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The Modern Ideal of Culture

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THE MODERN IDEAL OF CULTURE

A definition of modern culture as something realised and actual ought not to be too elusive, especially as it can be spoken of in concrete terms. It is possible to point to certain men and say, "There are cultivated men; the qualities they possess evidently go to make up culture." By way of approach, suppose we recall Matthew Arnold's sentence: "Notwithstanding the mighty results of the Pilgrim Fathers' voyage, they and their standard of perfection are rightly judged when we figure to ourselves Shakespeare or Virgil—souls in whom sweetness and light, and all that in human nature is most humane, were eminent—accompanying them on their voyage, and think what intolerable company Shakespeare and Virgil would have found them!"

Now, if Shakespeare and Virgil would have found the Pilgrim Fathers intolerable—and I dare say they might have so found them—would it not be expedient in illustration of modern culture to take those poets out of that boat and put other men there who would have loved Shakespeare and Virgil and who would not have found the Pilgrim Fathers intolerable? Here is a paragraph laden with such men:

"Apt scholars find great teachers. Early in life Mr. Wilson chose his with the confidence of natural kinship. All alike were scholars and all men of affairs—a noble roster to which he refers with esteem and gratitude. There were John Stuart Mill who had hammered out his theories in the House of Commons; Morley, famous in statecraft, and prince of biographers in our time; De Tocqueville, who learned his wisdom among men; the worldly-wise authors of *The Federalist*; the inimitable Bagehot, who drew his knowledge from the counting-house and the working machine of the British Constitution; and an 'arrow's flight beyond them all' Burke, who ploughed his philosophy with experience and reaped experience from his philosophy. A different school is theirs from the closet theories of Montesquieu, of Spencer, of Rousseau, and of Hume, differing by half a world; and at this school where theory is squared to the unbending practices of men, Mr. Wilson has been a life student."

Mill, Morley, De Tocqueville, Bagehot—it is such men as these that should be accredited with sufficient breadth of sympathy to appreciate at once Shakespeare, Virgil, and the Pilgrim Fathers, and, at a venture, a few other people and things besides.

These are typical men of modern culture. There might be added a scientist, von Humboldt, most versatile of men; or a man of letters, Sir Leslie Stephen, a prince of the short biography; or a poet, even Milton, say, "an arrow's flight beyond them all." But in choosing men from these various activities, it is precisely the field of work that I should *not* care to emphasise—rather, the type of mind. And I have already indicated one quality that goes to make up this type—breadth of sympathy. That and one other quality, intellectual energy, form the equipment of the modern man of culture. If, then, we insist that men of culture nowadays possess this equipment, best, of course, in a superlative degree, like Mill, Morley, Bagehot, Stephen, I think we shall succeed in making the word *culture* take on a definiteness of meaning. So a poet, a man of religion, a scientist, an artist, or a statesman may or may not be a man of culture; there are plenty of chances of his making definite contributions to human welfare and at the same time remaining narrow-minded. But it is the part of a cultivated man in modern times to appreciate poetry, religion, science, art, and statecraft, or at least to have a profound and abiding sympathy with all these activities, and at the same time be an intellectual and spiritual leader.

But this realised or actual culture, as I have called it, is based, naturally, upon ideal conceptions which like the ideal conceptions of religion remain as visions, unattainable, never to be arrived at, and yet to be striven toward as a worthy goal. It is of this ideal conception I wish now to speak and, if I may, to note some changes that have, in fairly modern times, come over it.

The western world, our world, derives avowedly a large share of its conception of culture from the Greeks. Whether or not this people had the word culture does not much matter, so intense and so apparently instinctive was their practice of the thing itself. Culture, by almost any definition, was part and parcel of their theory of right living. I wish to touch briefly and of course superficially upon their theory, but in doing so shall not hesitate to avail myself of criticisms of it, in order to indicate how a modern culture cannot possibly be a sheer imitation of an older one. Here is perhaps the worst that can be said of the Greeks, a leaf from the pen of George Gissing:

