VISION

HARVARD STUDENTS LOOK AHEAD

VOLUME III

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The Reformation of Civil Ethics

Peter Ulric Tse

America is in the beginning stages of a social upheaval rooted, ultimately, in the modern confrontation with meaningfulness. The conflict will be about how we are to live, what we ought to teach our children, what laws should be passed, and what choices we will be allowed to make as citizens. The recent killings at abortion clinics, the debate over assisted suicide, and the court cases testing school prayer are indicative of a broader struggle between opposing value systems. The present forum of the "war of cultures" is ethics, and it is inevitable that the places where a single policy must be set—the schools, the hospitals, and the government—will be flashpoints in this cultural conflict over what is true and right. The next decade will witness

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major turmoil over ethics that will tear at the fabric of American society no less fiercely than the struggles of the 1960s for racial equality. Only this time the culture of Reason will be on the defensive.

**How We Arrived Here**

The roots of the West's protracted crisis in values run deep. One immediate cause has been the worldview of science. From the fall of Rome until the Renaissance, the Church was the dominant moral force, its authority stemming from the conviction that the Church enforced the objective dictates of God. Science undermined the Church's authority by confronting people with the proposition that the universe operates solely in accordance with discoverable physical laws. Implicit in science's materialism was the claim that there is no objective morality upon which to base behavior. After Darwin took away our divine likeness by exposing us as apes evolved from inanimate matter, it seemed that Christianity and its God were, as Nietzsche put it, "dead." After Freud, even the animated demons and angels of religion vacated the physical world. They, like morality, took up residence in our minds.

There have been many attempts to fill the vacuum of meaning and values left by Christianity's deflation by Reason. Many new religions, from Mormonism to the Bahá'í Faith, have appeared. Science, however, poses the same threat to new theistic religions as it does to old ones. Thus, the most influential philosophical and social movements aimed at providing meaning in the modern era have not attempted to solve the problem of "how to live" theistically.

Karl Marx maintained that the essence of being human is the ability to create things from nature that satisfy material needs. Since humans attain meaningful lives only through society, he argued, all should share in the rewards of the species' labors to create. This ideal situation is not realized when owners exploit workers. Capitalism dehumanizes workers by turning them into commodi-
ties, thereby creating the antagonisms that will eventually overthrow it. Only through the unfolding of successive class struggles will a classless society emerge where workers receive just compensation for their labors. In this communal world of worker-owners, each person will contribute what he or she can, and be provided for as needed. This vision of a godless paradise wrought by human work nearly replaced theism in half the world this century.

Existentialism brought into sharp focus the dilemma posed by the indifference of the universe to the individual. Sartre argued that humans are condemned to act freely without the objective guidance of God’s commandments. In such a world, “no rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do” (356). According to the existentialist, a meaningful life begins with the prospect of self-annihilation. Once you have chosen life over death, you are left with the colossal project of creating your own meanings. It is as if you are to live life as a novel where you are your own author, protagonist, and, in the end, your only reader.

Even Nazism can be seen as an attempt to fill the spiritual vacuum. Its goal was to create an earthly paradise occupied by superhumans. More than fascism, it was an anti-rationalist and methodical attempt to create an organized “religion” of the Teutonic race.

Humanism, which lauded the powers and virtues of human life in this world, flourished in the Renaissance and has since taken many forms. A modern descendant, secular humanism, has, like Marxism, Existentialism, and Nazism, sought to transcend theistic religion by placing ideal humans at the center of the vacuum of meaning. Secular humanists are committed to a global society based on reason, justice, tolerance, and respect. They emphasize our common humanity and encourage questioning of any authority that attempts to supersede personal conscience.

In America, the various social movements that came to a head in the 1960s were aimed at rectifying the inequities of a society based on patriarchal and racist values. In one sense, the Civil Rights struggles are only the most recent in a centuries-old war of cul-
tures, the main antagonists of which have been dogmatic Christian culture and the culture of Reason. The excesses of the sixties have incurred today’s backlash from the churches in the form of burgeoning fundamentalism and the Religious Right. However, at least as many people have become adherents of New Age mysticism since the sixties as have become fundamentalists. Instead of trying to reinstall the Christian God, the New Age mystics fill the vacuum with supernatural forces and beings. Indeed, according to recent research done by social psychologist Raymond Eve, America today comprises three primary cultural groups: creationists (40 percent), New Age adherents (20–25 percent), and believers in science (35 percent). The first two groups agree only that the latter is wrong.

