

Maintaining the Earth's Human Face: Christian Culture's Personalistic Di- mension

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Neo-Kantian philosophy heavily influences the concept of culture in our day among philosophers and ordinary people. Culture appears to be a sphere of values that we create. This sphere of values is opposed to nature, and, in a way, is divorced from being. The opposition of *Natur-Kultur* corresponds to the opposition of *Sein-Sollen* (being-oughtness). This approach to culture claims to ennoble us, especially in relation to the material world. We often hear said that people create culture in the sense that we create

values. From the classical idea of *homo sapiens* and the modern idea of *homo faber* we finally arrive at *homo creator*.

Today Western civilization is in a new phase that can be described as “the cult of man”. We treat man as a god. We could say that this is quite noble, were it not for the diabolical consequences of the cult of man, and that this new deity can show a terrifying face. Losing their connection with nature affects all cultural domains: Theory, *praxis*, *poesis*, and the sphere of religion are increasingly turned against the human good. Science treats people like mere material things as it violates human subjectivity. The cult of tolerance opens the way for demoralization. Art no longer purifies our consciousness and subconscious. It cuts us off from the light.

Increasingly, religion constructs idols as it wages war against the one God. The regress of Western culture is directly proportional to its progressive de-Christianization. In this situation we must consider this paper’s topic: the personalistic dimension of Christian culture. A culture that strikes at the personal dimension of human life is an anti-culture, no culture at all.

When I consider the origins of the word *culture* I think first of agriculture. The Romans considered *cultura* as primarily the cultivation of fields. Cicero used the term *cultura* metaphorically, and extended it to cultivation of the soul. As a farmer uproots weeds, so culture uproots vices and sows the seeds of a sane and noble life.

Cicero undoubtedly had the Greek idea of *paideia* in mind when he wrote of the culture of the soul, even if he did not resort to an etymologically-related term. The term

paideia derives from *pais*, ‘a boy’. *Paideia* aimed at the proper upbringing of a young man, instilling in him the virtues of an excellent human being and man. Homer praised the virtues of fortitude and prudence. And he praised eloquence as the outpouring of wise thoughts. The other virtues appeared later.

Culture as *paideia* has a dynamic character. It develops in the human soul as its subject. Thus we must understand culture in relation to the concrete subject, the human soul. In this conception, culture is strictly connected with human nature. And nature requires cultivation by means of a proper education. Thanks to culture, through which we become increasingly truly human, and not so much thanks to ourselves, we appear to be culture’s creator. The first activity in the creation of culture is directed at human beings.

To understand the classical conception of culture, we must understand the classical conception of nature. The conception of nature was a key concept in Greek philosophy. It had many shades of meaning. Here we will limit ourselves to the different meanings of the term “nature” that appear in Aristotle’s *Physics*.

(1) “Nature is the principle and internal cause of motion and rest in things in which it exists by essence and not accidentally.” (Aristotle, *Physics* 192 b)

(2) Nature is the first matter that constitutes the supposit of any object that has within itself the principle of motion and change.

(3) Nature is the shape or conceptual form. Just as the term “art” refers also to the outcome of art, so the term “nature” refers both to the natural process and to the product of this process. What is muscle or bone in a potential sense

does not yet possess its own “nature”, and does not exist by “nature” until it receives a conceptual form. According to this second meaning, “nature” would be the shape or form (capable of being divided only conceptually) of things that possess a source of motion in themselves. However, what is composed of matter and form (for example a man) is not a “nature”. A man is “by” or “from” nature, or “exists naturally”. Moreover, form, not matter, is nature. We may say that any given thing exists in a more proper sense when it has achieved its full actualization than when it exists in a merely potential manner. Furthermore, a man originates from a man, but a bed does not come from a bed. For this reason we say that the shape of the bed is not the bed’s “nature”. We say the wood is the nature. For if a bed sends out shoots, it is the wood that is growing, not the bed. Even if the shape were a work of art, the form (of a man) would still be (his) nature, because a man begets a man.