"It is idle to talk to us of 'The Greeks.' The people we mean when so naming them were a few little communities, living under very peculiar conditions, and endowed by Nature with most exceptional characteristics. The

sporadic civilisation which we are too much in the habit of regarding as if it had been no less stable than brilliant was a succession of the briefest splendours, gleaming here and there from the coasts of the Ægean to those of the Western Mediterranean. Our heritage of Greek literature and art is priceless; the example of Greek life possesses for us not the slightest value. The Greeks had nothing alien to study—not even a foreign or a dead language. They read hardly at all, preferring to listen. They were a slave-holding people, much given to social amusement, and hardly knowing what we call industry. Their ignorance was vast, their wisdom a grace of the gods. Together with their fair intelligence, they had grave moral weaknesses. If we could see and speak with an average Athenian of the Periclean age, he would cause no little disappointment—there would be so much more of the barbarian in him,¹ and at the same time of the decadent, than we anticipated. More than possibly, even his physique would be a disillusion. Leave him in that old world, which is precious to the imagination of a few, but to the business and bosoms of the modern multitude irrelevant as Memphis or Babylon."

Such a brilliant page is, perhaps, a fair offset to the conventional encomiums we are accustomed to hear of the Athenian, encomiums which become possibly a bit wearisome, conventional, and extravagant. And yet I think we had better let an Athenian himself speak; here are the final words of that proud oration which Thucydides put into the mouth of Pericles:

"To sum up, I say that Athens is the school of Hellas, and that the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace. This is no passing and idle word, but truth and fact; and the assertion is verified by the position to which these qualities have raised the state. For in the hour of trial Athens alone among her contemporaries is superior to the report of her. No enemy who comes against her is indignant at the reverses which he sustains at the hands of such a city; no subject complains that his masters are unworthy of him. And we shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages; we shall not need the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist, whose poetry may please for the moment, although his representation of the facts will not bear the light of day. For we have compelled every land, every sea, to open a path for our valour, and have everywhere planted eternal 'memorials of our friendship and of our enmity."

These words spring from a cultivated mind; they express, to be sure, by no means the most profound and enduring conception of culture we get from the Greeks, any more than the speaker was the most perfect embodiment of that conception. He is, however, spokesman of something which he considers ideal and

¹ But compare Matthew Arnold's essay, *The Modern Element*.

fine, and which evidently did not blossom forth overnight. The Greek citizen in the age of Pericles was at once a soldier and a politician; body and mind alike were at his country's service; and his whole ideal of conduct was inextricably bound up with his intimate and personal participation in public affairs. The Greek ideal for the individual life included the perfection of the body; beauty no less than goodness was the object of their quest, and they believed that the one implied the other. But since the perfection of the body required the co-operation of external aids, they made these also essential to their ideal. Not merely virtue of the soul, not merely health and beauty of the body, but noble birth, sufficient wealth, and a good name among men were included in their conception of the desirable life. Harmony, in a word, was the end they pursued, harmony of the soul with the body and of the body with its environment. The same ideal of harmony dominates the Greek view of the relation of the individual to the state. The perfect individual was the individual in the state; the faculties essential to his excellence had there alone their opportunity of development; the qualities defined as virtues had there alone their significance; and it was only in so far as he was a citizen that a Greek was properly a man at all.

Such was the Greek view of life, and such the Greek view of culture. To the Athenian life and culture were synonymous terms. In criticism of this conception may be quoted a sentence or two from Lowes Dickinson:

"With the Greek civilisation beauty perished from the world. Never again has it been possible for man to believe that harmony is in fact the truth of all existence. The intellect and the moral sense have developed imperative claims which can be satisfied by no experience known to man. And as a consequence of this, the goal of desire which the Greeks could place in the present, has been transferred, for us, to a future infinitely remote, which nevertheless is conceived as attainable. Dissatisfaction with the world in which we live, and determination to realise one that shall be better, are the prevailing characteristics of the modern spirit."

So, if a group of men to-day were to take over bodily the Greek ideal of culture, they would find themselves isolated from the life about them. But here two questions rise in mind: in our modern definitions of culture, have we not been ready to discard much that we might have retained from the Greek ideal? secondly, in defining modern culture, must we not concede frankly that it is an isolated thing? My answer to both of these questions

will be implied in much that I say later; but I might observe now that of course culture is no longer synonymous with life. It is not even open to all free citizens. There should be in it nothing opposed to life, but there must be in it much that all lives cannot attain. We must, then, make the word *culture* mean something definite, something isolated, if you like, if we propose to employ the word at all. To be sure, since Matthew Arnold's day, no one thinks of not employing it.

