

## LAYING THE GROUND FOR A PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE

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A philosophical way of looking at culture has its presumptions. It presumes a specific field called philosophy of culture with a defined formal object of study. It implies that a line can be drawn separating the way philosophy views culture and the way sociology or any other discipline does. A philosopher approaching culture is actually treading on shaky ground. Someone has yet to define what philosophy of culture is or has yet to set its parameters.

In this article, I am going to discuss the present status of the concept of culture. I will rely primarily on some major points that Terry Eagleton raises in his book, *The Idea of Culture*. The thrust of my discussion is the conceptual development of culture and its interplay with historical reality. From here, I will try to show how the concept at different stages of its history can be relevant to philosophy. Doing thus can lay the ground for the possibility of a philosophy of culture.

### Origin of the Concept

Most studies of culture begin with an attempt to define the term. Scholars, however, are quick to admit the difficulty in formulating a univocal definition of the concept. Often, they refer to the statement of Raymond Williams who said that "culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language . . . because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct systems of thought."<sup>1</sup>

The root word of culture is the Latin "colere" which could mean cultivating, inhabiting or worshipping. The word colonialism has the same root, too. To colonize is to inhabit. The same is true for

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the religious "cult" which, naturally, involves worshipping. The original meaning of culture is tending of natural growth, of cultivating. So, we have words like agriculture, horticulture, etc. Today, culture is sometimes associated with the refinement of the mind, as when we speak of cultured people being refined, polished, and sophisticated. The word, however, has a more humble origin. It was associated with nature, the earth, or the soil. A related term, "coultter" meant the blade of a ploughshare. The affinity with the soil is quite clear.

### Development of the Concept

The fact that, as early as 1952, two anthropologists already compiled in a book various definitions of culture attests to the concept's complexity. Kroeber and Kluckhohn classified these definitions into six categories. The descriptive definitions emphasize the contents of culture, e.g., beliefs, practices, knowledge, art, etc. The historical definitions emphasize that culture is socially and historically acquired—cultural beliefs and practices are handed down from generation to generation. The normative definitions stress the role of culture in setting standards for ways of doing things, or in prescribing values. The psychological definitions refer to culture as a way of adapting to life situations, helping man with his needs/problems. The structural definitions accentuate the interconnectedness of the different aspects of culture. Lastly, the genetic definitions describe how culture came to be.

More than half a century after this compilation was made, scholars are still trying to pin down a single definition of culture. Eagleton claims that today, culture is in a crisis.<sup>2</sup> This crisis is not directly concerned with the conflict of cultural values or the differences in religious beliefs/practices. It is a different but related conflict that he talks about. Before he discusses the cultural crisis, he traces what he describes as a tangled history of culture.

Initially, culture was understood as an activity, a tending of natural growth; it was not thought of as an entity. To speak of a culture of a group of people, e.g., Filipino culture, came much later in its history. Culture as activity was a material process; it was the cultivation of crops or of animals. Later on, culture was used to refer

to the cultivation of the mind. Ironically, those who cultivated the land did not have the leisure to cultivate the mind. And the sophisticated people who cultivated their minds did so, only because they were freed from the burden of cultivating the soil.

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the meaning of culture shifted. From the material process of tending natural growth, it became the individual refinement of the mind. It was the individual cultivation of the self, a form of civility. Then it became the improvement of the society as a whole. Members of the society did not go about cutting off peoples' heads or grabbing women they fancied. This was called civilization. Whereas civilization included politics, commerce, and technology, the next development of the meaning of culture was the improvement of spirit alone. This referred to the individual/social artistic activities and their products. Finally culture came to be used to refer to a way of life. So, in this sense, the Filipino culture was the Filipino way of life.

At the turn of the 19th century, culture was slowly dissociated from civilization. Not only did culture stop being identified with civilization, but culture became opposed to it. How did this come about? For as long as culture was identified with civilization, the latter, like the former, embodied fact and value, reality and vision. Culture as civilization was a descriptive as well as an evaluative/normative term. It described what is, but also suggested what can be. It united the fact of what is and the value of what can be better than this. The concept of civilization slowly lost this unity of what is real and the vision of what is better. Furthermore, civilization became associated with imperialism. To colonize meant to civilize. Eagleton described civilization at this point as predatory and debased.

The first response to this development was to thrust upon culture the function of a social critique. Culture must now put back the value lost upon civilization. The second response to the dissociation of culture and civilization was a backlash of colonialism. This gave rise to *Volkekultur*. Culture was no longer seen as a refinement of society as a whole, but a distinctive way of life. It was no longer reserved for the civilized colonizers but also applied to the way of life of the colonized. Culture became a descriptive rather than



an evaluative or normative term. Culture described how people lived and not how they should live. If civilization obsessed with material progress, stopped being a value term, the same fate fell upon culture as a way of life. Culture became value-free when applied to a plurality of cultures. It became the source of the identity or solidarity of a group of people. The third response to the opposition between culture and civilization is the narrowing down of the concept of culture to the refinement of the intellect, of the spirit. "If the first variant in the word 'culture' is anti-capitalist critique and the second a narrowing-cum-pluralizing of the notion to a whole way of life, the third is its gradual specialization to the art."<sup>3</sup> Culture was now reduced to artistic and intellectual pursuit. It was for people who were into music, painting, etc. But contrary to what some might think, culture as art was not value-free. "The arts may reflect fine living, but are also the measure of it. If they embody, they also evaluate."<sup>4</sup>

### **Culture in Crisis**

The crisis in culture that Eagleton speaks about has something to do with the conflict between Culture and a culture. It is a conflict between universalism and particularism. On one hand, Culture represents the values shared by men by virtue of their humanity. On the other hand, a culture, as a way of life, represents the values which define the identity of a particular group of people, the source of their solidarity. How this conflict spills over into concrete reality is best described by Eagleton when he says:

For the three forms of radical politics which have dominated the global agenda over the past few decade—revolutionary nationalism, feminism and ethnic struggle—culture as sign, image, meaning, value, identity, solidarity and self-expression is the new currency of political combat...

