Prologue to Provocations

A Search for Truth in
Christian Anthropology

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Chapter 4

What Account can Philosophy give of Culture?

Thomas Storck

1. Introduction

The philosophy of culture suffers from a double difficulty. In the first place there have been varying meanings attached to the word *culture*, and secondly, there has been even greater disagreement over what the philosophy of culture is or ought to be. With regard to the first difficulty, what exactly we mean by culture, at least in recent decades philosophers concerned with culture usually understand it as do anthropologists, as something like "a common way of life - a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs," and which is "based on a social tradition...embodied in its institutions, its literature and its art."[1] This concept is relatively new as part of mankind's intellectual heritage. It developed in the nineteenth century in Germany and England, and has become standard in anthropology and sociology.[2] It is generally held that in the English-speaking world this usage of the word was introduced by Edward Burnett Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor wrote "Culture, or civilization,...is that complex

1 Christopher Dawson, *Dynamics of World History*, (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, 1978), 4 and 104. This definition ignores the question of a spiritual or ideological unity which shapes a culture. See section 4 for a discussion of this.

2 In recent years, however, there has been considerable dispute among anthropologists about the meaning and even the utility of the concept of culture. See, for example, William H. Sewell, Jr., "The Concept(s) of Culture" in Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, editors, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley : University of California, 1999), 35-61.

whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[3]

A culture as "a common way of life" is more than "a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs," however. The definition quoted above from Christopher Dawson is incomplete, as he himself indicated in many other places. He wrote, for example, "In the last resort every civilization is built on a religious foundation: it is the expression in social institutions and cultural activity of a faith or a vision of reality which gives the civilization its spiritual unity."[4] Pope John Paul II expressed this same idea in a striking passage in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (no. 24),

> At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.[5]

This truth is shown in the fact that different peoples have adapted to the same environment in different ways. For example, Spanish architecture of the American Southwest attempted to build in harmony with the arid and semi-arid climate, while Anglo-Americans often imported styles of building and expectations for living that may have worked well in New England or parts of the Midwest, but which were ill-adapted to the Southwest.

The presence of such a unifying ideal in a culture does not mean, though, that there must be only one such ideal at the heart of a particular culture, for it is possible for ideas and inspirations received from different sources, even opposed to one another, to coexist uneasily and create cultures which are marked by contradictory tendencies. Also it should be recognized that the continuing influence on a culture of some spiritual ideal does not mean that that ideal is

3 Tylor is said to have been the "first man to introduce this clear scientific meaning" of the term culture. Etienne Vermeersch, "An Analysis of the Concept of Culture," in Bernardo Bernardi, editor, *The Concept and Dynamics of Culture* (The Hague : Mouton, c. 1977), 10. In their review of the various meanings of culture, Kroeber and Kluckhohn trace the anthropological usage to the German writer Gustav Klemm's *Allgemeine Culturgeschichte der Menschheit* (1843-1852). They write: "It is difficult to be sure that Klemm's concept of culture was ever fully the same as that of modern anthropologists. On the other hand, it would be hard to believe that he is never to be so construed. Most likely he was in an in-between stage, sometimes using the term with its connotations of 1780, sometimes with those of 1920 - and perhaps never fully conscious of its range, and, so far as we know, never formally defining it." A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture, a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York : Vintage, 1952, 1963 printing), 14, 46.

4 Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (Garden City, N.Y. : Image, 1960), 211.

5 This central spiritual element in a culture can also be described in terms of values. "Die Wertesind das entscheidende Element einerKultur.... Der von Wertengebildete Kern der Kulturbestimmtentsprechend die sozialeEntwicklung in mindestensdemselben Masse wie die natürlichen Gegebenheiten und die materiellenTechniken." Constantin von Barloewen, *Werte in der Kulturphilosophie Nord- und Lateinamerikas* (Frankfurt am M.: Athenäum, 1989), 12.

necessarily active as an actual belief. The cultural effect of such ideals may persist even if the explicit ideal has been forgotten.