There are many reasons why Matthew Arnold should be called the Prophet of Culture. That, indeed, is what he aimed to be; his whole life was directed toward an understanding of the cultural ideal. To this end his environment was a most happy one. His father was a consummate schoolmaster, the head of an ideal home; Arnold associated constantly with the best sort of people—as favoured a class, I imagine, as the group of Athenians about Pericles. He was graduated with honours from the most scholarly college in Oxford; he became a fellow in that university and later professor of poetry. For thirty-five years he was inspector of schools. Everything he wrote savours of distinction, whether it be poetry, on education, on literature, on religion, or on politics. He was something of a linguist, an earnest student of philosophy and of history, though he was neither a philosopher nor a historian in the restricted meaning of these terms. Of science he knew next to nothing and with its claims he had little sympathy. His attitude on contemporary religious and political movements was that of ironical conservatism.

I am in no position to attempt a sketch of Arnold's theory of culture; indeed, at the risk of seeming shallow, I propose just now to attack it at what appears to be its most vulnerable point, where perhaps he made his finest effort to popularise it—his book *Culture and Anarchy* and especially that notable chapter entitled "Sweetness and Light." My attack, of course, will not be single-handed. I quote for a moment from Henry Sidgwick's admirable essay, *The Prophet of Culture*:

"When we speak of culture and religion in common conversation, we sometimes refer to an ideal state of things, and sometimes to an actual. But if we are appraising, weighing, as it were, these two, one with the other, it is necessary to know whether it is the ideal or the actual that we are weighing. When I say ideal, I do not mean something that is not realised at all by individuals at present, but something not realised sufficiently to be much called to mind by the term denoting the general social fact. I think it clear that

Mr. Arnold, when he speaks of culture, is speaking sometimes of an ideal, sometimes of an actual culture, and does not always know which."

Professor Sidgwick proceeds to substantiate this general stricture through a citation. For instance, Arnold describes culture in one page as "a study of perfection, moving by the force not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but of the moral and social passion for doing good." But in another page we find that this passion for doing good acts only in fine weather. "It needs," as Arnold affirms, "times of faith and ardour to flourish in." It is not evidently a spring and source of faith and ardour. Culture "believes" in making reason and the will of God prevail, but it must be under very favourable circumstances. "This," as Sidgwick says, "is rather a languid form of the passion of doing good; and we feel that we have passed from the ideal culture, towards which Mr. Arnold aspires, to the actual culture in which he lives and moves."

Ideally it is Arnold's wish that culture, taking ever wider and wider sweeps, shall carry the whole race, the whole universe harmoniously toward perfection. The Greek word *eúputa* expresses to him this harmonious excellence. "The immense spiritual significance of the Greeks is due," he says, "to their having been inspired with this central and happy idea of the essential character of human perfection." "Greece did not err in having the idea of beauty, harmony, and complete human perfection so present and paramount. It is impossible to have this idea too present and paramount; only, the moral fibre must be braced too." How to brace the moral fibre, Arnold suggests, inadvertently perhaps, when he says that culture must "borrow a devout energy" from religion; but devout energy, as Dr. Newman somewhere points out, is not to be borrowed. If culture, then, is to lack enthusiasm or if its devotees are to have no sympathy with men of action, it is bound to degenerate into dilettanteism. The impulse toward perfection will remain, as it often does remain, a self-regarding desire for exquisite states of thought and feeling.

This criticism of Arnold at his worst, I am pressing thus frankly because the chapter "Sweetness and Light" has been and is still, I doubt not, something of a stumbling-block in the way of a just interpretation of the modern cultural ideal. Arnold's dilemma, I should say, is something like this. He is in the act of bringing over to modern life the highest spiritual qualities of

