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Abstract:

The relation of culture to doctrine, of culture to the various ways of living, is one that goes back to the classical considerations of work, slavery, leisure, contemplation and action. On the philosophic side, the question of whether there is a universal culture or only a series of relative ones has fueled constant reflection and controversy. This essay seeks to defend the notion of a universal culture, itself open both to mind and revelation. But it does not deny that the various cultures embody universal ideas in different ways. The argument does, however, insist that we recognize that no culture is philosophically or religiously neutral, especially those that claim to be “pure” cultures. This means that it is not possible to avoid an examination of any culture on the basis of its truth, even though the same truth can be expressed in different ways.

CULTURE IS NEVER NEUTRAL

“Ut ager quamvis fertilis sine cultura fructuosus esse non potest, sic sine doctrina animus. (Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, II, 4). Just as a field, even if it is fertile, cannot bear fruit, without cultivation, so also a spirit without culture.”

– John Paul II, To the Polish University of Opole.¹

“What then are the conditions which made a fruitful cooperation between religion and culture possible? On the one hand, the assertion of the absolute transcendent spiritual claims of religion must not be interpreted as a denial of the limited, historically conditioned and temporal values of culture, and on the other the forms of a particular culture, even when they are inspired or consecrated by a religious ideal, must not be regarded as possessing universal religious validity.”

– Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*.²

“Aristotle himself can provide the clue to the reason for such inconclusiveness (of a new culture over a former one) when he points out that we must not expect to reach determinate

¹John Paul II, “For the Anniversary of the Polish University of Opole,” February 17, 2004, *L’Osservatore Romano*, English, March 3, 2004, 2.

²Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture*, The Gifford Lectures, 1947 (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 208-209.

conclusions from subordinate sciences, in which category we can place analyses of culture, when the indeterminacy of the subject-matter does not permit it. Of course, it could be rightly said that, in the case of the culture of Jesus's human nature, which was possessed by Him who was the second divine Person of the Trinity ... there was a culture completely uncontaminated with alien elements."

– E. B. F. Midgley, Letter, April 20, 2004.³

I.

We have become familiar with terms such as "multi-culturalism," "cultural relativism," "aristocratic culture," "inculturation," "democratic culture," "mass culture," "cultural diversity," or even "criminal culture," "Latino culture," and "corporate culture." On the surface, though not philosophically indifferent in terms of what they presuppose, such words and phrases strive to appreciate the variety of human ways, from eating to thinking, from worshiping to selling merchandise, from speaking English to speaking Mandarin, let alone Aramaic or Sanscrit or Arabic.

Moreover, the anthropological notion of ancient and modern cultures endeavors primarily to describe, almost as artifacts, how a given group or race of people thought about things or did things, from begetting to burying, from stealing to singing. No attempt is made, in principle, to judge whether this way of life was any more valid than some other equally peculiar way of life. Indeed, we find a scientific tendency or effort, analogous to concern with animal and plant species, to preserve a "cultured" way of life for its own sake, as if it were simply a prized, static object of scientific study. This "specimen" would be threatened by any radical change in its cultural ways or mores. The objects of "culture" are thus locked into their own closed order precisely because a universal standard is, in principle, rejected. Indeed, modern cultural "science" is ironically often used to prevent any change. We want aborigines to remain aborigines so that we can study them.

³Letter of E. B. F. Midgley to James V. Schall, S. J., dated April 20, 2004, Aberdeen, Scotland.

Any thought of “improvement” is rejected as that implies a standard by which we know what “better” might mean.

In all of these “culture” phrases, what is operative behind them is usually the notion of “cultural neutrality.” That is, no “high culture,” no “right” culture, no “universal” culture, can be conceived or admitted. A “high culture” would put limits on cultural diversity and question the prevailing philosophy defending its primacy. Any attempt to distinguish between Jew and Gentile, barbarian and Greek, primitive and modern, on the basis of better and worse, even of good and better, goes counter to the thesis that there is no high culture in which certain distinctions are fundamental to the understanding of human good itself in whatever form it might appear.

