

**CULTURE AND THE EMBODIMENT
OF CULTURAL IDEALS
AS PRELIMINARY TO A PHILOSOPHY OF CULTURE**

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Abstract. In order to lay the ground for the construction of a philosophy of culture the origin, meaning and some of the implications of the word „culture” are examined and discussed in light of a working definition of the anthropological concept of culture taken from C. Dawson. In Section II another concept of culture is examined, based on the idea of culture as human perfection. Then in Section III the concept of cultural levels is introduced, that is, the differing levels at which the central concept of a culture can be understood or embodied.

I. What do we mean by „culture”?

The concept of culture, in the sense of a human culture as „a common way of life – a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs” is relatively new in intellectual history.¹ This understanding of culture derives, at least in the English-speaking world, from Edward Burnett Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871). Tylor wrote „Culture, or civilization,...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”² But although new, it seems to me one of the

¹ This particular definition of culture is from Christopher Dawson, „The Sources of Culture Change,” in *Dynamics of World History*, (La Salle, Ill. : Sherwood Sugden, 1978) p. 4.

² 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) p. 10. Kroeber and Kluckhohn, however, trace this definition back to the German writer Gustav Klemm in the first volume of his work, *Allgemeine Culturgeschichte der Menschheit* (1843-1852, in ten volumes). They sum up his usage in this way: „It is difficult to be sure that Klemm’s concept of culture was ever fully the same as that of modern anthropologists. On the

most fruitful concepts for understanding many aspects of human life and history. To employ it more usefully in our analyses, however, we must have a clear idea of what it is and what it implies, that is, a genuine philosophy of culture. In order to contribute to the ultimate formulation of an adequate philosophy of culture, my purpose here is first to discuss the meaning and some of the implications of our definition of culture, then to discuss how what we might call a culture's fundamental ideal or pattern is concretely embodied or realized in different cultural levels. I will explain what I mean by this in section III. Let us begin our discussion by considering some parallels that may be drawn from *culture*'s original meaning as the cultivation of members of the vegetable kingdom.

The word culture comes from *agri cultura*, the cultivation of a field.³ Thus culture does something to man analogous to what we do to crops and the culture of human beings is formed on analogy with the culture or cultivation of plants or animals. If we confine ourselves for the moment to simply an analysis of the term, we can see both fruitful similarities as well as contrasts between the two concepts.

In the first place, the cultivation of human beings is sometimes taken as helping them to develop those abilities or powers which were merely implicit in them. Culture, then, in this sense is the nurturing and nourishing of man so that he develops according to his inherent pattern or nature. In this sense, then, the cultivation of a field and the cultivation of man have in common that each is concerned with creating the right conditions for its subject to make explicit what was, before, potential in some way. But in the case of a field, not everything that can be done to it is actually *cultivation* – if we throw oil or tar in our field, then very likely the plants will die, or grow up stunted or diseased. And something similar may be said about man, although the question is obviously more complex, – we can have stunted or diseased people, either in body or in soul. But we must note one important difference between mankind and the vegetable kingdom. Given a particular variety of plant, there is little important variation in the healthy adult specimen. One tree might be taller or thicker than another. But these seem to be trivial dif-

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), pp. 14, 46.

³ A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture, a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, p. 15. The earliest citation in *The Oxford English Dictionary* for the word „culture” is 1420 and it is used in the sense of cultivation of crops.

ferences. With humanity, though, at least some individual differences are of more importance. And in addition to individual differences, there are the differences we call *cultural* differences, differences caused by living within different cultures. Different cultures are different ways of bringing men to maturity and organizing how we express our humanity, especially in association with others.

The only important differences in the growth of a plant, as we saw, are whether it matures in a healthy or unhealthy fashion. What are some of the factors with regard to human growth which complicate this for mankind?

The life of a human being depends more on his *interiority*, that is, the largely hidden life of the soul, than is the case with the lives of dogs, and this is the case with dogs more than plants, plants more than minerals. Thus when we speak of healthy or unhealthy with regard to mankind, we must include more than physical development, but also the intellectual, psychological and moral. Keeping this in mind, we have in the first place, as I already noted, the possibility of unhealthy or sickly human development versus healthy development. This is a distinction that in some ways is dependent upon culture, in other ways not. I will say more on this below. Then we have other differences which are rooted in the individual, although they certainly may play out differently in different cultures. For example, those differences traditionally known as temperamental, or differences in body type. And then there are cultural differences, the chief subject of our inquiry.