Greek civilisation and is on the point of saying, "Accept these; these are culture," when, lo! there rises before him the apparition of Christianity. "To a world stricken with moral enervation," he says, in a later chapter, "Christianity offered its spectacle of an inspired self-sacrifice." The dilemma is clear, is it not? Self-development, self-sacrifice. Here, to change the figure, are two roads, one leading apparently to religion, the other to culture. "The lesson must perforce be learned," Arnold concludes in this later chapter, "the lesson must perforce be learned that the human spirit is wider than the most priceless of the forces which bear it onward, and that to the whole development of man Hebraism itself is, like Hellenism, but a contribution." Suppose we should substitute for Hebraism another word, a word which Arnold possibly avoids—Christianity. Is Christianity but a contribution to the human spirit? Is it not rather the most significant fact in modern life? Or, if the word Christianity be troublesome, suppose the question stand, Is not the truth of self-sacrifice part of the very texture of modern life? If it is, and I assume your answer, then, if culture is also to hold a place in modern life, it must fall under life's conditions, one of them being self-sacrifice.

I have no intention of pursuing a problem in ethics. I will, however, offer an illustration. A man is born in Florence, say, Florence of the late thirteenth century when she is alert to become the most cultured, the most Greek of all Italian cities, of all European cities. Giotto is there; and poetry and art and philosophy are about to spring into new birth. This man is good to look upon; he delights in bodily exercise. He is of excellent family and of sufficient wealth. He is notable among the brilliant intellects there and is passionately fond of his city. Pericles could have pointed to such a man, and exclaimed, "Behold my ideal citizen!"

But misfortunes come upon this man. His party loses control and he is banished from his city. For many years he wanders from place to place, climbing back stairs and eating the bread of sorrow. As a young man, he had written; and now he keeps on writing, growing lean over his verses. He gives to the world a great poem, rare in expression, in philosophy, in observation. Yet Pericles could not have accepted that poem. It would have bewildered him; it is too instinct with a culture alien to his own.

There is an antagonism which most of us endeavour in one

way or another to reconcile, but which Matthew Arnold wrote upon with lack of sympathy and with possibly some little Pharisaeism, some little holding of the nostrils. Concerning these antagonisms, I return for a moment to Sidgwick:

"The religious man tells himself," he says, "that in obeying the instinct of self-sacrifice he has chosen true culture, and the man of culture tells himself that by seeking self-development he is really taking the best course to 'make reason and the will of God prevail.' But I do not think either is quite convinced. I think each dimly feels that it is necessary for the world that the other line of life should be chosen by some, and each and all look forward with yearning to a time when circumstances shall have become kinder and more pliable to our desires, and when the complex impulses of humanity that we share shall have been chastened and purified into something more easy to harmonise."

If, then, I were to give a trial explanation of what the modern cultural ideal is, I should say that outwardly its distinctive features are Greek; it involves an exercise, fine and complete, of all the powers of body, soul, and mind. But this outward ideal, if I may call it so, has on its road to us been fused and transformed into something tremendously inward, the meaning and end of which we cannot fully apprehend. Greek culture is static—it is a flower; it springs into bloom and then fades. Modern culture is an unceasing growth; its bloom is always to be, but never is.

After Tolstoy, in his book *What is Art?* has told us that the highest mission of art is to usher in the reign of brotherly love, that insatiable soul adds this word: "Perhaps some day science will reveal to art an ideal still more exalted than that of brotherly love, and art will proceed to realise it." With this vision of science and art still biding their time, forever unappeased, I leave the discussion of modern culture as an ideal and return, in closing, to those leaders who I said were representatives of modern cultural attainment.

Their interests were various. Of Bagehot it is said he gave to literature energies which might have gained him a large fortune in business or a great position in the political world. His favourite studies in college were poetry, mathematics, and history. Mill devoted himself to chemistry, botany, and advanced mathematics; he was fond of music and was himself a fair pianist. He no longer called the desert of Bentham peace when he fell under the influence of Wordsworth. Stephen is the man who never wrote below his best. Von Humboldt used to rail at bigotry

without religion, philosophy without common sense, æstheticism without culture. His service to the state, he said, was an apprenticeship to his service of science. He might have put it the other way, for I presume his service to science made him a better servant of the state, just as Morley's service to literature makes him a better statesman and his service to the state makes him a finer critic. "There is a view of culture" says Arnold, "in which all the love of our neighbours, the impulses toward action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it—motives eminently such as are called social—come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part." Such motives are dominant in the men I have named; they explain their breadth of sympathy and their restless self-forgetful inquiry, as contrasted with the selective, discriminative principle of the older ideal.

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