> A nation once Calvinist in Creed may have ceased for the most part (as Scotland has) to believe in Predestination or to trouble about Conversion and the Reprobate sense; but it will continue for generations, and probably until a new set of doctrines shall be taught it, to think (therefore, to act) in the Calvinist manner. It will incline to the Calvinist attitude toward wealth and the acquirement thereof. It will take for granted an inexorable process of cause and effect. It will concentrate upon the responsibility of the individual to himself, the isolation of soul, and a consequent cultivation of what it will call 'Character.'[6]

Any culture, therefore, will exist as a dialectic between the environment, the fundamental ideals or values which the particular social group holds, and, as we will explore below, human nature.

Although philosophical interest in culture largely reflects the development of the concept in anthropology, there has been little agreement over exactly what shape this philosophical interestshould take. As the contemporary Danish philosopher Steen Brock said, "Denn, was heisst Kulturphilosophie? Es gibt wohl keine allgemein akzeptierte Definition von dies!"[7] Although this conclusion, that there is no generally accepted definition of the philosophy of culture, parallels the lack of agreement among philosophers on many other matters, nevertheless it is probably the case that there is less consensus even on what questions the philosophy of culture should address than is the case in most other areas of philosophy. But there are certain questions which seem to be primary in any philosophical discussion of culture, and they mostly concern the relations between culture and nature, especially human nature. It is with these questions that this paper will mainly concern itself.

2. Culture and Nature

The relationship between culture and nature raises the most interesting as well as the most perplexing questions in the philosophy of culture. Often nature and culture are seen as opposed to each other, or at least as separate realms. "'Culture' means practically everything which is not 'from nature': the whole human world with its customs, artifacts, knowledge, material products, ideas and values."[8] Yet here is a paradox. All the specified items, "customs, artifacts, knowledge, material products, ideas and values," in fact flow more or less directly from human nature

6 Hilaire Belloc, "The Two Cultures of the West," in *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN, [1931] 1992), 240.

7 *Kulturphilosophie: Bohr, Cassirer, Wittgenstein, Cavell, MacIntyre, Winch, Taylor [und] Haraway: SechsVorlesungen am Humboldt Universitätzu Berlin, August 2006*, [8]. Accessed from http://pure.au.dk/portal/files/41412787/kulturphilosophie.pdf, (February 15, 2015).

8 TõnuViik, "What about the Philosophy of Culture?" *ActaPhilosophicaFennica* 65 (2000), 247.

in the sense that man naturally creates these things and in fact needs them in some form to fulfill what seem to be the demands and capacities natural to him. Yet obviously the particular "customs, artifacts, knowledge, material products" and so forth which humanity creates are artificial, even if they are demanded by human nature.[9] Thus culture is natural at the same time as every particular culture is artificial and contingent.

This natural human requirement for culture is shown most clearly in language. It is obviously natural for human beings to speak, but any particular language is a construct and an aspect of a culture. The explanation for this paradox lies in human nature. Our abstract capacity to speak needs to be made concrete or specific in order to be actual. But as concrete each language is necessarily something constructed and contingent, something cultural. Thus culture is natural as something necessary for expressing the abstract capabilities of human nature. But no single particular cultural product can be said to be natural as such. We cannot say that any one language is natural, since each is a human artifice. We can say, however, that language is natural to humanity and that in general each of mankind's cultural products reflects at the same time human nature's needs and its ability to create some means to satisfy those needs, even if there are many possible ways to meet any particular need.

Of course when I say that any particular culture is constructed, I do not mean that all or most cultural components are consciously created. The origins of most elements of culture are unknown to us, e.g., the origins of a language or of any of the widely varying types of family structure or of music or painting. Nor is there any way to discover how or why one original cultural choice was made rather than another. By the time historians or anthropologists are able to examine any culture, its basic structures are already in place, and all subsequent developments, though sometimes shaped by conscious human choice, nevertheless take place within a framework whose outlines and boundaries already exist.