Cultural differences can, it seems to me, be of three kinds from the point of view of the healthy development of mankind. First they can be indifferent, such as which language one speaks.⁴ Then they can directly affect man's

⁴ Even here we have to make a distinction. A language can be improved, for example, by enriching it with a philosophical vocabulary which enables its speakers to make and express distinctions more clearly. But it can also be degraded, making thought and the expression of thought more difficult. Also, because of complex historical accidents a language can become linked with geopolitical or geocultural imperial projects, so that extension of a language becomes a means of extending the political or economic power of some nation. Compare these words of Harold Goad, „Finally, as we watch the expansion of English into other continents, we see that our settlers have carried from their native land a peculiarly strong and practical civilization, inspired by a spirit of individual independence which gives life to systems of representative government similar to that of their homeland and also teaches to other peoples certain principles of honesty, tolerance, justice, and respect for the sanctity of law and contract which are the ideals of all English-speaking lands.... It is only after long and patient education in the English ways of life and thought that our democratic principles have been understood abroad.... Englishmen find it hard to understand that principles they regard as commonplace may seem merely naive or eccentric to the foreigner brought up with very different ideals.... But this does not occur when the audience has been educated

healthy development by inculcating cultural practices which offend against human nature in one way or another. Thirdly, they can be mixed, that is, cultural traits can be in a sense indifferent, but have results or tendencies which impact positively or negatively on man's healthy growth and reflect a better or worse approach to human development and social life. The study of culture is concerned with all these types of differences and we must keep the distinctions between them clear. Thus in evaluating the concept of culture, as well as individual cultures, we must avoid *cultural relativism* or the notion that no one culture is superior, in any respect, to any other,⁵ at the same time as we acknowledge that very many cultural differences are more or less equally healthy varieties of human social existence and can produce equally healthy human adults.

As we already saw, there is little or no significant difference in the way that a healthy plant can develop. In fact, if a plant grows at all, we can say that after a fashion it was cultivated, even if that cultivation comes about through the natural action of rain, sunlight and minerals in the soil. This is not true of the human race. Since human babies are not able to take care of themselves, they must be raised by others who will necessarily impart a culture to them. Whether in the language in which they are addressed, the songs sung to them, their food, the clothes put on them, the place they sleep, the sort of medical care they receive – in all this they begin to imbibe a culture before they can say a word.

Thus man both needs culture and is fitted for it and in fact cannot live without it.⁶ Culture is necessary for humanity because of our needs both

by the study of English literature and language.... In the modern world the English language expresses modern habits of thought more adequately than any other and therefore, if we believe in the peaceful persuasion of England and her ideals, we should try to preserve and extend to other nations, hitherto less penetrated by those ideals, her linguistic expression as the vehicle of her practical, tolerant, sporting, easy-going, concrete, and democratic point of view." Harold Goad, *Language in History* (Harmondsworth, Eng. : Penguin, 1958) pp. 237-242. But behind this happy paean to the English language lies a project of hegemonic cultural expansion.

⁵ Kroeber and Kluckhohn themselves admit the existence of some cultural „universals" and explicitly appeal to the „*consensus gentium*" in doing so. See *Culture, a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, pp. 348-354. The fundamental reason why we can evaluate and judge cultures from a moral standpoint is because their subject, man, is always the same. His physical and mental constitution is the raw material upon which cultures operate, but since that constitution has inherent principles of its own proper development, these principles must be respected by any culture, even if there is room for diversity of many kinds.

⁶ The only time a human being might be said to be without a culture, at least a *human* culture, is in the case of feral children. Ruth Benedict speaks of Carolus Linnaeus' encounter with such unfortunate beings and that he „classified them as a distinct species, *Homo ferus*,

of body and soul. The variants of food, shelter and clothing are all cultural differences, as are our means of communication such as language. As soon as one makes clothes, builds a shelter or creates utensils, one begins to make a culture, though of course these things are conditioned by matters such as the climate and the material available. But at the same time as men form a culture, that culture also begins to form them and their descendants. Since many of the potentialities of human nature are legitimately indeterminate, a culture determines them in a particular direction. Quite obviously few of us reflect much about the way we live. In fact, when we are still very young particular ways of existing and reacting are formed in us according to our own cultures. And it would seem that part of the task of a culture is to free us from the daily necessity of thinking out every choice over and over again. But since a culture does form us before we are mature enough to weigh the various cultural choices theoretically available to us, this fact tends to obscure the very existence of such choices. That is, we take many things so much for granted, that we cannot imagine acting any differently, and the possibility of thinking or behaving in any other way for most people is not a real option, unless these cultural choices are explicitly pointed out to them.⁷

