



# ETHICAL VIEWS

April 2025 Vol. 139, No. 8 Newsletter of the Philadelphia Ethical Society

## SUNDAY PLATFORMS

The public is welcome to join us \*

**Sunday, April 6, 11 AM**

***Instrumental Music and Humanist Spirituality***

**Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader  
Philadelphia Ethical Society**



Music reinvigorates, heals, comforts, and inspires. It can turn us inward by connecting our heads and our hearts. It also can turn us outward by nurturing emotional connection to others. Music, in many forms, has been central to religions throughout time. Hugh Taft-Morales brings a humanist perspective to the science, art, and experience of listening to music. He will conclude by explaining why he considers music to be spiritual.

**Sunday, April 13, 11 AM**

***program to be announced***



**Spring!**

### \* **Where They'll Be**

The Philadelphia Ethical Society gathers in-person every Sunday, at 1906 Rittenhouse Square. Platforms are delivered simultaneously in the Auditorium and over zoom. When guest speakers appear on zoom, attendees in the Auditorium can view their presentations on a screen while experiencing the rest of the program in real life. Please continue to check your Weekly Bulletins for updates.

**Sunday, April 20, 11 AM**

***Climate Skills***

**Eugene Chislenko, Professor of Philosophy  
Temple University**



Combating climate change requires a set of skills that allow us to address the problem constructively rather than focus solely on threats and the possibility of failure. Climate skills are not specialized: they include such familiar actions as listening, raising issues, making connections, starting groups, creating art, and demonstrating care.

Eugene Chislenko explains how deploying these skills can lead to meaningful climate action and institutional change. Chislenko, who learned climate organizing with the youth organization The Sunrise Movement, is co-founder and steering committee chair of Philosophers for Sustainability.

**Sunday, April 27, 11 AM**

***Lessons from Bonhoeffer***

**Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, resisted Nazism and paid for it with his life. After 18 months in prison for participation in the German resistance, Bonhoeffer was hanged on April 9, 1945. Although they differed theologically, Ethical Culture founder Felix Adler and Bonhoeffer shared some characteristics. Both were born in Germany. Both spurned materialism, craved unity, embraced reason, and accepted suffering. And both felt a duty to act to save others. Hugh Taft-Morales explores how Bonhoeffer's example can support our justice work today.



## LETTER FROM THE LEADER

### What the Hell Is “Holy Ground?”

By Hugh Taft-Morales

“What the hell is holy ground?” a visitor to the Philadelphia Ethical Society asked me one day. “I thought you all didn’t believe in God?”

Our visitor was looking at the 12 words carved above the stage in our Auditorium: “The place where we meet to seek the highest is holy ground.” Some version of that message is prominently displayed at Ethical Societies in Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and New York, where it often elicits similar bewilderment. It’s a reasonable question; and Mike Black-Smith, our president, offered a good explanation in *Ethical Views* last May. I’d like to expand on his comments.

Leave it to my favorite Ethical Culture historian, Leader Jone Lewis, to offer context. When Christians say “holy,” they refer to the blessing of God. But as far back as the 1830s, liberal religious circles used the word as an alternative to traditional assumptions about a deity. For Ethical Culturists, what is holy is humans in community. As Jone put it, “holy ground isn’t something that God defined. It’s created any time people seek together for the highest.”

“Holy” often is used as an adjective to intensify a commonplace noun in an exclamation. Think “holy cow,” “holy mackerel,” “holy moly,” or “holy crap” (and its more profane counterpart). The first definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary doesn’t reference supernaturalism, Jone points out. Rather, “holy” is simply the characteristic of being “exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness.”

The superlative “perfect” doesn’t sit well with me, however. Contemporary humanist communities generally agree that humans are flawed creatures. We may aspire toward perfection, much as our nation strives to form a “more perfect union.” Congregational humanism encourages such growth by regularly bringing members together in a supportive community.

In our own Sunday space, we meet physically and intellectually to converse, plan, and work toward solutions to shared problems. Such collective action requires that we share perspectives, learn from one another, and compromise. But that can’t happen if everyone is striving—individually, or as a group—to be perfect. Pragmatism, not perfection, is the goal. On good days, the process brings out our best.