From the “neutral” point of view, when we compare cultures, it looks as if we are trying to “impose,” as they say, one set of dubious values on another set of equally dubious values. Both are right, it is claimed, simply because they exist, whatever way it be. The word “impose” has taken the place of “persuade,” since in the relativist world, no basis for reasonable change or studied comparison exists. The presumption is that no one can show or demonstrate the superiority or preferability of one thing to another. The moral principle that follows from this position is that all must be preserved in their pristine status. Nothing in one culture is “better” than that in another, so why change? The universal standard is that there is no universal standard, the great cultural contradiction. Needless to say, this position makes all “missionary” endeavor that seeks to “change” souls to be at least problematic, if not forbidden on cultural grounds.

II.

The word “value” itself, moreover, is a modern philosophical word deliberately and methodologically deprived of any substantially grounded content. Following Max Weber, a “value”

means pretty much what we want it to mean. Will is its only foundation. And will as will is empty of content. A “value,” as they say, has the status of an “option.” We cannot, in this view, establish or make firm first things or first principles. We can only “opt” for the ones we “like.” No “reason” can be given fully to explain any option. Our epistemology does not allow us to know real things or their order. The “value” of value, as a theory, is that it has *no* value, no established content.

This “openness” to all positions is said to prevent “fanaticism,” the worst of evils in a culturally neutral world, since it implies some dogged suspicion of a standard. From this perspective, “fanaticism” is generally said to be any claim that there is an objective truth in things, including human and divine things. We can therefore praise each other’s “values” without going to any effort to determine whether they are worthy of praise according to some standard that can undergird all meaning. Thus, more than meets the eye can be detected in the passionate opposition to “fanaticism” in the modern world. The problem is not so much with what some “extremists” hold, but that anything at all can be held as true. The problem with “fanaticism” today is, in fact, largely a problem with truth. And we cannot speak of truth as that implies a standard. The alternative is simply to deny that any truth, however held, is possible. This is what much of the worries about “fanaticism” are really about, the fear that truth is possible with an intrinsic claim for affirmation.

Such views about culture and values, no doubt, are themselves philosophic propositions that need careful testing. One origin of “value neutrality” is Rousseau whose operative “general will” is deliberately designed to avoid any confrontation with some overarching standard. Leo Strauss put the problem correctly: “The general will, the will immanent in societies of a certain kind, replaces the transcendent natural right.... The difficulty into which Rousseau leads us lies deeper. If the

ultimate criterion of justice becomes the general will, i.e., the will of a free society, cannibalism is as just as its opposite. Every institution hallowed by a folk-mind has to be regarded as sacred.”⁴ Today, however, it is not merely “folk-minds” that practice “cannibalism” with regard to the “value” of human life. Such practices, in their recent, more “sophisticated” forms, are much more likely to be advanced by scientists and intellectuals than by contemporary head-hunters, if there be such.

Indeed, since human life itself, in this milieu, is only another “value” – and a “value” is what we say it is – then, by the principle of “value neutrality,” we have no standard to judge whether cannibalism, abortion, human experimentation or anything else is right or wrong if the “general will” approves or promotes it. Whatever the courts or legislature says “becomes” the law, even partial-birth abortion, something rather worse than even cannibalism. The “transcendent natural right” is replaced by the volatile “general will.” By this criterion, a society that practices cannibalism, for food or valor, is morally a better society than one that practices wide-spread abortion or euthanasia for convenience. The modern and the primitive in this sense only differ because of their tastes – the cannibal uses the human body for food, the modern culture, when it uses it at all, uses the body of the fetus for cosmetics and parts replacement. To justify our position, we think we have a “right” – another will-based word in modern thought – to correct our own “mistakes” by eliminating their consequences, as if the only thing that counted is our intentions not our actions on an objective reality.