All these movements have occurred in reaction to and against a backdrop of nihilism, which makes no attempt to fill the vacuum of meaning and value. It dwells upon the meaninglessness of human life and finds expression in facile killing, depression, escapist drug use, obsessions with death, sexual abuse, teen suicide, and much else that is symptomatic of our time.

**Civil vs. Private Ethics**

In Western democracies, people have the right to believe whatever they want and generally can live by any private ethical system that does not conflict with others’ rights. In a civil society, however, there must be agreement on what counts as acceptable social behavior; that is, we must have a common ethics for civil, as opposed to private, behavior. To the extent that a civil ethics is not commonly held, we will have conflict.

We have a situation now where many people disagree with the liberal secular ethics of Western democracies and wish to impose their private ethics upon others. If changing others’ beliefs is not possible, they wish to impose on others at least behavior compatible with their private ethics. Thus, from the fundamentalist point of view, it is not enough to refuse to abort one’s own fetus on personal grounds, leaving other people to decide for themselves.
THE REFORMATION OF CIVIL ETHICS

Since fundamentalists believe the public secular ethics is wrong, some of them feel obligated to attack abortion clinics, and, if possible, change the public ethics to a theistic one.

To end the tyranny of one private ethical system over another, the founders of American democracy insisted on a separation of church and state. Civil ethics, they decided, would be based on more reasoned principles of right and wrong than those dictated by the tenets of any religion. Ironically, the separation of church and state now being challenged by the Religious Right was invoked by the framers of the Constitution to guarantee individuals the freedom to choose ethics and religion privately.

Given that our civil ethics is to be a reasoned one, what is it to look like? On what principles will we base our laws? Indeed, what is the basis for any ethics once we forsake a theistic foundation for our civil ethics? How can we value anything in a universe that is indifferent to our existence? This last dilemma must be addressed before any attempt is made to construct a rational ethical system for society or self.

THE BASIS OF A NONTHEISTIC ETHICS

If an indifferent universe provides no basis for ethics, we must find a basis in the human condition itself. Either ethics will be subjective, on the level of instincts; or objective, in the sense that its principles must hold for all humans regardless of individual desire or circumstance; or there will be some mixture of unreasoned instinctual and rational elements. I will argue that both the rational and irrational must form the basis of any nontheistic ethics.

The parameters of subjectivity and objectivity defining the debate over the basis of nontheistic ethics were set by Hume and Kant, respectively. Hume argued that ethical judgments are entirely subjective because human behavior is based on "passions." Because no statement of "ought" could ever logically follow from a statement of what "is," reason, he argued, could at best be used to incite a passion to act or justify an action already committed irrationally. Kant took the opposite view, arguing that there is an
objective basis for ethics in the laws of detached reasoning. Ethical decisions about what one ought to do must be based on the “categorical imperative”: Act in a certain way only when you are willing to allow that way of acting to become “a universal law” of behavior.

The modern inheritors of Hume’s stance are the sociobiologists who argue that altruistic and other ethical behavior is instinctual (see Wilson 155–75). Altruistic tendencies were selected into us as we evolved in the context of small bands of long-lived primates who depended for survival on exchanging favors, building alliances, and remembering who could be counted on. When pressed about the existence of altruistic behavior toward strangers with no possibility of reciprocation, sociobiologists tend to argue that such behavior was of benefit in the context in which it evolved, since in that context everyone was a potential ally. It is only because of our recent movement out of small bands into ever larger groups that pseudo-altruistic behavior has become truly altruistic.

Sociobiologists have tended to underemphasize human abilities to reason and empathize regardless of personal benefit. Reason and imagination allow us to make ethical decisions based on principles of justice and compassion for their own sake. For example, people can decide not to eat meat because of the suffering it causes animals, even though they might enjoy its taste. Sociobiology becomes absurdly reductionistic when reasoned selflessness (or, say, reasoned suicide or celibacy) is considered selfish merely because reason itself must have evolved thanks to the survival value it bestowed on “selfish genes.”