The “holy ground” phrase is also part of Ethical Culture’s legal history. In 1957, the Washington D.C. Ethical Society was the plaintiff in a case before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The court ruled that, for tax purposes, Ethical Societies functioned as religious communities, even though they did not embrace a supernatural God. The majority opinion, written by Justice Warren Burger before his ascent to the Supreme Court, argued that Ethical Culture is a religion because it acts like one. Burger cited our weekly services, sermons, singing, and moments of meditation: all familiar practices in other religious groups. He also mentioned the words that now appear above the Philadelphia Society’s stage.

I’ll end with words from Ethical Culture Leader John Lovejoy Elliot, who took the reins of our movement after founder Felix Adler died. Elliot used the term “holy” to clarify how we differ from traditional places of worship. “The churches celebrate the holy communion as their most sacred symbol of the relation of God with man,” he wrote. “The Ethical Religion bases itself on another kind of holy communion, that of man with man, and endeavors to express this sense of the ultimate sacredness of daily living and in the work of the world.”

To that, I add a hearty Amen!

*Hugh Taft-Morales is the Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society*

## FROM THE ENDING RACISM TASK FORCE

### How Classical Orchestras Fail Black Musicians

By Henry Pashkow

In February, I presented a Sunday reflection about the lack of diversity in opera. The same problem exists in classical music. In 2023, 2.4 percent of orchestra musicians were Black; and 6.7 percent of conductors and music directors, according to a study by the League of American Orchestras. Composers remain predominantly white as well.

Much of the blame falls on institutional bias. European music has always held sway in the classical music world. One look at the classical programs for any major orchestra in this country will tell you that, despite some efforts to increase diversity, this is still true. Financial contributors, including the Boards of Directors of most major orchestras, treasure the European tradition and would erect barricades in the streets to forestall any real effort at change.

It could have gone another way.

A truly American classical music would draw upon the harmonic language of slave songs, spirituals, and jazz. George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* is probably the best-known example. In the last century, exceptional work was produced by Black classical music composers, including William Dawson, William Grant Still, Florence Price, Nathaniel Dett, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Their music is enjoying a revival these days.



Samuel Coleridge-Taylor

Jazz really is America's classical music. When I listen to the avant-garde jazz music composed in the 1950s and early 1960s, it sounds as fresh and original as the day it was first played.

European musicians themselves have long appreciated the value of Black American music. Czech composer Antonin Dvorak (pronounced Dvorzhak) came to New York in the 1890s to lead a music school. He was struck by the beauty and depth of feeling found in what were then called "Negro melodies." He made extensive use of one melody in the second movement (Largo) of his *New World Symphony*. (You can listen to it on [Youtube](#).)

A racial awakening occurred on the classical music stage following the murder of George Floyd, in 2020, according to an article by Black flutist Jennifer Grim that appeared on a site called "I Care if You Listen." Suddenly, music by Black composers was being programmed. But Grim's skepticism that this will continue is clear from her article's title: "Classical Music's Racial Awakening—Was It All a Mirage?" Among other obstacles to real change, Grim cited the tendency of arts funding to support Western European programming, fear by orchestras of alienating their largely white audiences and donors, and the lack of role models for young Black musicians.

And lack of role models isn't the only thing keeping the number of Black classical musicians low. The high cost of becoming a professional musician includes the price of lessons, a quality instrument, and travel to summer festivals and auditions, explains Katie Brown, a Black violist also writing in "I Care If You Listen." Brown observes that even Black musicians hired by classical orchestras often leave due to "feelings of isolation, misalignments between personal ideology and the institution, or a desire to create more change from outside the concert hall."

Grim talks about her own experience, as a young musician, meeting the Black composer David Sanford, whose works encompass jazz improvisation and modernism, reminiscent of the music of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Thelonious Monk. She describes how she identified both with the music and with the musician, the rare instrumentalist who looked like her. We'll always have exciting new musicians like Sanford and others. I hope I get to hear more of them.

*Henry Pashkow is a member of the Ending Racism Task Force*

## We Remember Ruth Dubinsky

Ruth Ann Dubinsky, former chairperson of the Philadelphia Ethical Society's Community Committee and one of our most engaged and enthusiastic members, died on February 1, at age 70.