⁴Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?” *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL.: The Press, 1959), 51.

III.

In her book on the notion of culture in *Gaudium et spes*, the document of Vatican II that sought to open the Church to the “rights” and “values” of modern “culture,” Tracey Rowland has written:.

In post-Council thought, one finds several antitheses: between the emphasis on the ‘autonomy of culture’, a concept endorsed in *Gaudium et spes* paragraph 59 but not defined and variously interpreted, and the idea that no realm of culture is really neutral in relation to theology or completely autonomous of any other; between an uncritical endorsement of mass culture ... and the idea that mass culture is toxic to virtue and resistant to grace; between a conception of liturgy as necessarily embodying the aesthetic and linguistic norms of the mundane and a conception of liturgy as necessarily transcending the mundane; between the promotion of Enlightenment tradition as ‘magnificent achievements’ and a critique of Enlightenment traditions as ‘severed fragments’ or ‘mutations’ or ‘heretical reconstructions’ or ‘secular parodies’ of the classical theistic synthesis....⁵

Obviously, much is at stake if we assume that a culture has within it no habits or customs, no formed institutions that militate against a universal philosophy or religion based on the truth of things. We are equally in trouble if we postulate that there is no universal culture but only a series of relatively closed ways of life, one of no more or less “value” than the next.

⁵Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 167.

In assuming that modern culture was theoretically neutral to the essentials of Catholicism, the writers of *Gaudium et spes* were rather unprepared for the ease with which modern culture could itself modify and undermine any principled acceptance of things from a transcendent source. Without claiming that there is anything specifically “heretical” in *Gaudium et spes*, it can still be postulated that it failed to understand many of the issues at work in modern culture. This failure represents one of the greatest intellectual theological failures to judge what is going on in the world. It resulted in a great self-inflicted wound. Surely it has proved to be something as damaging to the Church’s mission as the problems now associated with the famous Chinese rites controversies of the 17th Century. It serves as a constant reminder that the Church also depends on the quality of intellect of its own bishops and theologians.

IV.

At the beginning of these reflections, I cited three remarks on culture that will serve to indicate the direction that I want to go in understanding the relation of culture to those transcendent principles and purposes that should be present in all particular cultures, without, at the same time, totally rejecting the validity of any given particularity in which universal principles must appear. In considering these things, I am not unaware of Edmund Burke’s notion that, because of custom and practical reasonableness, even laws or practices that are objectively wrong in their formulation, can be modified in such a way that their actually working out already has modified or eliminated the problem with their erroneous initial statement.

The opposite of this phenomenon is also true. Pronouncements and laws that are formulated with a proper respect to transcendence, I think of the Declaration of Independence, can be interpreted in such a way as to justify the very opposite of what they stood for. The “right” to life

has come to include killing the innocent. The “rights” to equality and liberty are used to destroy any objective standard. “Without a living religion a culture perishes and disintegrates like the human body when the soul has departed,” E. I. Watkin wrote in 1932 in his *Catholic Art and Culture: An Essay on Catholic Culture*.⁶ Rowland’s argument is that a religion cannot save a culture if the religion insists in speaking in those terms that, when understood in their proper cultural meaning, also undermine the religion’s ability to understand itself as distinct from the aberrations of the culture. The constant religious appeal to “rights” and “values” has had the general effect of importing the modern relativist understandings of these notions into religious discourse.⁷ The result is that, culturally attuned to modern usage, we no longer hear the transcendent message in them even though it may be present in intention or in the original meaning.

The first citation is from Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. It contains the most famous classical explanation of human culture. If only to make the point that culture includes translating things rightly from one language to another, I am deliberately citing Cicero’s passage from an address that John Paul II gave to a visiting group of Polish academics. The original address was in

⁶E. I. Watkin, *Catholic Art and Culture: An Essay on Catholic Culture* (London: Burns Oates, 1932), 17.

⁷See Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952).

