corruption, need for purpose, the moral education of children) as well as some practical logistics (Sunday meetings, no ritual, but keeping music for its healing and soothing powers). He gave particular emphasis to the role of the lecturer as teacher, not a priest "after a new fashion," who would bring to the audience the best of the past to aid in consideration of the worst of the present in service to the future. Key concepts in this lecture include the importance of action (deed), human worth and inclusion, and peace among those whose beliefs differ.

The Inaugural Address–titled simply "Ethical Problems"- began a pattern followed for many years by NYSEC: A new season would begin on the third Sunday in October and continue until the middle of May. The hiatus of the summer months was used for travel as well as for study and preparation for the next season. In reading the address, note the broad scope of concerns that Adler includes among the ethical problems to be considered over the coming season. Nonetheless he reminds us that life is more than duty; it is also beauty. As pertinent as the ethical problems of 1876 might seem in relation to the ethical problems which daily confront us

in the news today, the same hopeful note that Adler sounds in his conclusion seems also heartening to our present circumstances.



New York, Oct. 1st, 1876.

Dear Sir:

Prof. Felix Adler's "*Sunday Morning Lectures*" on "ETHICAL PROBLEMS," *will be inaugurated, on* Sunday, Oct. 15th, *at 11 o'clock, A. M. at* **Standard Hall,** *cor. 42d Street and Broadway, entrance on Broadway.*

The presentation of enclosed card will entitle yourself and family to reserved seats.

You are respectfully invited to attend.

Doors will be closed punctually at 11.15.

For the Committee,

JULIUS ROSENBAUM,

Secretary.

(Invitation to the Inaugural Address)

As with all beginnings, there are still plans to develop and carry out. One plan, still being developed, is a **lyceum** for the autumn and, perhaps, in the spring. If plans mature, the Ethical Culture Institute will present its first lyceum in September or October with further discussion of these three lectures and how they relate to Ethical Culture in the twenty-first century. Until then, happy reading!

Bibliographic Notes

- The **Temple Address** as presented here is a recreation of a typescript discovered in the NYSEC Archives a short time ago. Although the typescript was scanned to create a

digital copy, the text was also entered into Word (using dictation) to create this more readable version. In preparing this version, I noticed that part of a line at the bottom of a page was misaligned. I was able to locate a second copy and see that the misalignment was a reproduction error which had dropped a portion of the text; the error has now been recovered. Unfortunately, a later misalignment seems to have occurred (on page 3 of the current text) and was not discovered in time to be corrected for this newsletter. The omission is indicated by ellipses. I will endeavor to determine whether there is indeed an omission and make any needed correction before the lyceum discussion. Some modernization of punctuation has been provided for clarity.

- The **Founding Address** has been reproduced in several locations online. The copy that is linked here was published in *Ethical Addresses*, Series Three (1897), and is available online at the Internet Library (archive.org). This version was chosen to demonstrate the availability of yet more of the writings and lectures of not only Adler, but also other thought leaders of the Ethical Movement.
- The **Inaugural Address** was published as a pamphlet soon after it was delivered at Standard Hall. The cover indicates that the address was "Specially Reported by Miss Jennie Turner," a stenographer who, at that time, would have recorded the speaker's words in shorthand and then transcribed them (pre-typewriter) by longhand to lined paper. Typesetters would then have worked from the manuscript to create the printed work. This particular pamphlet was recently located in the NYSEC Archives and digitally scanned since the paper is quite fragile and likely will not withstand much further handling.

Why a Deeper Dive into Felix Adler's Ethical Philosophy is Needed

Curt Collier
Leader

Reading Felix Adler's philosophical works can be challenging. His language feels dated and complex, and his frequent use of neo-Kantian concepts can be confusing for those unfamiliar with the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As a result, Adler's ideas may seem difficult to fully grasp. This challenge is compounded by the fact that, as Adler matured, his ideas evolved significantly.

In his youth, Adler's central concern was the question of how to live ethically, and his approach often appeared puritanical and elitist. Later, he sought to position his ideas within the broader spiritual context of mid-19th-century religious thought. His major work on ethical philosophy, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life: Presented In Its Main Outlines*, wasn't published until 1918, when he was 67. By then, Western philosophy was shifting toward Pragmatism, Existentialism, and Analytical philosophy, while social and political ideologies were rising in prominence. As a result, Adler's reliance on Idealism appeared increasingly outdated.