Born in Plainfield, New Jersey, Ruth was raised in the countryside, where she tended a veritable menagerie that included dogs, cats, and a barn-full of horses. She and her three older sisters competed in 4-H shows and went on trail rides and cattle round-ups. Right out of high school, Ruth landed a job at Johnson & Johnson, taking care of monkeys used for research. She worked there for 33 years, in areas including product development, basic research, drug development, and clinical trials.

Johnson & Johnson gave Ruth more than just a paycheck. The company paid for her college tuition. Over 26 years, Ruth attended night school, earning degrees in biology, from Raritan Valley Community College; the humanities, from Fairleigh Dickinson University; and organizational development, from Saint Joseph's University.

It was also at J&J that Ruth met Barry Dubinsky. They started out as carpool buddies. He became her husband, her best friend, and the love of her life.

After retiring in 2005, Ruth launched her own consulting company, serving product-development clients. An avid gardener, she began volunteering as an ambassador at the Morris Arboretum and as a horticulture assistant at the Philadelphia Flower Show. Ruth also signed up to be a science educator at the Franklin Institute, where her favorite station was the Heart Bar. As she explained the functioning of animal hearts to children, Ruth would encourage them—especially the girls—to pursue careers in STEM.

Ruth and Barry joined the Ethical Society in November 2022. Immediately, Ruth leapt into congregational life and leadership. The reviving force behind our moribund Community Committee, she rallied members for volunteer actions, like preparing meals at the Metropolitan Neighborhood Nutrition Alliance. During the midterm campaigns, she organized a phone-banking effort to get out the vote and a voter registration event outside our building. She held wine and cheese social hours and scheduled greeters at our Sunday services.

While the pandemic still kept many people at home, Ruth recruited a professional magician to perform a magic show for members on Zoom. When someone in the congregation suffered a loss, she made sure the Society offered support and condolences. In March 2022, Ruth led the Community Committee's production of a Women in Science celebration that included science- and space-themed puzzles, riddles, and brain teasers.



Although she was our newest committee head, Ruth took it upon herself to convene a meeting of all Society chairpersons at her home. She invited them to envision what their committees could become and how they could best contribute. A consummate cook and hostess, Ruth ended that day with a delicious meal.

Ruth was always trying to be a more ethical person. Together with members of the Ending Racism Task Force, Ruth and Barry both participated in a Whites Confronting Racism workshop, which required some painful soul-searching.

Last summer, despite her illness, Ruth helped drum up interest in the Society's simulation of what it's like returning to civilian life after release from prison. Still exhausted from a recent hospital stay, she spent a wild evening running the Social Services station, swapping stories with the formerly incarcerated man with whom she had been paired.

Ruth was also a lovely writer, who expressed herself with remarkable clarity, character, and candor. Throughout her illness, she sent dispatches to the congregation: about her symptoms and treatment but also about the funny or hopeful moments in her life.

"Everything Ruth touched turned to joy," said Leigh Buchanan, a Society member and among Ruth's many friends. "She was only part of us for a few years. But we are so lucky to have known her."

# UPCOMING EVENTS

Unless noted, events take place at the Philadelphia Ethical Society, 1906 Rittenhouse Square.

**Sunday, April 6, 3 PM - 4:30 PM**

## How Does a Stoic Eat?



Stoicism teaches indifference to external goods. Essentials, such as food, are treated as neutral. Does that mean Stoics eat without pleasure, focused solely on function? Join the Ethical Society and Philadelphia Stoa to explore the Stoic balance between bodily needs and the virtues of temperance and moderation. Discover how Stoics' diets reflect their ethical values: nourishing both body and character.



**Sunday, April 6, 5 PM - 6:30 PM**  
**Ethical Culture Happy Hour!**

Hugh hosts an introduction to Ethical Culture in the Leader's office. Learn more about our non-theist alternative to traditional religion while enjoying beverages and snacks.



**Monday, April 7, 12:30 PM - 1:45 PM**

## Lunch with Hugh

Bring your lunch to the Leader's office for some casual conversation.