Polish, though Cicero was cited in Latin. In turn, we have an English translation in *L'Osservatore Romano* either from the Latin or from a Polish translation of Latin.

It is well-known that the original notion of culture had to do with tilling a field – agriculture. A piece of land, even if very fertile, could not produce at its best unless it was properly cultivated. Both man and nature, it seems, were designed to be completed by human knowledge and active work. Nature, it was learned, sometimes very slowly, sometimes rapidly, could be improved by human enterprise. This “improvement,” of course, presupposes the principle from Genesis that the cosmos is created for man as if the purpose of the former is directed to the purpose of the latter. Contemporary ecological views that any human-caused deviation from the earth’s natural state is wrong obviously presupposes another philosophy about the nature of reality. Modern ecology is often closer to a new religion or ideology than it is to science.

Cicero compares the cultivation of land with the cultivation of the human soul. The translation of the Latin *animus* by “spirit” is not the best. A “spirit” is technically a being with no body proper to its existence or nature. An angel is thus properly a spirit. The soul, though it can have independent existence, is not a “spirit” in this sense. It is an immaterial principle directly related to a body. The result of body and soul in combination is a single whole person.

The English translation of the Latin noun, *disciplina*, is, unexpectedly, “culture.” This translation seems wrong also, like defining a word by itself. *Cultura* meant in context, “cultivation,” the ploughing or harrowing of a field. In his analogy with *animus*, Cicero does not use *cultura*, but rather the word *disciplina*. This word rather means in English discipline, in the sense of hard, organized work on a given subject matter, the discipline of law or mathematics. The intelligent mind needs more than its bare self to know what it is or can be capable of knowing. The analogy is:

field is to cultivation (*cultura*) as soul is to discipline. By themselves, neither field nor soul suffices to be its best. Good as they are, both must be brought to perfection. This fact suggests that some things are designed to be imperfect so that other agents can act to improve or perfect them.

In the Dawson citation, the great English historian of culture and religion is concerned to show the existence of absolute transcendent religious claims, valid for all cultures. The denial of such claims risks the very meaning of our common humanity with its destiny. Yet, the expression of such positions will be made differently from time to time, from place to place. In acknowledging such different expressions of the same truth, Dawson seeks to preserve the relative “autonomy” or legitimacy of different cultures and languages. A valid freedom exists but not on the basis of approving everything no matter what is proposed. Dawson did not deny that universal standards remained. In these truths, all men share even if, because of a freedom that includes the possibility of rejecting the truth, anyone is capable of rejecting them. The fact that some or many deny universal propositions does not necessarily argue against their truth, any more than the fact of murder implies its licitness

The third citation is from E. B.F. Midgley, the too little known philosopher from Aberdeen in Scotland.⁸ He too is concerned indirectly with Dawson’s point about the validity of differing ways to express the same universal truths. We cannot decide whether, say, genuflecting, bowing, or prostrating ourselves is the only or absolutely best way for a corporeal being to acknowledge the divinity. Barring revelation instructing us otherwise, the particular form of honoring God is open to a wide, but not infinite, variety of alternatives. The universal proposition, that the divine origin should

⁸See E. B. F. Midgley, *The Ideology of Max Weber: A Thomist Critique* (Aldershot, Hants.: Gower, 1983).

be acknowledged, however, does not change. The analysis of culture, in which many things can be otherwise, is a subordinate science to metaphysics and theology.

We may think, for example, that something is wrong with the way that the Greeks do things. We may also think that something is right about the way the Romans do things. Both propositions may be valid if they deal with free alternatives. What we cannot conclude is that, therefore, the Greeks must do what the Romans do, even though what the Romans do is all right. Going back to Cicero, there are many ways to improve a field, but not all we do to it actually improves it.