Since a culture of some kind is a consequence of natural human needs and capacities, a human being without culture of any sort - at least without a specifically *human* culture - is actually living in an unnatural condition. The anthropologist Ruth Benedict wrote of Carolus Linnaeus' encounters in the eighteenth century with children who had been abandoned by their parents and raised perhaps among beasts. He

> classified them as a distinct species, *Homo ferus*, and supposed that they were a kind of gnome that man seldom ran across. He could not conceive that these half-witted brutes were born human, these creatures with no interest in what went on about them, rocking themselves rhythmically back and forth like some wild animal in a zoo, with organs of speech and hearing that could hardly be trained to do service, who withstood freezing weather in rags and plucked potatoes out of boiling water without discomfort. There is no doubt, of course, that they were children abandoned in infancy, and what they had all of them lacked was association with their kind, through which alone man's faculties are sharpened and given form.[10]

While these unfortunates were undoubtedly human as members of the species *homo sapiens*, most or all of their specifically human capabilities had never been developed, even though those capabilities were certainly possessed by them, at least originally.[11] As Jacques Maritain said, "The labour of reason and the virtues is natural in the sense that it is in conformity with the essential inclinations of human nature.... It is not natural in the sense that it is supplied ready made by nature...."[12] Maritain's mention of "reason and the virtues" brings up the further point that one of culture's functions is or should be educative. As the feral children needed to learn from a human community in order for their specifically human attributes to become manifest, so the culture of any particular community can help or hinder the development of our human capacities, and in particular those that pertain to "reason and the virtues." If we can rightly designate man as a *rational* animal, then it would seem that those things which concern our specifically rational nature are among the most important aspects of culture, since they are what distinguish us as a species from other types of animals.

Culture, then, and some particular culture, is necessary if we are to live according to the fullness of our nature as rational animals. But any particular culture is not only a means for making concrete and determinate some of the many indeterminate capabilities of human nature; it in turn, mediates how we interact with nature, even with our own human nature and with the natures of the many other things that exist in the world. Even those aspects of human life that partake in such a high degree of our bodily constitution and instincts as eating or reproduction are hardly unaffected by culture. To take a simple example, foods that are consumed avidly in some places are not eaten at all in other places, or are even regarded with revulsion, and perhaps would not be touched except to avoid starvation. This shows the interdependence and close connection of even our bodily needs with the cultural superstructure which is likewise a demand of human nature.

9 Although, it is sometimes asserted today that human nature itself is something constructed, this hardly seems possible if we understand nature in its original and modest sense (following Aristotle) of how a particular type of thing acts according to its inherent nature or qualities, following the scholastic maxim, *agere sequitur esse*, action follows being. As we will see, due to the indeterminate quality of human nature, the *agere* of human beings can vary immensely and yet still follow from the *esse* of human nature.

10 *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, c. 1934, 1961), 12-13.

11 Most probably these human capacities were dormant because the relevant physical organ had atrophied due to lack of use. Nor can one deny the possibility of damage caused by poor diet, exposure to cold, disease, etc.

12 "Religion and Culture" in *Essays in Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 3.

Although there are probably no human activities which are not affected by culture, does it follow from this that each and every culture does an equally adequate job of expressing these fundamental needs or capacities of human nature? Or, in other words, do some cultures cultivate human nature better than others? To continue with our example of eating: If among the various purposes of eating the fundamental purpose always remains human nourishment, we might ask if in some cultures eating is no longer primarily about nourishment but about consumption of edibles which have a symbolic value but whose ability to actually nourish the human body is limited or which are even detrimental to human health. Contemporary North America, especially the United States, is one such example, where highly processed edibles with little nutritional content are widely consumed, resulting in a population with a large number of people obese or ill, and at the same time lacking in important nutriments. The necessarily cultural activity of eating has become divorced from its most basic requirement. The cultural filter which forms how human persons interact with their food does not simply shape this activity in some particular way - something which is necessary and occurs everywhere - but in this instance shapes it in such a way that it is now opposed to its natural function. Culture has here become the enemy of nature, rather than culture facilitating nature in the task of the bodily nourishment of human beings.