Human ethical decisions seem to be based on more than instincts like parental love or what the sociobiologists call “inclusive fitness altruism.” While we may have innate tendencies to avoid sex with siblings, for example, no human behavior occurs unmodified by the influences of culture and personal reasoning. Such reasoning may be right or wrong, but the point is that reasoning does influence human behavior. However, if vegetarianism can be as reasoned a policy as genocide or slavery, how are we to choose between good and evil reasoning?
A nontheistic ethics can be founded on our capacities to reason and to empathize by considering perspectives beyond our own. We should obey a rational ethics because the perspective we find ourselves in is “accidental.” We might as easily have been poor as rich, white as black, male as female, or our enemies as ourselves. Ethical decisions must find justification in detached reasoning that determines principles of what ought to be done regardless of personal benefit or harm, if they are to hold “objectively,” from each person’s perspective.

Kant’s categorical imperative, therefore, might be rephrased: “What if everyone behaved like you?” Similarly, the Golden Rule might be rephrased: “What if you were treated like this?” Parents ask just these sorts of questions when teaching their children to consider perspectives not their own. Such questions can and do form a rational basis for compassion, consideration, and respect. Reasoning can inform us when innate drives and feelings are right, or when they are wrong and in need of restraint. One aspect of being civilized, then, is this ability to exercise restraint over passions so as to do what is right. Without civility rooted in rational restraint, civilization decays; selfishness and the laws of the jungle take over.

Rational laws of society must be formulated on the assumption that everyone is equal. This follows because a rational ethics cannot assume otherwise and still claim to objectively hold for all people regardless of their accidental social station. The social contract ethics of Rawls, following Rousseau, views justice as fairness. Rawls starts with a question: what laws of society would people come up with beforehand if they did not know what their race, gender, wealth, intelligence, or other characteristics would be upon entering society? He argues that they would choose “equality in the assignment of basic rights and duties” (15). They would also find inequalities of, say, power and wealth in society just and fair only when they could also benefit from the organization of that society. Whether Rawls is correct here is less important than the
point that there is a rational basis for civil ethics and the laws that enforce and embody that ethics.

The Limits of Reason

While it is easy to think of social justice as fairness, it is difficult to think of rightness as fairness, since some relationships are by their very nature unequal. Consider the issue of abortion. The embryo’s life depends on that of the mother, whereas the converse is not true. One way to choose rationally in such cases is to give ethical primacy to the condition that allows for the existence of another conflicting condition. In the case of abortion, such reasoning would grant the rights of the mother precedence over those of the fetus. However, such an ethics will have to be tempered by other rational considerations: When can a fetus first be considered an independent individual, subject to society’s determination of human rights? Would we want such suffering imposed upon ourselves? Where reason provides us with no clear answer, and objective rules seem impossible, we will have to take a consequentialist stance and ask ourselves: what are the consequences of allowing abortion as opposed to not allowing it?

There is ethical ambiguity in such cases. Sometimes conditions exist by virtue of each other. For example, individuals depend for their existence on society, which in turn depends for its existence on individuals adhering to just laws. Which, then, is to be given primacy, the individual or the society? Should a government by and for its people subject a citizen to the death penalty if that person threatens to kill again? Here the notion of ethical primacy or Rawls’s contractual reasoning does not help us. Kant’s categorical imperative does prove helpful, but leaves us wondering what would happen if everyone committed murders. It seems, then, that we must make our decision regarding the death penalty based on the kind of society we want to have and on other possible consequences such as the deterrence of future murders. At this point, a detached rational ethics gives way to goal-oriented or consequentialist ethics. Do we want to create a society where in-
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nocent individuals are sometimes killed for the good of public safety? Are certain groups likely to be unfairly victimized by the death penalty? If so, contractual reasoning argues against the death penalty. But the conclusion is ethically ambiguous because it no longer derives from detached reasoning. It derives from particular ends that we wish to achieve.