What Midgley is getting at, to go back to Strauss' "transcendent natural right," is that what Christ did, or better what He was, is not "relative" in this sense. His was, as it were, a "culture completely uncontaminated by alien elements." This sentence itself justifies the long and sometimes bitter controversies about the exact definitions of Christ's human and divine nature or about the fact that He was the Second Person of the Trinity. Get these wrong, and no cultural adjustment or expression can save the truth contained and its consequences in how we live and conceive our destiny.

But there may be different ways of expressing the same truth. The ultimate roots of the difference between Islam and Christianity lie in the former's denial either of a Trinity within the Godhead or an Incarnation. Cultural differences are not neutral in this sense whatever we make of them. As Russell Kirk once put it, "a culture – which arises from a cult – cannot well abide two radically different religions."⁹ The reason for this difficulty to abide is not their varied customs,

⁹Russell Kirk, "T. S. Eliot on Literary Morals," *Creed & Culture*, edited by James M. Kushiner (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 59.

languages, or practices, but what they hold about reality and whether reality corresponds to what is held. Not all religions or philosophies hold the same thing.

V.

In his convoluted way, Nietzsche saw quite clearly that “culture” is the shape of society that must be radically changed if some new willed view is to come about. He saw, in effect, that historically Europe was the faith in its culture. This culture was the result of what was held to be true. “Assuming it were true, that which is now in any case believed as ‘truth,’” Nietzsche wrote in *On the Genealogy of Morality*,

*that the meaning of all culture is simply to breed a tame and civilized animal, a domestic animal, out of the beast of prey “man,” then one would have to regard all these institutions of reaction and resentment, with the help of which the noble dynasties together with their ideals were finally brought to ruin and overwhelmed, as the actual tools of culture; which is admittedly not to say that the bearers of these instincts themselves at the same time also represent culture.... These bearers of the oppressing and retaliation-craving instincts, the descendants of all European and non-European slavery, of all pre-Aryan population in particular – they represent the regression. These “tools of culture” are a disgrace to humanity, and rather something that raises a suspicion, a counter-argument against “culture.”*¹⁰

The “tools of culture” that made Europeans slaves were, of course, the basic Christian doctrines of natural law, forgiveness, and meekness. Nietzsche saw European civilization or culture to be the

¹⁰Frederick Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. M. Clark and J. Swensen (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 23.

result of the revolt of the weak over the strong caused by a change in doctrine, a change caused both by Plato and Christianity. His “will to power” was not designed to argue with Christianity and Platonism, which he identified in *Beyond Good and Evil*, but to destroy them and replace them.¹¹

What, then, is intended in the proposition that “no culture is neutral?” First of all, we do not want any “culture” to be neutral, if we mean by neutrality that we deliberately seek to exclude from external expression any truth about the nature of things and of our destiny within reality. Often this position is what is meant by the term “secular culture.” That is, it is a militant culture that functions as a censor and mind-control agency. Indeed, many cultures operate this way, even religious ones like much of Islam or secular ones like the Chinese communists.

“It is no less impossible for the same mind, whether individual or collective,” Henri de Lubac wrote to this point,

¹¹Frederick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil Towards a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 8.

to separate radically Christian faith and human culture, as some theologians teach today in search of a “secularization” from which they think a perfect purity of faith would result.... These adversaries of all “Christian culture” could no more provide for the missionary apostolate than they could support a living faith within a Christian environment; they do not know what they are talking about.¹²

These blunt words attest to the notion that transcendental purposes and truths do not exist outside of an effort to express them and put them into practice, even when their universal intent is admitted and understood. Faith, of whatever content, and culture are not the same thing, but they cannot be separated. This is why culture is never neutral.

The word “cult” has, no doubt, fallen on hard times. The fact is that the origin of most “culture,” as we know it, is not so much “agriculture,” the cultivation of the fields, though it does not exclude that, but rather the way in which the gods are worshiped. This way will include implicitly a theology to explain what they are held to be and our relation to them, that is a morality explaining how we act in view of our understanding of the gods. The irony of the modern political effort to tame “cults at war,” to use Kirk’s phrase, to get rid of “fanaticism,” is that it chose to do this so by itself becoming a secular “cult.” The problem is not avoided by, through democratic tolerance theory, ignoring the question of the right cult, the question of where there is a valid worship..