If each culture is then „a common way of life – a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs,” as Dawson stated, what are the reasons for the differences among cultures? The most obvious are perhaps the physical – climate, food supply, soil, nearness to the ocean or to rivers, etc. But there are others which are more important. The culture of the Middle East, for example, once Christian and now largely Moslem, changed not because of any change in the physical factors, but because of what John Paul II indicated when he wrote,

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.” *Patterns of Culture* (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, c. 1934, 1961) pp. 85-86.

⁷ „Nations have qualities which are glaring to the foreigner, but which they themselves never suspect; they are also so familiar with things of their own as to think these universal and obvious, and thus not worth describing....” Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Nature of Contemporary England*, (New York : Sheed & Ward, 1937) p. ix.

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 existence⁸.

In the time of St. Augustine the cultures that bordered the Mediterranean Sea were fundamentally one⁹, whereas today the culture of the European shore of the Mediterranean differs from that of the African because of the difference in religion between them, just as the difference in culture between Scotland and Spain owes much to the difference in religion.

As Hilaire Belloc wrote:

There is a Protestant culture and a Catholic culture. The difference between these two is the main difference dividing one sort of European from another. The boundary between the Catholic and Protestant cultures is *the* great line of cleavage, compared with which all others are secondary.¹⁰

Thus, although interaction with physical factors is an essential ingredient in the formation of a culture, it cannot explain everything, for there is certainly more than one way of adapting to one's physical surroundings. For the *material* culture of a society, including its technology, the way its cities and highways are set out, and so on, although obviously depending to some extent on the climate, terrain, availability of building materials, and so on, is not *determined* by these factors. Thus houses built in the American southwest by the Spanish and later the Mexicans, are largely of a certain style and constructed of adobe, those built in the same places by Anglo-Americans are of a different style and, at least in most instances, of different building materials. It is clear that cultural ideals or traditions were

⁸ Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, 24. Since I will be referring several times to this passage, I will give the Latin text for it: „Mediam vero partem cuiuslibet culturae occupat hominis adfectus ante maximum omnium arcanum: Dei mysterium. Singularum namque Civitatum formae humani cultus totidem tandem rationes sunt quibus interrogationi respondeatur de sensu vitae uniuscuiusque hominis:....”. This same truth was expressed by Christopher Dawson more than once. 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. Thus the great world cultures correspond with the great world religions, and when a religion dies the civilization that it has inspired gradually decays.” *Understanding Europe* (Garden City, N.Y. : Image, 1960), p. 211.

⁹ I do not ignore the differences between the Greek and Latin cultures, but I am focusing on their similarities as both formed by the Catholic Church and Greco-Latin civilization, in fact, as constituent portions of Western culture.

¹⁰ Hilaire Belloc, „The Two Cultures of the West,” in *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, Ill.: TAN, 1992), p. 239.

more at play than the type of building material readily available.¹¹ People will generally tend to perpetuate their cultural styles in places to which they emigrate, even if part of the original reason for choosing such styles was the presence of climatic and geological factors which differ in their new place of abode.

We should note, moreover, that the theological and philosophical concepts that lie at the heart of every culture need not be actively held as living beliefs in order to continue to shape a culture.

Those doctrines may have lost their original vitality. 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.”¹²

And of course the institutions and customs of a culture, once it is formed by certain theological or quasi-theological ideas, tend to reinforce and perpetuate those half-dead notions whose origins were in a definitely held creed.

After this preliminary discussion of the meaning and fundamental characteristics of culture, before going on we must pause to consider how what I have argued in this first section relates to the notion of culture as human refinement or the pursuit of whatever explicitly *cultivates* man. Although at first it might seem unrelated to the anthropological concept which we are employing, in fact they do have a relation, and this relation might help us understand better certain features of our definition and concept of culture.