I believe that we will ultimately be forced to acknowledge that reason alone cannot solve all our ethical dilemmas. But since reason, via science, drives us to accept that the universe does not provide moral guidance, a reasoned ethics seems both inadequate and necessary if we are to avoid basing ethics purely on passions. Perhaps we can only hope for a maximally rational set of laws, but must give up hope for an ethics that can tell us exactly what we should do in every instance. No amount of reasoning from first principles can, for example, justify the legality of killing a fetus on one day, when killing it the next day would be illegal. Ultimately, we make a compromise and assign abortions legal status up to some cutoff date based on what seems a reasonable criterion, such as the viability of life outside the womb, which formed the basis of the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision. Likewise, no amount of reasoning can prove that the continued existence of humans is an ultimate good. It is a high priority for us only because we are humans.

Unprecedented technologies will increasingly drive us into ethical gray areas that no pre-established ethical rule can satisfactorily resolve, whether it be a rule derived from reason or religion. Consider, for example, the prospect of immortality. A recent article in the Economist reported that cells age in part because they lose a finite number of chromosomal “telomere” endings with each cell division (“Forward to Methuselah” 65–68). If it becomes possible to have “telomerase treatments” that ward off this self-destruct mechanism, will such treatments be right? Our instinct for survival will send millions to use the new technology. But what of the consequences? How will society deal with so many undying people? If we do not have some notion of what we should do, the marketplace will answer this for us, and only rich people will be
able to afford treatments. This would certainly not be right, but then what would? Immortality may seem far-fetched, but similarly ambiguous ethical issues have been raised regarding euthanasia and life-support, engineering new forms of life, cloning, or cultivating embryos for the use of their tissues. Ultimately, we will have no recourse but to base our decisions on likely consequences of our actions rather than on hard and fast ethical rules. In order to choose the course that is most beneficial, we will have to know what our ultimate goods are.

Rationally derived ethics will increasingly come to depend on non-derived propositions such as “the existence of our species is an ultimate good.” This trend is part of two historic changes in Western thought. First, the conviction that reason can solve all problems is fading. There are problems that reason cannot solve in principle, whether in quantum theory, mathematics, or ethics. Second, rule-based ethics is giving way to consequentialist ethics. The implications of accepting the limits of reason will be profound.

The Age of Reason inherited the arrogance of the medieval Church. The Church’s claims that all truth could be apprehended through the Bible and that the Bible’s commandments could solve all ethical problems gave way to Rationalism’s equally arrogant and parallel claims that all truth could be apprehended through reason and that reason could find laws that solve all ethical problems. We now find that neither religion nor reason can solve all problems unambiguously. In a sense, Western culture is reaching the limits of apprehending the world through rules and reason. Just as no law seems capable of telling us what exactly an electron will do, save probabilistically, no religious commandment or reasoned imperative seems capable of telling us, save tentatively, whether we should donate a kidney to prolong a relative’s life.

**Reforming Civil Ethics**

The only solution, I believe, is to stop the arrogant posturing on both sides of the reason/religion divide, and to attempt to reach some consensus about our ultimate goals and goods. If a rule-
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based approach to decision-making is inadequate, whether those
rules be reasoned or received, we must make decisions based on
the consequences that will maximize our ultimate goods. In short,
there is room for humility, dialogue, and maybe even agreement
once both sides recognize their limitations.

Rationalism and religion will, I believe, agree on many of the
ultimate goods of human life. We will not agree on theism or athe-
ism, but that is not required. It is possible to agree on ultimate
human goods without agreeing on the source of those goods. Thus,
the culture of Reason and the cultures of religion can both agree
that the continued existence of humans is an ultimate human good,
without agreeing on why this might be so. They can also agree that
we should minimize suffering and that life should have dignity.
We are, after all, alike in our mortality and our susceptibility to
pain. On that basis alone, we are likely to agree on many of life’s
ultimate goods.

In addition to searching for a common core of human values,
we must reassess the “goods” implicit in our present capitalist sys-
tem: namely, enhancing wealth, competition, and personal gratifi-
cation. While leading to an increase in material standards of living
unparalleled in history, these values have also led to environmental
degradation, social dislocation, and a hedonism of self-realization.
Living by consumerism’s values, then, may actually be under-
mining a deeper good like our continued existence.