Certainly philosophers, anthropologists and historians, studying various cultures in the present and the past, must be careful not to pronounce too hastily that a certain cultural custom is opposed to human nature, or to assert that any particular culture is superior in general or with regard to one or more of its features. But we would be unfaithful to the philosophical task were we to refuse ever to make such judgments on the plea that all cultures are equal in every respect. If there is such a thing as human nature, then the possibility exists that its indeterminations, while being made determinate by a particular culture, can also be deformed or impeded.

Any particular culture's understanding of God and the world is embodied not only in customs and institutions, but usually in explicit beliefs and ideas. Although in many instances it is possible for an individual to consciously reject overt cognitive norms which his culture maintains and attempts to impose - in European culture this has been common for centuries - there are other and more subtle norms which one can escape from only with difficulty. Thus it is not unusual to see people who ostensibly adhere to a particular religion at the same time manifest on a deeper and perhaps less conscious level beliefs and behaviors which are in conflict with those of the religion whose tenets they claim to accept. Thus many have pointed out that Catholics in the United States very often accept unconsciously and uncritically certain notions derived either from the Enlightenment principles upon which that country was founded or from the Protestant culture which has long shaped its social order. Such Catholics

usually do not realize how or to what an extent their actual operating principles of thought and conduct contradict those which historically have derived from Catholic beliefs.

This raises the question of whether and to what extent a person in any particular culture can escape the ways of interacting with reality that his particular culture imposes. Some have argued that we are in a sense imprisoned by our cultures. Ruth Benedict stated this view thus:

> No man ever looks at the world with pristine eyes. He sees it edited by a definite set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking. Even in his philosophical probings he cannot go behind these stereotypes; his very concepts of the true and the false will still have reference to his particular traditional customs.... From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behavior. By the time he can talk, he is the little creature of his culture, and by the time he is grown and able to take part in its activities, its habits are his habits, its beliefs his beliefs, its impossibilities his impossibilities. Every child that is born into his group will share them with him, and no child born into one on the opposite side of the globe can ever achieve the thousandth part.[13]

But surely the author herself demonstrated that this is too extreme a statement of this view, for she, as well as many others, has been able to look with some degree of detachment on her own culture as well as gain some understanding of other cultures. Alfred Kroeber stated the difficulty is less drastic terms:

> The degree to which every individual is molded by his culture is enormous.... The formal or deliberate part of the process we call education: education through schools, in religion, and in manners, and morals primarily at home. These agencies convey the mores and some of the folkways. But perhaps a larger fraction of the cultural tradition is acquired by each individual at his own initiative.... In this class are his speech, bodily postures and gestures, mental and social attitudes, which he imitates from his elders or from near-age mates, and a thousand and one activities...which a child "learns," often without any formal instruction, because he has seen others do these things and wants to do them too.[14]

Experience makes it obvious that many people do manage to see the world at least partly outside of the "set of customs and institutions and ways of thinking" inculcated by their cultures. In principle, there is no cultural construct which cannot be transcended or rejected. The difficulty is in recognizing that one has such a custom or mode of thinking or acting in the first place. For many of the "mental and social attitudes" acquired as a child are not easily identified, and in

13 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 2-3.

14 *Anthropology: Culture Patterns and Processes* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 96.

some cases, even when identified, are not easy to overcome. But in principle it would seem that it is always possible to do so.