¹¹ In Willa Cather's novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she describes an Indian traveling through the desert with Bishop Latour. „When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation. He buried the embers of the fire and the remnants of food, unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand. Since this was exactly Jacinto's procedure, Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air.” Chap. 7, sect. 4. Page 233 in Alfred A. Knopf edition (1984 printing).

¹² Belloc, „The Two Cultures of the West,” p. 240.

II. The concept of culture as pursuit of perfection

An approach to culture that has roots in both the English humanistic tradition and among some Thomists looks at the question in this way: If culture *cultivates* man, then only those cultural practices and institutions which truly accomplish this aim can be called culture. In other words, whatever elevates man in the highest degree is culture. An example of this idea would be Matthew Arnold's well-known definition of culture from his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869).

... a pursuit of total perfection by means of getting to know...the best which has been thought and said in the world. ...culture is, or ought to be, the study and pursuit of perfection; and that of perfection as pursued by culture, beauty and intelligence, or, in other words, sweetness and light, are the main characters.¹³

A similar definition, cited by Augustinus Fischer-Colbrie, is that of J. Donat, „Cultura est perfectio naturae humanae socialiter possessa,” that is, Culture is the perfection of human nature socially possessed, or as Robert Brennan renders it, „the perfection of man's nature in its specifically human and social aspects.”¹⁴ Another Thomistic work that assumes a similar notion of culture is Martin Grabmann's *Die Kulturphilosophie des Hl. Thomas von Aquin* (Augsburg : Benno Filser, 1925). It is ultimately on such a notion of culture as this that we are accustomed to refer to museums, symphony orchestras and the like as cultural institutions, or to call someone cultured because he has refined manners or a knowledge and appreciation of literature or the fine arts.¹⁵

Perhaps one could simply regard these two concepts of culture as unrelated and those who are speaking of the first to be discussing a different thing from those who are concerned with the second. But I think it is fruitful to realize that there is a relation between them which will be helpful to take note of in our goal of understanding culture and classifying its various

¹³ Quoted in Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture, a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁴ Donat's definition is quoted in Augustinus Fischer-Colbrie, „Quid Sanctus Thomas de Cultura Doceat,” in *Xenia Thomistica*, edited by Sadoc Szabó (Rome: Vatican Polyglot Press, 3 vols., 1925) p. 534. Robert E. Brennan likewise quotes Donat and gives the translation which I quoted. „The Thomistic Concept of Culture,” *The Thomist*, vol. 5, January 1943, p. 113.

¹⁵ This is also akin to the concept of culture as contained in the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 53. „By the word culture in a general sense are indicated all the things by which man perfects and unfolds the manifold endowments of mind and body....”

aspects. The proponents of what I am calling the concept of culture as perfection focus on the fact that culture is meant to *cultivate* man and thus they concentrate their attention on those particular institutions or practices within a society which are specifically and especially concerned with cultivating man, especially with his spiritual or intellectual development, with the fine arts and so on. This view, however, largely ignores or forgets the fact that all aspects of a culture are engaged in forming (or deforming) man, not just its highest or most culturally conscious institutions. Thus Fischer-Colbrie makes a point of saying that no one should be excluded from the goods of human culture.¹⁶ But according to the anthropological conception of culture, it is impossible to exclude someone from participation in culture, since simply to exist within a society is to participate in and be formed by its culture, although there are various levels of such participation as we will discover.

The conception of culture as perfection or ideal looks at any particular culture and is concerned only or chiefly with those customs or institutions which form man explicitly, while our anthropological idea of culture understands that it is not just a society's highest and consciously cultural or educational institutions which shape the characteristics typical of that society, but rather everything from customs concerning food to the way houses are built.¹⁷ But these two concepts are not simply two different uses of the same word. For we can say that the concept of culture as ideal takes those customs and institutions that comprise a culture (in the anthropological sense) and selects from them those which seem most to cultivate the highest aspects of man, his intellect, his moral sense, his creation and use of the fine arts, in fact, those institutions which approach more explicitly to a culture's fundamental ideal or vision: „the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God... [the] different ways of facing the question

¹⁶ „...nullum hominem esse a bonis culturae humanae penitus excludendum,” „Quid Sanctus Thomas de Cultura Doceat,” p. 543.