VI.

¹²Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans S. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 217.

In his book, *Work, Society, and Culture*, Yves Simon sought to reconcile, if I may put it that way, the high and the low cultures. That is, he wished to overcome the historic prejudice against work or labor that identified it with slavery or servility or the merely “useful.” He was, in a sense, attempting to accept Josef Pieper’s notion of leisure and freedom without denigrating the necessary work that had to be done by the sweat of the brow.¹³ This endeavor brought Simon to a reconsideration of Aristotle’s distinctions between craft and prudence, theoretical and practical intellect (Book 6, *Ethics*).

What was primarily at issue was the redemption, itself largely instigated by revelation, of the notion of work. St. Joseph was a carpenter. The Apostles were fishermen. This effort required an analysis of the intellectual processes that go into even the most boring and difficult physical work. But neither did Simon want to sacrifice the astonishing bloom of culture by which its splendors have manifested the glory of humanity both in its inner-worldly and transcendent reaches. He did not want to grant anything to the relativist position that sought to justify customs, institutions, and laws that were in fact contrary to human nature and good even if they were of long-standing practice and based apparently on venerable, if sophisticated, argument..

Pieper sought to reconcile the Greek contemplative life with Christian theology, whereas Simon sought to reconcile or at least point out how the Greek notion of work with its relation to slavery could be transformed into terms that were valid to Greek philosophy. The issue is not over whether culture is “neutral,” it is not, nor should it be, even in its relation to the highest of

¹³Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. G. Malsbery (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine Press, 1998).

philosophical and theological concept. The question is whether the Nietzschean attack on a particular culture as an anti-human weakness can be overturned.

Simon does not want to set work over against the contemplative life, but rather examine how the practical life, as it were, has contemplative aspects while at the same time accomplishing its own good in what is produced. Even in practical deliberations, either of art or prudence, in which the result is the product of an informed choice, there remains an initial contemplative moment in which the mind simply beholds or rejoices in the truth of the position to be taken or thing to be made.

This is why Aristotle was able to say that all the human capacities detailed in Book 6 of the *Ethics* – wisdom, understanding (first principles), science, prudence, and art – were devoted first precisely to truth. In the latter two cases, art and prudence, the “truth” did not necessarily mean that what was to be done or made could not be accomplished differently. It did mean that what was acted upon did bear a valid intelligibility that truly guided the action or object to its end, to what it was.

Earlier, I had cited de Lubac’s remark about those who want completely to eliminate any “cultural” content from Christianity. If they should do so, de Lubac thought, they would undermine its “missionary apostolate.” What does this “undermining” mean?

Lucy, to give an delightful illustration of this point, is seen skipping rope while Charlie Brown is looking away in the distance. He says out loud, “It’s really a good thing people are different.” In the next scene Lucy continues vigorously to jump rope as Charlie continues, “Wouldn’t it be terrible if everyone agreed on everything?” In the third scene, as if she clearly sees where his logic is going, Lucy suddenly stops. She stares Charlie right in the eyes to ask him,

“Why?” And finally as Charlie continues staring at her in sort of a trance, Lucy concludes, rather triumphantly, “If everybody agreed with me, they’d all be right!”¹⁴

If we look at this amusing scene, however, we can see that it does have some relevance to this discussion of culture. One universal proposition states that “people are different.” It would be “terrible” if everyone agreed on everything. Mentioned only by implication is the counter-proposition that it would likewise be terrible if no one agreed on anything. Lucy’s wit matches her logic. If everyone agreed with her, everyone would be right. This conclusion, however, implies that Lucy’s views on everything are not only her views, but the right views.