Human nature, the shared possession of all human beings, will not change. But unless determined and formed by a particular culture, human nature cannot realize itself - or will be reduced to Linnaeus' *Homo ferus*. Therefore our first question, the question of the relations between nature and culture, can be resolved by saying that culture is both natural and artificial. Our specifically human powers and needs almost always require some culture to make them actual, even though the resulting cultural form is constructed and to a great extent arbitrary. Moreover, although any particular culture can give expression to human nature's abilities and needs, there is no necessary equality between cultures in how well they do this. As we saw in the case of food, although there can be and are many different cultural choices, all of which give more or less equal expression to mankind's needs, there can also exist cultural norms which work against what is natural to humanity and to that extent fail in culture's task of making the needs and demands of human nature concrete and thus able to be fulfilled.

Although any one culture is necessarily particular, we must now discuss the question of whether there can be anything that is transcultural.

3. Are Some Things Transcultural?

Human life is profoundly shaped by culture, or rather in the concrete, by any one particular culture. Although one can say that there is no truly human existence that is not a cultural existence, does it follow from this that nothing exists which we can rightly regard as transcultural, that is, as in some manner transcending any particular cultural expression? We have already examined the question of whether it is possible for a culture, instead of serving as a more or less adequate means of realizing some demand or capacity of human nature, to frustrate to a greater or lesser extent that natural demand or capacity. In fact, we may call the fundamental demands of human nature transcultural, even though they can never be realized without being embodied in some particular cultural expression. In this section we are concerned with something different, however, with the question of the existence of ideas or concepts which can be termed transcultural. This concerns not only philosophical concepts which claim universality, but also religious concepts claiming universality and based on a revelation, real or otherwise.

The opinion is not uncommon that the existence of cultures does in fact mean that there are "no universal truths." Viik describes the prevailing view as follows:

> "Culture" means practically everything which is not "from nature": the whole human world with its customs, artifacts, knowledge, material products, ideas and values. As such, culture is considered to be the most important determinant of human life. From this perspective human being seems to be essentially *In-der-Kultur-Sein* instead of Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-Sein*. It means that all human thoughts and actions are constituted by culture and the world of culture serves as a horizon for any possible activity. Consequently philosophy has no universal truths at its disposal and is nothing but an expression of the "spirit of an age."[15]

Let us consider whether this viewpoint can be sustained.

Despite the diversity of cultures, we cannot escape the fact that things simply *are*, and thus are the same for all of humanity. Although culture can affect how we view even ordinary things around us, this must not be understood to mean that reality itself is constructed. Philosophy has long claimed the ability to discover and express truths about reality, including metaphysical truths. Such truths claim a universality founded in the nature of things, such as (at the simplest) the principles of non-contradiction or of identity. But since such truths must be stated in words, and words not only are in a particular language but imply some kind of intellectual heritage, how or to what extent is the wording of such statements bound to a particular culture? And on the other hand, to what extent can something be expressed in different words and in the context of a different intellectual tradition and still signify the same truth?

In the first place, therefore, our question concerns language, language as a medium for expression of concepts or propositions, a point of difficulty long ago recognized with regard to translation. As the ancient Greek translator of the Old Testament book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) wrote, "For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language" (Sirach, prologue). Languages divide up reality in somewhat different ways, the denotations, and still more the connotations of words in different tongues differ, and a language may even lack a word for a particular concept. Hilaire Belloc sketched some of these difficulties in his Oxford lecture on translation.

> The reason there are no such things as exact equivalents between two terms in two different languages lies in two characters of the Word. First each word, however simply used, is used with multiplicity of meaning. Secondly, the history of a word, its use in the prose and verse of the language to which it belongs, its sound-value in that language, its connection in the mind of the cultured reader of that language with its use in certain masterpieces and remembered phrases, and in general all the atmosphere of its being, make it one thing in one language from what it is in another even where the use being made of it is similar.[16]

15 Viik, "What about the Philosophy of Culture?", 247.

16 "On Translation" (1931) in *Belloc, a Biographical Anthology*, edited by Herbert Van Thal (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 291-92.