¹⁷ With regard to the latter point, the Hispanic and Anglo-American civilizations have approached house design very differently. „Even the houses are mirror images of each other with everything reversed: the Latin narrow sidewalk, blank front wall, small windows with iron bars on them, a fence with bits of broken bottles fixed in concrete, all life going on in the hidden patio out of sight; and the extroverted American house with a big front lawn, picture windows, and an open backyard where the life of the owners is exposed to the common view.” Samuel Shapiro, „A Common History of the Americas?” in Samuel Shapiro, ed., *Cultural Factors in Inter-American Relations* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, c. 1968) p. 57. Yet in seeming contradiction to the house styles, life in Latin cities generally occurs more in public places, in streets, plazas, restaurants, whereas in North American cities it takes place more in the private space of the home and yard.

of the meaning of personal existence.” This conception is interested in those things which explicitly cultivate man and largely neglects those which cultivate him but in ways not as clear or immediate. If our understanding of the differences between these two concepts is correct, then the conception of culture limited to only certain cultural institutions or practices will not fully perceive how a culture functions, how the fine arts, for example, are related to the more humble practical arts, or the relationship between high culture and popular culture or the way that a society’s theological or philosophical conceptions are expressed and embodied in everyday life.

But a comparison of these two related concepts helps make explicit an important point I have already touched on. This is that the task of culture is to *cultivate* man. A healthy culture helps man develop his capacities according to an understanding of human nature rooted in both nature and revelation. The anthropological concept of culture, at least as I am using it here, does not ignore the moral aspect of human development, the fact that we can be deformed in our human growth. But it concerns itself with the ways that all cultures, whether healthy or unhealthy, do in fact shape human beings. This concept of culture is a powerful tool for understanding both individuals and societies in their development and interaction and in the many institutions and customs that they give rise to. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, culture, any culture, has various levels at which it can form man. It is not only at the highest educational levels that man can achieve a certain perfection. A healthy culture does this at all levels by means of all its customs and institutions as each embodies and articulates the central ideal of that culture.

III. How different cultural levels reflect a fundamental cultural ideal

If we must regard as too limited the conception of culture which concerns itself only with „the best which has been thought and said in the world,” still it is true, as I said above, that within any particular culture there are institutions and customs which reflect more clearly than others the culture’s central ideal, its „attitude... to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God... [its way] of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.” In this last section I will explore some of the ways in which what is „[a]t the heart of every culture” is expressed by that culture in varying institutions and customs, especially as these involve what we might call differences in

cultural level. One way to introduce this topic is by means of a passage in Plato's *Republic*. Although we need not commit ourselves to the Platonic theory of forms, nevertheless this passage seems to me helpful.

„The lovers of hearing and the lovers of sights, on the one hand,” I said, „surely delight in fair sounds and colors and shapes and all that craft makes from such things, but their thought is unable to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself.”

„That,” he said, „is certainly so.”

„Wouldn't, on the other hand, those who are able to approach the fair itself and see it by itself be rare?”

„Indeed they would.”

„Is the man who holds that there are fair things but doesn't hold that there is beauty itself and who, if someone leads him to the knowledge of it, isn't able to follow – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake? Consider it. Doesn't dreaming, whether one is asleep or awake, consist in believing a likeness of something to be not a likeness, but rather the thing itself to which it is like?”

„I, at least,” he said, „would say that a man who does that dreams.”

„And what about the man who, contrary to this, believes that there is something fair itself and is able to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it, and doesn't believe that what participates is it itself, nor that it itself is what participates – is he, in your opinion, living in a dream or is he awake?”

„He's quite awake,” he said.

„Wouldn't we be right in saying that this man's thought, because he knows, is knowledge, while the other's is opinion because he opines?”¹⁸

Plato here suggests that an ideal, in our case a cultural ideal, can be grasped in more than one way or on more than one level. On one level, the ideal itself, or something close to the ideal is understood, on another level, an outward form that both embodies but at the same time veils the ideal is what is grasped. There is no question, it seems to me, but that some such distinction does exist. Intellectuals, that is, those who by training and understanding grasp the central theological or philosophical idea at „the heart of every culture” better and can articulate and defend it, are „able to catch sight both of it and of what participates in it.” On the other hand, in varying degrees and ways, the remainder of the population is concerned with those cultural products or goods, in particular the products of the fine

¹⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 476b-d, translated by Allan Bloom. (New York: Basic Books, c. 1968) pp. 156-57.

arts, that express or incarnate the central cultural ideal, or „participate” in it, as Plato put it.¹⁹

One author has made a tripartite division of knowledge that I think corresponds well to these different levels of appropriation of cultural ideals. Despite some differences of terminology, his explanation is worth quoting at some length.