We have here an implicit standard or criterion that rejects the simple proposition that because people differ in some things, they should be different in all things. But if a thing is “right,” we do not want to disagree with it. And if someone as pleasantly obnoxious as Lucy knows what is “right,” we ought to agree with her, not because it is Lucy’s view, but because it is right. To be a “missionary” of truth is implicit in its logic of this scene. We do not want to differ about the truth. Even when we differ, we implicitly acknowledge that we appeal to some grounding for our truth that is not simply arbitrary will. We reject Nietzsche, in other words. Thus, it is not terrible if we all agree on something even if we are all different. Our differences do not obviate the fact that we are all human beings with minds ordered to the truth of things. What is “diverse” is not the truth, but how we express it. Even there, we presume that behind its varied expressions is something open to everyone, something we can sort out by argument and understanding, that “disagreements” are not simply unresolved and unresolvable differences..

¹⁴Charles Schulz, *Peanuts*, May 19, 1970, United Features.

What Simon has done, then, is to identify the areas in which things both are and perhaps ought to be different – “wouldn’t it be terrible if everyone agreed on everything?” – and those in which they are and ought to be the same – “then they’d all be right!” What Simon contributes to the notion of culture is a solid philosophic explication of why the classic Greek distinction between work and leisure, while based on something real, did not have to conclude to identifying manual workers with slavery, even though that is how many did historically conclude.

But as Pieper pointed out, Aristotle himself thought that slavery, aside from medical abnormalcy, was a question of the dullness and brutality of the work that needed to be done. It did not refer to the ontological being of the worker. That is, the very doing of the work was so absorbing or demanding that it left no time or strength for anything else. The Greeks even applied this analysis to business. The redemption of business has also been one of the accomplishments of modern culture. This redemption, however, can itself best be understood by a more sympathetic analysis of Aristotle’s views of art and practical intellect.¹⁵

In a passage on Henry Ford, that goes a long way to correct many erroneous understandings of capitalism and what is now called, dubiously, “social justice,” Simon explains just how the requirements of modern technology, both on the skilled and unskilled side, can be looked upon as

¹⁵Yves Simon, *Work, Society, and Culture*, edited by V. Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 143-48. See James V. Schall, “On the ‘Prospects of Paradise on Earth’: Maritain on Action and Contemplation,” *Truth Matters: Essays in Honor of Jacques Maritain*, edited by John G. Trapani, Jr. (Washington: American Maritain Society/The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 12-25.

ways designed to order practical intelligence. “Everyone knows that one of the leading ideas of Henry Ford...,” Simon wrote,

was that in order to mass produce automobiles cheaply it was necessary to organize work in such a way as to be served well by completely unskilled workers.... In order to mass-produce automobiles cheaply, one must divide the process in such a manner that unskilled workers – peasants coming from Ireland, Poland, Portugal, Italy and elsewhere – can do the job with a minimum of training and guidance. Despite what literary gentlemen say, this is extremely significant from a social standpoint. That is how ordinary people without any special skills happened to make good wages, perhaps for the first time in the history of mankind. This too is what distinguishes modern societies from past societies.¹⁶

Simon points out that ancient societies also demanded much heavy labor but they did not use technical systems that trained unskilled labor. Labor is replaced through technology by machines, as Aristotle suspected it might be. These machines are the results of applying intelligence to work. Moreover, this process of importing unskilled labor goes on in the first decade of the 21th century with others besides Irish and Italians, with the same effect of ordering the lives and gradually developing the capacities of unskilled workers.

What Simon seeks to do is to show that, of Aristotle’s five ways of truth as discussed in book six of the *Ethics*, only prudence is really a “virtue” in the proper sense of an intellectual habit that guides all our activities, including the intellectual virtues (*habitus*), to our human end. He

¹⁶Ibid., 153.

demonstrates this point by showing that Hume's notion that nature is simply a repetition of acts, something of psychology not reality, is incorrect.