In Bosnia or in Belfast, culture is not just what you put in the cassette player; it is what you kill for.<sup>5</sup>

The values of a particular culture clash with the values of another, only because these values clash with the values of the universal subject. The crisis of Culture as universal lies in its failure to



resolve the conflict between particular cultures. This crisis is homogenized into what Eagleton calls "culture wars." This phrase is misleading; it brings to mind the wars between cultures. But the war he speaks of refers to culture seen from different points of view.

Our culture wars, then, are at least three-way: between culture as civility, culture as identity, and culture as commercial or postmodern. One might define these types more pithily as excellence, ethos and economics.<sup>6</sup>

Although the wars can be viewed in the level of concepts, the conceptual conflict has bearing, ultimately, on concrete reality. For human agency will always be motivated either by the pursuit of human excellence or perfection, by the preservation of one's cultural identity, or by the need to survive or the obsession to accumulate wealth. Whether for "excellence, ethos [or] economics," actions will possibly clash. The inability of Culture to mediate between these conflicts is what constitutes the crisis of Culture.

### **Philosophical Themes in the Concept of Culture**

The concept of culture is pregnant with ambiguities, some of them distinctly philosophical. First, there is the question of culture's relation to nature. Does it produce nature or is it the other way around? If culture is the tending of natural growth, does that mean nature is ontologically prior to culture. Dupré expresses the question in a different way. Is culture a cultivation of nature or is it a creation of a new nature? Whichever is the case, it is born out of man's constant dialogue with nature through labour—man acts upon nature and is acted upon in return. Culture is the means through which nature changes itself.<sup>7</sup> This continuous interplay with nature implies both regulation and spontaneity. If culture is a tending of natural growth, then it must regulate nature. However, nature has its own autonomous existence that defies total regulation. You can only do so much to nature.

There is another side to the relation between culture and nature. The self that must act on nature is a part of that nature. There is continuity between the human agent and his surrounding; and the self that shapes nature also shapes itself. Culture, therefore, is also a

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process of self-realization. Although the latter is a concept in psychology, it is also a philosophical theme. It can be Sartre's idea of the self as project, or the Greeks' exercise of vital powers along lines of excellence, or Plato's search for the good life or Aristotle's search for a life befitting a human being.

Furthermore, the dialectical relation between culture and nature involves the philosophical problem of freedom. The freedom of the self that molds nature is limited by the autonomy of nature. To a certain extent, human action is determined by the facticity of nature. The question of freedom, like the question of the good life is an ethical issue. So is the crisis in Culture, the conflict between universalism and particularism. It is actually a search for universal values in the face of the diversity cultural values.

The matter of universalism ties up with the idea of the cultural configuration of knowledge. This is an epistemological problem related to the creation of culture as a world of shared meanings. Ulin cites Husserl in this regard: "The concept of 'life-world' has become familiar to anthropologists...as the intersubjectivity of meaning, the idea that human beings collectively create and inhabit a shared world of constituted meaning and experience."<sup>8</sup>

The idea of the social construction of reality carried to an extreme, leads to cultural relativism or culturalism. It is all a matter of culture. No truth, no value is objective anymore. In ethics, this poses the threat of ethical relativism.

Are the philosophical dimensions of the concept of culture enough bases to speak of a philosophy of culture? At the risk of being anti-postmodern, I think we can find a focal point that ties up all these philosophical aspects of culture. In this connection, I want to refer to Ernst Cassirer for whom an interest in truth centers on our interest in man, in understanding man. Even our interest in the other- the world or the transcendent Other- is part of the interest in the self.

According to Cassirer, our understanding of culture must be prefaced by an understanding of human nature. Man is different from brutes not only because he is rational but mostly because of his symbolizing tendency. All animals including man have a receptor



system and an effector system. The former is that by which man receives external stimuli and the latter is that by which he acts on those stimuli. The human being is different because he has a symbolic system in addition to the receptor and effector systems. He transforms symbolically what he receives before he responds.<sup>9</sup>

All elements of culture—whether art, religion, myth, language, history, or science—reflect man's capacity for symbolic transformation. This symbolizing tendency of man serves as the creative unity of the various aspects of culture. To see this as a part of human nature helps us understand culture, just as understanding culture helps us have a better grasp of man. The dialectical relation between man and culture is not just a matter of man shaping culture and vice-versa. This is man shaping culture as he is shaped by culture, and culture shaping man as it is shaped by man. So, we move from man to culture, only to return to man in a higher level.

I think all reflections about finding the truth, or finding the right way of living, or finding the self, all in the context of culture, point back to man. Even man's encounter with God is his encounter, and no matter how this experience is colored by culture, it is part of man's cultivation of the self. Man lies at the heart of the metamorphosis of the concept of culture. And the philosophy of culture is ultimately is a philosophy of man.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams quoted in Philip Smith, *Cultural Theory: An Introduction* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (UK: Blackwell, 2000), 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

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<sup>7</sup> Louis Dupré, *Marx's Social Critique of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Ulin, *Understanding Cultures: Perspectives in Anthropology and Social Theory* (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1944), 15.

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