For these reasons, many within the Ethical Culture movement tend to value his earlier work on the ethics of personal living more than the complex theories he developed later in life. By the time I became a Leader, studying Adler formed only a small part of my training, which also included humanism, congregational dynamics, and social science. However, as a philosophy student and someone who has taught philosophy at the college level, my admiration for Adler has never waned.

Adler's work can be interpreted in multiple ways. The first approach, similar to Formalist Critique, involves reading his texts as standalone documents, taking his ideas at face value. However, this can be difficult without a background in Kantian and neo-Kantian philosophy, as even Adler's definitions are hard to grasp without formal philosophical training. A second approach, Historical Criticism, examines Adler's work in relation to the historical, cultural, and social context in which it was written. This approach attempts to situate Adler within the social

movements and intellectual currents of his time, particularly in relation to his contemporaries like John Dewey, with whom he shared a professional relationship at Columbia University.

While both of these approaches offer valuable insights into Adler's thinking, I believe there is a third approach worth considering: intentionalism. This method focuses on understanding the author's goals and intentions, a perspective that, while criticized in some literary genres, is quite common in nonfiction and philosophy. Adler himself was clear about the key questions he sought to answer in his works. Three central questions stand out:

- What does it mean to live an ethical life?
- What is the moral foundation for human worth and dignity and for the worth and dignity of existence itself?
- What are the conditions under which new ethical insights emerge?

Adler's early attempts to answer these questions may seem out of touch with contemporary sensibilities. Some of his statements might shock us today, and we might be tempted to dismiss him as a product of his time. However, when we apply a historical lens, we see that Adler was asking important questions that no one else in his era was addressing. While other thinkers and religious traditions reduced ethical living to a set of prescribed rules, Adler sought a deeper understanding of how to embody ethics in everyday life.

A key indicator of Adler's uniqueness is his second question: how do we affirm the worth and dignity of being? This question is intertwined with the first. Finding a moral grounding for human worth is far more complex than it may first appear. While it's easy to affirm the worth of others, Adler insisted that this alone is insufficient, especially in an era when religious thinkers viewed humans as inherently flawed or sinful. For contemporary humans, who understand the origins of life through theories like evolution or the Big Bang, the question of what makes life sacred and inviolable is more pressing than ever. Today, human and non-human life is often valued based on national, economic, or cultural utility. Adler, however, believed that without a firm grounding for human worth, no ethical system could be sustained. History has proven him right.

Adler rejected prescriptive belief systems—those that claim to provide a fixed, one-size-fits-all way of living ethically. Instead, he proposed a generative ethical system, one in which new insights would continually emerge and transform society. This forward-thinking vision establishes Adler as one of the most profound religious thinkers in history. He believed that goodness is always broader and more expansive than any single individual could comprehend. Rather than seeing this as a limitation, Adler viewed it as a foundation for grounding human

worth. In essence, to understand goodness, we must engage with others in all their unique and diverse forms. For Adler, the path to understanding goodness lay in recognizing it in the lives of others. In his view, humans do not fall short of divine ideals; rather, they themselves are manifestations of divinity.

Adler's concept of divinity did not rely on the existence of a god. Instead, he saw goodness as a fundamental product of the universe, much like the patterns we uncover in nature through mathematics and science. This intrinsic goodness explains why injustice feels not only irrational but inherently wrong. It is what makes one infant cry when hearing another in pain. For biologists like E.O. Wilson, it's the reason why altruism often prevails over selfishness in biological systems. In Adler's view, this isn't the result of divine will—it is simply the way life operates at its core.

Adler did not aim to create a prescriptive set of beliefs, but rather a way of life–a praxis for bringing ethics to life. The study of Adler's writings is not just an academic exercise; for many of us, ethics is central to existence–it is the pulse of life itself. There is still much wisdom to be uncovered if we approach this study with, in Adler's words, a "trustful heart."