The first mode of knowledge is that of unreflective, untutored, day-to-day, spontaneous knowledge.... This kind of knowledge is similar to those immediate, simple judgments in the practical order which are often called „common sense.”... These truths are more or less the immediate results of perceptual experience.... Of these things and truths even the untaught and unreflective man is certain....

The second mode of knowledge is refined. For example, knowledge in the second mode is that which an educated person has of human nature through poetry, history, drama, and so forth; briefly, it can be designated as the product of a liberal education. This refined mode of knowledge has two essential characteristics. One is that it possesses some organization through principles. The other is that it is not merely knowledge; it is addressed to the total human personality, and for this reason it often is called „humanistic knowledge.”... Because humanistic knowledge usually develops out of a contact or interaction with culture, it is more complete than spontaneous knowledge, for it draws on the contributions of a social group....

Humanistic or refined knowledge...does have some organization, but its organizational principles are either understood in the spontaneous mode or in terms of concrete imagery, its structure tends toward the rhetorical, and its deepest understanding tends toward metaphor or myth....

¹⁹ A more contemporary statement of what seems to me essentially the same idea is made by Ernest van den Haag in these words. „Such feelings as love; such experiences as wit, beauty or moral obligation; or styles of congress, housing and living – all, however degenerate they may become, are brought into existence and elaborated by artists and intellectuals. Without them, life is formless. With them, there is, at least, a paradigm. The most common of human experiences and the most trite still depend on artists and intellectuals to become fully conscious and articulate. Even the silliest entertainer and his public are part of, or are parasites of, a long line of creators of cultural expression – artists, philosophers, writers, composers, et cetera. For as Bernard Berenson suggested, ‘Popular art is always a derivation from professional individual art.’ Just as the technician depends on pure scientists he may never have heard of, so civilized nations in general depend on the creators of cultural expression – intellectuals and artists.” „Reflections on Mass Culture,” *The American Scholar*, vol. 29, no. 2, spring 1960, in William W. Watt, editor, *A Comparative Reader for College English* (New York : Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961) p. 29.

[There is] a third mode of knowledge, the scientific. This mode of knowledge is relatively complete and has freed itself from the subtler as well as the grosser errors of everyday knowledge. Moreover, it is organized by intrinsic principles that are proper to its subject, and therefore it can really demonstrate its conclusions. As a further consequence, it is at least to some extent a certain knowledge.²⁰

It is important to note, moreover, that contrary to what most modern thought would assume, the paradigm of this third type of knowledge is not one of the modern natural sciences, but philosophy, especially metaphysics.

We are concerned with culture, not with knowledge *per se*. So we might say that the possessor of spontaneous, largely unreflective knowledge, participates in and understands a culture's ideal in an unorganized and often outward manner. However, this way of participating in a culture, or even of obtaining knowledge, is not simply the „immediate result of perceptual experience,“ but often includes popular proverbs and stories which to some extent are examples of generalized knowledge.

We can also compare the other two types of knowledge to cultural understanding or participation. The second shares in a culture's more explicit statements about itself and its ideals, and the third does so in the highest degree. Of particular interest is the ability of the third type of cultural understanding to „demonstrate its conclusions,“ that is, to give a justification for a particular culture's way „of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.“

It is fairly easy to perceive these differences in levels of cultural perception or understanding when we are looking at explicitly intellectual matters, such as philosophy. It becomes more complicated, I think, when we turn our attention to the fine arts, to literature, music, painting and so on. Here we encounter our familiar distinction between high and low, or highbrow and lowbrow. Is this distinction simply an example of the different levels of cultural participation that Plato discusses? I think the answer is complex.

In his essay, „High and Low Brows,“ C. S. Lewis, although confining himself only to literature, fails to find any intrinsic criterion which makes a book either high or lowbrow.²¹ And there is certainly some truth to this. What was seen as low culture in one age, for example certain kinds of folk art or music, can easily become high culture in another age or place. Therefore, to some extent, I think we can say that high culture is simply

²⁰ George P. Klubertanz, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Being* (New York : Appleton-Century-Crofts, c. 1955) pp. 1-3.