Significant responsibility for the rise of social movements
motivated against basing society on a reasoned civil ethics lies with
those who believe in the supremacy of reason. They have failed to
see that reason cannot ultimately teach us how to live or provide us
with ultimate goods to guide us. A reasoned civil ethics can at best
advocate an equality of rights. But by advocating unconditional
individual rights as the highest guarantee of justice, rationalists
have overseen a rapid decline in common civility, family strength,
and community. However objective it seems, a policy of liberal
individualism implicitly regards the individual’s freedom as the
highest value. Civic culture has decayed in part because, in a
political culture where everyone has the right to act out of self-
interest, regardless of effects on the community, community values and civility decline (Gray 24). Civil ethics, however, requires more than the entitlement of individual rights. It also requires individuals to act for the common and ultimate goods agreed upon by the civilization. The emerging backlash against rational liberalism, then, results partly from its failure to support that half of civil ethics that invokes individuals to their civil responsibilities as opposed to their civil rights.

The Flame to the Mirror

Western intellectuals from Galileo to Bertrand Russell strove to undermine the powers of the Church. While this was a necessary step in the formation of a society governed by rational as opposed to religious laws, this attitude has now become self-destructive. In all other cultures, intellectuals create, promote, and safeguard the collective myths that bind society. Only in the West have they actively destroyed them. This tendency to ridicule myth and its meanings has a complicated history of development in this century as various schools from the existentialists to the deconstructionists have found a common theme in “meaninglessness.” According to deconstructionists like Jacques Derrida, the continual search for ultimate meanings and truths is a delusion: just as a sign such as Ω has no inherent meanings, so a text, the author of that text, myth, and, ultimately, the myth of the objective world have no inherent meanings. However, by stripping our society of myth and ritual without replacing these with anything else worth living for or by, Western intellectuals have placed ordinary people in an unprecedented dilemma.

Childhood cravings for magical stories were traditionally satisfied with a culture’s myths and rituals, revealing the human desire for enculturation. Even in our demythologized era, we remain social beings who desire meaningful narratives about our world and ourselves. We love everything from gossip to heroic stories in which we can see our own life stories played out. We may be convinced that Good will win in the end or that destined lovers will
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eventually embrace, but many of us nevertheless enjoy popular
movies and fiction. Conversely, tragedies offer catharsis because
through them we can mourn our own deaths, failures, lost loves,
and unfulfilled dreams. The point misunderstood by
deconstructionists is that even though a story may be meaningless
or false in the sense that it has no objective referents, it can be
meaningful in the simple sense that it moves us. Stories move us
because they resonate with our own deepest wishes and dreads.
Deconstructing a myth, symbol, or ritual into its real and hidden
referents is an academic exercise that attempts to rationalize a
human need that lies beyond the scope of rational dissection. The
essence of a good story is that it connects us with our feelings, the
world, or our culture. Since such connectedness is essential in any
spiritual tradition, deconstructionism is destructive and perhaps even
nihilistic. It is an anti-spiritual “rational fundamentalism” similar
in its vehemence and dogmatism to anti-rational religious funda-
mentalism.

But deeper than our desires for myth and narrative, we are a
species with religious tendencies. It is as if we were “congenital
animists.” Not only do we want to live in the context of meanings
greater than ourselves, but we also grant desires and intentions to
inanimate objects almost as easily as we do to people or animals.
(Even an atheist will go through contortions in an effort to keep a
curving bowling ball from falling off the lane.) From such predis-
positions, it is a small leap to an animistic religion. Indeed, anthro-
pologists have never found a culture lacking beliefs in either a spirit
world or some transcendent causality of meanings.

Yet we are told that the universe is indifferent to us and that
any meanings or heroes we may believe in are to be revealed for
the lies or cultural constructs that they really are. It is as if the
leaders of the Age of Reason have put a flame to the mirror of
human nature. That flame is meaningless. The tensions in the
glass are intense, but which way the crack will eventually go is not
foreseeable.

Whenever there is great tension in a society, a local fluc-
tuation can suddenly become so amplified that it sweeps new
structure into the whole system. For example, there are always visionaries preaching on streetcorners, usually people who are ignored, imprisoned, or otherwise damped down. But given the extreme stresses of demoralized and unemployed Germany, Hitler was able to reorder the entire society in just a few years. The tensions might have been released in some other way, but Nazism was the crack in the mirror that in fact occurred. We now live in a time of instability growing out of the tensions that the declaration of a meaningless universe has engendered. For now, material wealth will keep most people away from demagogues. But, if another Great Depression occurs, the tensions can only become worse, and the eventual release can only be more extreme.