Toward the Ethical Culture Online Library

Carolyn A. Parker, PhD
Senior Research Fellow

While the actual existence of an online library of the works of the Ethical Culture Movement is yet a dream, some first steps have been taken. This newsletter, for example, is a means to provide broader access for its readers to works which have never been published before (the **Temple Address**), works that have been published but are now out of print (the **Inaugural Address**), and works which are available in other online repositories (the **Founding Address**). Another step is offered through the ***Bibliography of Ethical Culture***. While the *Bibliography* has other purposes[1] and is an ongoing work-in-progress, a new "cleaned up" version has been prepared for publication via this newsletter to provide an introduction and access to the large number of works by, about, and for the Ethical Culture Movement that are already available online in several repositories.

There will be many "next steps" to achieve the goal of our own online resource library, but, with the availability of this version of the *Bibliography*, there can now be many more hands–or should it be feet?--to help take those steps. How can you become part of this project? Here are some suggestions:

- Use the *Bibliography* to learn more about Ethical Culture. As you do, you will be double-checking my work for accuracy and completeness.
    - If you see an error, **tell me** about it!
    - If you find something that should be listed, **send me** the information!
    - If you find a broken link–or another online repository with the entry–**let me know**!
- Help build the *Bibliography* with specific mini-projects using online repositories and your local libraries and archives. Over the summer the Institute will be calling for and training volunteers in how to take the next steps in creating a lasting resource for the next 150 years of Ethical Culture. **Let me know** if you want to be one of those volunteers.

[1] See Parker, "**Desperately Seeking Ethical Culture,**" and ***Biblioblog for Ethical Culture*** for more discussion of those purposes.

Contributing Editors

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Leader, NYSEC and Ethical Culture Society of Bergen County.

Collier has a long history of service to the Ethical Culture Movement, including serving as Leader for the Riverdale-Yonkers Society for Ethical Culture and consulting for the Ethical Society of Silicon Valley and the Ethical Society of Austin (which he also founded). He is a member of the National Leaders Council of the American Ethical Union and has served as its representative to the AEU Board of Directors.

Curt Collier is currently also Adjunct Professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University, teaching Ethics. He received a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Texas A & M University, a master's degree in communication disorders from Texas Tech University, certification in counseling from the PostGraduate Center for Mental Health in New York, and has completed course work for a doctorate degree in pastoral counseling from Hebrew Union College.

DR. RICHARD KORAL

Leader, NYSEC and Ethical Humanist Society of Long Island.

Koral has been a member of the Ethical Culture Movement for over 35 years. He was a long-time Board member of the Westchester Community for Ethical Culture and its president from 1997 to 2002. He served as president of the American Ethical Union from 2012 through 2015. He was certified as a Leader in 2017.

Koral holds a B.A. from New York University, a J.D. from New York Law School, and a Doctor of Ministry from the Hebrew Union College. He practiced law for 30 years in the field of corporate reorganization.

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Parker is a member of both the Ethical Society of Austin and the New York Society for Ethical Culture. She represents ESOA on the AEU Board of Directors and chairs its Communications Committee. For NYSEC, Parker chairs the Archive and Policy Committees. She is a past president of both ESOA and AEU, and currently serves on AEU's Finance Committee.

Parker has a BA in English from the University of Houston and both MA and PhD in Anthropology from the University of Washington. She has conducted field research in Kenya, served as Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Swahili Research at the University of Dar es Salaam, and chaired the Swahili Program in the Department of Oriental and African Languages and Literatures at the University of Texas at Austin.

The Editors thank **Dan Donohue**, **Ed Beck**, and **Zahira Aragon** of NYSEC for their technical support and advice in the preparation of this issue.
We also thank the **NYSEC Board of Trustees** for their trust and support as we embark on this journey of discovery in Ethical Culture.

"But it is not only the duties, but also the beauties of life that we would more fully know and appreciate. We do not share the gloomy view of those who are forever peering into the curtained secrets of the grave, and hold this life to be a worthless thing. For us the clover blows and the violets spring; for us the summer brooks murmur their marvelous melodies, and the eternal hills raise their solemn testimony; for us the peace of the woodland, and the leaping laughter of the fall; for us the glamour of moonlight, and of the still stars that melt into the dazzling day; and, greater than these, for us the sweet accents of tenderness, the thrill of sympathy, the ecstasy of truth, the sacred, sacred gift of love. Life is grand everywhere if you possess it grandly, and read its meanings with a trustful heart."

-Felix Adler, *Inaugural Address*