**Tuesday, April 8, 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM**

## Politics Hour #1

Join us for the first of two conversations about political tactics today. We will watch and discuss the five-minute video "[Bonhoeffer's Theory of Stupidity](#)." Bring your own lunch. (For additional context, watch the 30-minute video "[The Theory of Stupidity](#)" on your own.)



**Thursday, April 10, 5 PM - 6:30 PM (zoom)**  
**Politics Hour #1**

An online version of our April 8 discussion. See above.

**Saturday, April 19, 7:30 PM - 8:30 PM**

## Earth Tones: A Benefit Piano Performance by Kip Leitner



Jazz musician Kip Leitner presents the public premiere of an improvised long-form piano solo that expresses the sounds of the four seasons in all their moods and feelings. Admission is free, but you'll be asked to make a donation of your choice on the night of the concert. All proceeds will be split between the Ethical Society's Camp Linden Children's Summer Program and Artwell, a non-profit that works with at-risk children in Philadelphia. Get your tickets through [Eventbrite](#). Doors open at 7 PM.

**Sunday, April 20, 3 PM - 4:30 PM**

## Beyond Stoicism: Ancient Philosophies for Modern Times



Join the Ethical Society and Philadelphia Stoa to explore how Stoicism's fundamental rule—the distinction between "what is up to us" and "what is not up to us"—addresses modern challenges. Dr. Amjol Shrestha, from Rowan University, will explain practical approaches to differentiating between those things inside and outside of our control. This ongoing series reveals practical ways to live an ethical life that leads to human flourishing. Copies of the book *Beyond Stoicism: A Guide to the Good Life with Stoics, Skeptics, Epicureans, and Other Ancient Philosophers* can be purchased at the event or [in advance](#).



**Tuesday, April 29, 12:30 PM - 1:30 PM**

## Politics Hour #2

Join us for the second of two conversations about political tactics today. We will watch and discuss the 20-minute video "[The Alt-Right Playbook: You Go High, We Go Low](#)." Bring your own lunch.

**Thursday, May 1, 5:30 PM - 6:30 PM (zoom)**  
**Politics Hour #2**

An online version of our April 29 discussion. See above.





## SUNDAY SERVICES

11 am

Ethical Views is published monthly except July and August.

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## PHILADELPHIA ETHICAL SOCIETY COMMITTEES

Our Society is sustained by all of its volunteers who serve on the many committees that fulfill our purpose and guide our decisions. The following generous members serve as chairs of the committees, which meet at the times shown. Members and interested others are welcome to attend. Check with chairs for meeting venues.

Email us to learn more at [office@phillyethics.org](mailto:office@phillyethics.org).

**Board of Trustees**  
**Michael Black-Smith**  
**Sunday, April 20, 6 PM**

**Building Committee**  
**Michael Black-Smith**  
**Wednesday, April 16, 6 PM**

**Camp Linden Committee**  
**Jeffrey Dubb**  
**Wednesday, April 23, 5 PM**

Community Committee  
open chair  
next meeting TBA

**Education Committee**  
**Betsy Lightbourn**  
**Wednesday, April 2, 3:30 PM**

**Ending Racism Task Force**  
**Sylvia Metzler, Erik Younge**  
**Saturday, April 12, 11 AM**

**Ethical Action Committee**  
**Julia Gokalp**  
**Sunday, April 13, 1:30 PM**

**Finance Committee**  
**Nick Sanders**  
**Tuesday, April 8, 5 PM**

Media Committee  
Drew Snyder  
no meeting this month

For suggestions regarding this newsletter, contact [leighebuchanan@gmail.com](mailto:leighebuchanan@gmail.com).



## Cleanliness Is Next to Humanism

With cherry blossoms blooming in the Square, the Ethical Society embarked on its own rite of spring: a building clean-up! On a recent Sunday afternoon, more than 20 people—members of the Society and renters, such as AA and Rittenhouse Chess—painted over dings and scuffs in the Auditorium. Upstairs, we winnowed our overgrown collection of kitchenware (who needs 11 pairs of salad tongs?), scrubbed cabinets, and cleaned walls.

Among those helping were (clockwise from top left) John Horkel, Robert Steinfort, Michael Black-Smith, Stan Horwitz, Sharon Wallis, Julia Gokalp, and Kimberly Blough.