²¹ C. S. Lewis, „High and Low Brows“ in *Selected Literary Essays* (Cambridge University Press, 1969).

that culture associated with certain sociological elements in a society, with (in the past especially) royal courts and universities, or broadly speaking, with the more highly educated classes. Certainly we should not assume any judgment of worth about cultural products which are considered highbrow; some of what would normally be called high culture has in fact no value, as for example the electronic music of a John Cage or many other forms of modern art and music. And indeed, it is only within high culture that nonsense could pass itself off for products of the fine arts.

But I think that nonetheless, at least sometimes there are intrinsic criteria which differentiate between high and lowbrow cultural products. Herbert Gans, for example, notes a few of the differing characteristics of cultural products of varying levels.

Upper-middle fiction emphasizes plot more than mood and character development, although heroes and heroines are more important than in high culture....

The aesthetics of lower-middle culture emphasize substance; form must serve to make substance more intelligible or gratifying. Dramatic materials express and reinforce the culture's own ideas and feelings, and although some questioning is permitted, doubts must usually be resolved at the conclusion of the drama....

The aesthetic standards of low culture stress substance, form being totally subservient, and there is no explicit concern with abstract ideas or even with fictional forms of contemporary social problems and issues.... Low culture also emphasizes the morality play, but it limits itself primarily to familial and individual problems and to values which apply to such problems; low culture content thus depicts how traditional working-class values win out over the temptation to give in to conflicting impulses and behavior patterns.²²

Although this analysis does not pretend to describe anything wider than American culture at one particular period, still I think that it is possible to generalize to some extent about the different ways in which different cultural levels would approach imaginative literature or other fine arts, and that Gans' description does have some wider applicability.

But there is one very important distinction which affects any discussion of this topic: this is the difference between *mass* culture and *popular* culture.²³ What is this difference? Popular culture historically has been the

²² Herbert J. Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York : Basic Books, c. 1974) pp. 82, 85, 90.

²³ I am departing from normal usage when I make a distinction between these two terms, for usually when other writers speak of popular culture they mean mass culture. But the

culture of those with little access to education, usually distant from the centers of political power, and was generally a culture rooted in place, so that it very often varied by region or even from village to village or valley to valley. Its canons of taste, both of creation and performance, were traditional, and although it certainly changed over time, usually this change was slow. Many of its cultural creations are of the highest quality.

Of course, there are intermediate types of such culture, the culture of provincial towns, for example, in traditional ages, partaking both of some high cultural forms and some taken from the pure folk culture of the countryside. Nor was popular culture entirely cut off from high culture. Each influenced the other, and this mutual influence was important for the health of both, the high culture helping to prevent popular culture from running to excesses, and the popular culture helping to prevent high culture from becoming too narrow or eccentric.¹

Mass culture, on the other hand, is produced within industrial civilizations and its cultural creations are marketed for a profit, and have no genuine reference to any tradition.² Although sometimes mass cultural products consist in imitations of high or popular cultural creations, more often they are of little cultural depth or worth. Though very often popular cultural products of past ages, as I mentioned above, have been adopted by high culture, I cannot imagine the same thing happening to many mass cultural products.

Therefore while it might not be possible to state with a great degree of precision what differences there are in the fine arts among different levels of cultural participation or expression, there probably are some which are more or less intrinsic and apply to more than one place or period, and thus reflect Plato's distinction between those things which „catch sight“ of the „fair itself“ and those which look only at what participates in the fair.

difference seems to me so important as to justify such a departure. Some people would call popular culture folk culture, and that term is generally acceptable. But still I think it is an error to continue to refer to what is really mass culture as popular culture, for these two things are not the same.

¹ That popular culture has had considerable influence on high culture is well-known, but the contrary is also true. „We also know little about the age of the various styles of folk music in Europe. Still, we are sure that for centuries there has been a close relationship between the art music of the continent and its folk music....“ and „The ballad was developed in Europe in the Middle Ages – first, presumably, by song composers of city and court – and evidently passed into oral tradition and the repertoires of folk cultures thereafter.“ Bruno Nettl, *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2d ed., 1973), pp. 38 and 52.

² Mass culture can also be the product of a totalitarian government and have an explicitly political rather than a commercial aim.

