

MUCH ADO ABOUT CULTURE

(Draft - unfinished)

During the investigation of such immense questions as the purpose of true education or the nature of the good life, there is a term, in my observation, that comprises the convenient distillation into which many of their answers reduce, and from whose orbit most discursive attempts can never seem to escape, at times steering the conversation through its associated constellation of concepts, and at other times making direct appearance, but in either case, evading firm definition. That term is culture. By culture is meant not “way of life” as might be understood in the lay sense of the word - as in, some combination of cuisine, customs, languages, and mores that define a particular people or civilization - and a man of culture is not a man who is merely knowledgeable of mass culture and pop culture, or any particular national culture such as that of the French. Rather, culture here is meant to denote some notion of cultivation, refinement, and growth, as applied to the whole person: mind, character, soul; this distinction is important, as one might otherwise interpret a sentence such as “liberal education is an education in or towards culture” as an injunction to go travel abroad or read up on celebrity news. The Germans, clever and rigorous as they are, do possess a word not available in the English language that captures this notion of broader human development - *Bildung* - and those who are familiar with the term may immediately understand what I mean, as well as the difficulties that are to come. For the fact that culture is to be understood as “cultivation” when applied in the philosophical context is about as far as many humanists will agree. Even then, one would be justified in wondering whether

the aforementioned agreement is meaningful at all if we have simply “pushed back the envelope of definition” onto the term “cultivation”. What is actually meant by culture or cultivation - or what true culture consists in - is a question for which so many different accounts and definitions have been produced that agreement only appears to exist at a vague conceptual level, or perhaps only semantically. I have been scrupulously collecting such accounts throughout my brief wanderings through intellectual history, and in light of such brevity, am sure such a project has been undertaken by a mind and in a manner far more academic than my own, though if it exists I have yet to encounter it, and at any rate, the realization of this effort is meant to reflect to any who might be interested in matters important to me my true thoughts on these matters.

There is much difficulty with the definition of culture. We can trace part of the difficulty down to the fact that, among the various conceptions of culture, several deal heavily in conceptual terms which rely on subjective knowledge if true understanding is to be reached, and such written definitions, rich and descriptive as they may be, will only resonate insofar as one has had subjective experience of the issue. Indeed, if we are to use the definitions of culture which invoke concepts such as beauty, nobility, and greatness, then perhaps the best way to understand culture is to enter into it, that is, to become cultured, and I would not disagree if one went further to say that this is the only way to know culture. This presents a unique conundrum. The preservation of culture as such depends on an appreciation for it, which in turn generally relies on direct knowledge of it, which is not to be attained unless one enters into culture, which is unlikely if culture has not been preserved in the first place. One can see how the decline of culture more easily propagates itself than does its incline. We might note that it has been the former which captures the trendline of the most recent centuries of history. Indeed our age, having since grown considerably more bourgeois and positivistic than when those terms were first conceived to describe it, no longer has much interest in, or may not understand in the first place, the question of culture and of human formation. Such a lofty and historical, or even spiritual, question does not readily appease the needs of a mind that recognizes validity in only the tangible and definable and that requires some possibility of worldly utility in any project in which it is willing to invest effort. As one who was once

thoroughly and is still moderately the product of his time and place, I might, when speaking of a mindset of complete ignorance to the higher matters, appear under the guise of an enlightened and removed observer, but am rather merely recounting the perspectives I once inhabited and once lived, or rather, until I had the tremendous fortune to be rescued by people to whom I owe so much of who I have become (a journey which is chronicled in *Memoirs of a Careerist*). Perhaps it is due to this unique trajectory that my subsequent studies found affinity with the issue of the true nature of culture, a question after whose discernment my interest in the subject grew tenfold; indeed, what lured me into philosophy, which of its many forms appealed to me most as the effort of reflection meant to serve action (to serve life, and living), was a tradition of thought anchored upon the idea of culture and its respective merits and discontents.

I will begin with a few examples of phrases of the kind of which I earlier spoke, those which ostensibly aim to clarify the definition of culture but which do so by recruiting to its aid a set of words somewhat longer in length but not evidently any more amenable to the understanding, so much so that one might rather be inclined to dismiss them as clever maneuvers to push the burden of clarification away from “culture” and onto these other concepts. This in my view is, as an initial reaction, appropriate, though misinformed, on the basis that any explanation which is subject to simplification in the hopes of acquiring clarity tends as a general rule to have also lost some of its conceptual matter, at best perhaps retaining directional correctness or capturing a derivative effect: any tangibility is gained at the expense of accuracy. It would be naive, as well as intellectually lazy, to expect from all complex ideas the possibility of a distillation which simultaneously reduces the idea to a form gentle on the comprehension yet still encapsulating the idea in full and piercing into the emotional and conceptual core. Thus, these phrases, while they may not absolve one from having to commit the mental legwork, or offer the soothing balm to the frustration of which any eager and capable mind denied immediate apprehension will quickly become aware, indeed succeed in providing holistic and insightful accounts of culture. They are elegant and beautiful phrases, and over time, I have taken an inexplicable liking to them.

The first of these accounts offers us the tasteful notion that culture consists in “an attunement of the spirit” - a phrase which might inspire, among other impressions, the realization that that lengthy primer-disclaimer with which I preceded this section was certainly not without its reasons. For what is meant by “attunement” is not at all clear, nor even is the term “spirit”. And to specify that attunement has a German counterpart in *Stimmung* - often described as a world-disclosing mood, a total disposition through which life becomes intelligible - probably clarifies little. Yet, for those to whom the concept of culture is already intelligible, something about this account feels right; in fact it feels quite stylish and poignant, and it does not at all feel, as some may accuse, as though we have simply added more words without also adding meaning. I particularly like the synonymous description of culture as “a nobility and greatness of the soul”, whose invocation of the idea of greatness points us towards a source of clarification which can be found in historical thought, particularly in Tocqueville, and his conception of “greatness of character”, a greatness which is enfeebled under the equalizing and stifling nature of democracy. We have traveled some of the way towards understanding culture if we understand that by Tocqueville’s account of “greatness” is not meant just ambition or achievement: the distinction lies not in the degree of ambition but in the variety and largeness of the ends towards which such ambition might be directed. The bourgeois man with ambition wishes to attain the heights of the worldly sphere; the aristocratic man, the man of Aristotelian *megalopsychia*, the man of true heroic or magnanimous character, when he is ambitious, expands the scope of such ambition to spheres beyond the worldly, and has his sights set on not material security but perhaps some moral or political or human project. In his spiritual and psychological largeness, he is able to find value in beauty, excellence, and seriousness, and he makes all these higher ideals a part of his ambition. Greatness, then, is closely tied to the idea of wisdom: a sense of proportion regarding what is worth caring about.