The age of unbounded faith in the powers of reason is drawing to a close. The demise of Marxism may be considered another indication of this. In many ways the most reasoned social system ever attempted, Marxism failed to fulfill basic human needs for autonomy and meaning. Secular and democratic capitalist societies should not take comfort in Marxism’s demise, for their own system could go next.

Since the root tension in modern society derives from meaninglessness, alienation, and disillusionment with rationality, the crack in the mirror will most likely take a religious form. We may look with dismay at the Branch Davidians or the cult allegedly behind the poison gas attacks in Japan, but such cults are fulfilling a need for their adherents unfulfilled by modern society or traditional religion. Their leaders provide them with believable myths and meanings to live and die for.

It is possible that a religiously motivated political movement led by a charismatic master of mythic narration will usher in a new social order in the next century. If that movement is anti-rational, there will be extensive bloodshed. Even if the crack is not on the order of the Nazism or militant Shintoism that emerged out of the Depression, lesser cracks will abound. In the next five years there will be a steep rise in apocalyptic cults as we approach the end of the millennium. Most will be damped down. Nevertheless,
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violent conflict will probably worsen as both religious and secular groups seek to restructure the foundations of society.

WHERE ARE WE GOING FROM HERE?

When fascism was defeated fifty years ago, that part of Western civilization responsible for the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, science, and the notion that “all men are created equal” narrowly escaped its demise. If the fascists had won, the Age of Reason would have ended. Since the end of the Cold War, some like Francis Fukuyama have proclaimed “the end of history”: capitalist democracy, it is argued, has won the war of ideologies. This is a dangerous delusion. In the coming two decades, societies based on rational civil ethics will suffer the strongest attacks against them since World War II. Not only will groups within the democracies attack the notion that society should be based on the laws of detached reason, but other cultures, particularly Confucian and Islamic, will challenge the tenets of our civilization from the outside. This time, the culture of Reason may not occupy the moral high ground. The culture it has created is spiritually and morally fragmented.

Ironically, the Age of Reason—if it survives attacks by dogmatic religion, terrorists, rising neo-fascism, and New Age mysticism—will require spiritualities compatible with science and reason to save it from ever increasing crime, incivility, alienation, and nihilism. (Dogmatic religion is trying to address these very problems by returning society to a literalist interpretation of the Bible. The motivation may be well-founded, but the solution is both anti-rational and a step backwards.) Rational spiritualities, unlike pure reason, can teach us those ultimate goods that heal us and renew our connections to family, community, self, and world. For example, the ecology movement, with its reverence for life and the earth, in fact offers the beginnings of a spirituality compatible with reason. Neither Zen Buddhism nor an allegorical interpretation of the Bible’s stories in any way conflicts with a rational approach. Whereas civil ethics addresses what is right
behavior, spirituality can get at the deeper issue of what is right reasoning, intending, and feeling. Right behavior, after all, follows from having a compassionate and just heart, not vice versa. Without a renaissance of spirituality that goes beyond the recent revival of anti-rationalist fundamentalism, our society based upon a rational civil ethics will grow ever more uncivil.

In America the emerging conflict between the culture of Reason and dogmatic religious cultures will threaten the very principles upon which our republic was founded. While the conflict over ethics may be violent, the result may be a healthier society. Rather than dismiss them as benighted or fascistic, rationalists should engage and challenge the Religious Right on specific issues, particularly education. There is room for give-and-take because there may indeed be a need for a return to ethical—as opposed to religious—education in our public schools. Although rationalist culture should not compromise fundamental tenets of the democracy it created, such as separation of church and state, there are valid reasons why rationalism is being attacked by conservative religious culture. Civility and community have declined at the expense of individual rights. If religious and rationalist cultures agree to a dialogue, they may well discover the common ultimate goods that underlie any meaningful life. These ultimate goods will serve as the basis of a civil ethics that is compatible with both spiritual values and reason.

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THE REFORMATION OF CIVIL ETHICS