One more point needs to be discussed before we conclude this section. This is the way in which cultural formation or perfection occurs at different levels of culture. Earlier I wrote, „It is not only at the highest educational levels that man can achieve a certain perfection.” If we accept, as I suppose most people will, that individuals differ in intellectual as well as physical strength and ability, then we can admit with Plato that there are „lovers of hearing and...lovers of sights” as well as those who are able „to see and delight in the nature of the fair itself.” Both can be perfected by a culture, but according to their capacity for perfection. This is not, of course, moral or spiritual perfection, for here the intellectual seems to have no advantage, either in theory or in fact. Nor is it even cultural perfection *in every respect*, for there is a sense in which an uneducated man can embody the ideal of a culture as successfully as an intellectual: „it is important to remember that we should not consider the upper levels as possessing *more* culture than the lower, but as representing a more conscious culture...”³ The perfection of the human intellect by culture is a real and very important good, and for the health of a culture it is necessary that this perfection be explicitly sought. But if we can rightly say that not all men are capable of this kind of perfection in the highest degree, it is still the case that „lovers of hearing and... lovers of sights” can both perfect themselves to the fullest extent of their capacity and help to perfect a society also. In fact, one of the ways a culture shows itself as healthy is that it does not simply offer the products of mass culture as the only alternative to high culture, but allows and fosters a flourishing of popular culture which can perfect each and every man at every level of culture.

Concluding remarks

The anthropological concept and definition of culture seems to me to be useful in understanding human conduct, both individual and social, both in the present and past, and therefore any effort to make that definition more exact should be helpful toward the final goal of a more or less adequate philosophy of culture. Some topics which in my opinion need further examination include the relationship between human nature and cultural institutions, that is, how attitudes which are essentially interior to man become embodied in external institutions, the ways in which the fine arts attempt

³ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, c. 1977), p. 121.

to express what is at the heart of a culture, the interrelationship of cultural institutions or customs, for example, how they reinforce the culture's central ideal or whether, on the other hand, they can be imperfectly adapted or accommodated to that ideal, the different types of cultural formation appropriate for different classes of people, and the interaction of different cultures, how they influence and borrow from one another, how they adopt and adapt institutions or practices from each other, and what that means for a culture's central ideal, its „attitude...to the...mystery of God." These questions obviously have many implications for the Church's ongoing concern for „inculturation," not only with regard to the liturgy, but for Catholic intellectual and spiritual life as a whole. Philosophers and theologians of culture must depend on history to find examples of what was done in the past, both as illustrations and to know what *can* be done, that is, how in fact cultures work and interact. All this, it seems to me, can make a valuable and interesting contribution not only to philosophy but to the Church's concrete project of evangelization, and to the living of the Christian life among all cultures and peoples of this world.

Addendum: Is there a useful distinction between culture and civilization?

Before I finish I wish to add a short comment on the distinction sometimes made between the terms *culture* and *civilization*. We should remember that Tylor himself did not distinguish between them, for he wrote „Culture, or civilization,...is that complex whole" etc. But although

to many students writing in English...[t]he concepts attached to the two words in usage have been close enough to make choice between them to a large extent a matter of preferential taste...[i]n German, however, three separate attempts have been made to *contrast* culture and civilization.⁴

Two of these attempted distinctions are based on the difference between „technological-economic activities" and „spiritual ennoblement or enriching." But in fact these two attempts use the terms in exactly an opposite fashion.⁵ So I would suggest that while we should be aware of this possible distinction, T.S. Eliot's comment on this point shows us a better way to proceed:

⁴ Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *Culture, a Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, p. 288.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 288-89.

Its [*sc.* culture's] part is of course doubled by the word *civilisation*. I have made no attempt in this essay to determine the frontier between the meanings of these two words: for I came to the conclusion that any such attempt could only produce an artificial distinction, peculiar to the book, which the reader would have difficulty in retaining; and which, after closing the book, he would abandon with a sense of relief. We do use one word, frequently enough, in a context where the other would do as well; there are other contexts where one word obviously fits and the other does not; and I do not think that this need cause embarrassment.⁶

Though it might seem odd to speak of primitive *civilization*, since civilization seems to connote a more materially developed way of life, still I think that Eliot (not to mention Tylor) is correct and that it is well not to press any distinction between these two words. Most of the time either will do; culture does seem the broader of the two. If it is ever useful to distinguish between them, then it would seem that *civilization* might usefully be employed in referring to those cultures which have achieved a higher material level. But I am not convinced that this distinction helps us much in our investigations.

⁶ *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture*, p. 85.

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