How often have rules of action been held axiomatic, when as a matter of fact they were merely customs that had never been subjected to rational analysis? How often indeed have such social customs been at variance with conclusions of rational analysis? We all know that such instances have been all too frequently in history, and they all point to the difference between the kind of necessity which proceeds from objects of thought. The despairing skepticism of Hume consists precisely in saying "There is no objective necessity, all you can find in the mind is the subjective necessitation of habit." Thus, to call science an intellectual habit (as many translations do) is to miss what is essential in it – namely, the search for and (in the best cases) the grasping of a necessity which is not the effect of repetitive activities of the mind but the expression of what constitutes a form of being.¹⁷

Even though many confusions can and do exist, it is possible to see the form or truth of a thing. Simon is here denying that customs or varieties of expression themselves prove that there is nothing universal operative behind them.

VII.

But while the defense of intellectual order based on an order in things is indeed possible and necessary, something not well understood in modernity, still Simon recognizes the other side of the classic discussion of cult and culture, namely its flourishing, its area of freedom to see what cannot

¹⁷Ibid., 164-65.

be otherwise and respond to it with an infinite variety of responses. “A rational nature involves the paradox of a system of necessity open to infinity,” Simon writes in a remarkable sentence.

When we say “nature” we mean something definite; but when we say “rational” we posit a nature which over and above its definite needs enjoys an openness to infinity. This paradox is not merely human: it is universal. Look around in the universe. Superabundance and luxury prevail throughout the world of our experience. An animal psychologist, who was both philosophically and romantically inclined, remarked to me once that in the spring the birds sing far more than is allowed by Darwinian theory. In order for the species to survive, the cock need not sing so much: a few sounds are enough to attract the attention of the female. But the birds sing a hundred times more than is needed for the purposes of the species.¹⁸

Nature, even animal nature, if we see it, is open to infinity, to superabundance, to freedom. This is where the Pieper and Simon theses on leisure come together in a coherent whole.¹⁹

Thus, to conclude, the fact that no culture is “neutral” is not an argument that it should be. Rather it is an explanation both of the fact that there is a universal culture and that this universal culture can be expressed in a multiplicity of ways, not merely can be, but should be. There is nothing so abstract about human intelligence that it does not seek some incarnation. Yet, the tradition of “leisure” as the basis of culture, the Greek idea of things worthy for their own sakes, things of play and of solemnity, are expressions of the abundance, indeed the superabundance of

¹⁸Ibid., 169.

¹⁹See James V. Schall, “The Law of Superabundance,” *Gregorianum*, 72 (#3, 1991), 515-42.

things. Simon puts it well: “What is needed to have the fullness of culture is something more, something that in some way is above necessity, is independent of need, and is fulfilling no laws except perhaps its own.”²⁰ Cultures do need to stand the test of philosophy and revelation.

We need, therefore, to know the “form” of what cultures are. This “knowing” is very demanding intellectual exercise, the “work,” as it were, of intelligence, the effort to know what even “things that can be otherwise” are. But though we must live, eat, and prepare the land, itself an effort of increasingly practical intelligence and not sheer drudgery, we are open to infinity, even in this world and in this life. The remarkable challenge of Nietzsche to our culture results largely from his own being scandalized with those who did not practice what they claimed they believed. All he could see to replace faith and mind was pure will, devoid of any content.

There is indeed a culture “completely uncontaminated by alien elements,” but it too needs to be expressed and made living on no other basis than it is true. Leisure is the basis of culture. So is truth. So is freedom. So is work. So is worship. We seek to know the things that cannot be “otherwise.” But, on finding them, we strive to express them in ways that are closer to why the birds sing unnecessarily wondrous songs than to our self-creation of a world based on an arbitrary will that sees nothing but itself and sees all things simply as diverse and relative.

Wouldn't it be terrible if everyone agreed in everything?

Just as a field, even if it is fertile, cannot bear fruit without cultivation, so also a soul without discipline.

But birds sing a hundred times more than it necessary to preserve the species.

²⁰Ibid., 170.

Culture is never neutral.

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