(4) A thing’s nature can be the process of generation, whereby the thing attains its own “nature”. In this sense, nature is unlike healing, which leads to health, not to medicine. Healing *comes from* art. It does not *lead to* art. This is not the same relation as that of nature (in one sense) to nature (in another sense), because that which naturally develops, develops from something, and then becomes something else. The aim of this development is not to move toward its starting point. It moves toward its final state or goal.

(5) Form, then, is nature.

Aristotle tells us that form and nature occur in two senses, because a privation or lack is also a form in some sense. (*Physics* 193ab) Let us examine this passage in detail. We

may present its main points in a list similar to the one above. Nature is:

- (1) The essential and internal cause of motion and rest.
- (2) Matter and the suppositum for things that possess the principle of change within themselves.
- (3) Shape or form.
- (4) A natural process.
- (5) The product of a natural process.

To sum up, according to Aristotle, nature is (1) more properly the form as a thing that is already actualized, not merely potential form, or something that may be; (2) the process of generation, the effect of which is that a thing attains to its nature; or (3) a natural development from something and to something that is different from the starting point, to which the thing moves by inclination, as inclining to attain its form.

We may understand nature considered in itself in any of three senses. Crucial in this paper is that we understand nature first as the starting point, then as the process, and finally as the terminal point.

In talking of nature as starting point, I wish to emphasize the moment (1) at which a particular and definite form determines the acting subject; (2) of potentiality; and (3) of inclination. I consider inclination as the attraction for a fitting object of action, attainable under normal conditions. I emphasize these three moments because: (1) without any determinate acting subject only be an unorganized pile of matter, a heap, would exist; (2) without potentiality no process would exist; and (3) without inclination, the conse-

quence of form, any process would be chaotic. The principle of teleology or finality appears here.

In a process we deal with the realization of the principle of finality. If any process moves, (1) an end or goal must exist as the motive for the sake of which the activity is elicited; and (2) the phases of the process that occur in sequence must be ordered. Order is a sign of rationality because order is a sign of the participation in reason.

In the terminal point we must make a distinction between two senses of end, because end in one sense is the final phase, while end as aim is the achievement of a perfection or fullness, which can occur before the final phase. This is the end as a perfection and as the completion or fulfillment of potentiality. In a natural process, degeneration can follow fulfillment, or a thing may reach the term of its existence before it can achieve perfection.

We should note that in the world of nature the process from the starting point to the terminal point occurs in most cases without hindrance. Natural beings start a process under the influence of an internal principle and achieve the fullness of their development and of their particular powers. After they give life to others of the same species, they degenerate and perish. In most cases this is what occurs, but something may fail to reach its goal because of an accident, of some incidental cause. An internal defect, or the actions of some other being that is also acting for an end, may interfere. Animals usually attain the optimum of their particular powers, such as the power of self-movement, sense powers, nutrition, and reproduction. They attain the optimum set forth by their species and the disposition of their particular powers.

Apart from considering nature as what we consider or talk about, we can talk about nature as we refer it to diverse subjects. Properly speaking, when we predicate a nature of some subject, we have to do so analogically, or participatively. We do not predicate of a subject a single, univocal, or totally equal participation of nature. And we do not predicate of a subject many equivocal, unrelated, and totally unequal participations of nature. While we predicate nature in different, or unequal, senses of participation, these share a common core of content, or meaning, and a principal analogate in which this content is most fully realized or possessed. In the case of nature, the principal analogate is not the starting point or the process. It is the terminal point, nature in the sense of fullness and perfection, a maximum, not nature in the sense of potentiality and process, a minimum. This is the classical understanding of nature. And it opposes the common understanding of nature today as starting point and process, where the terminal point is regarded as destruction or as a violation of nature.

We cannot apply the Greek conception of nature to human beings in exactly the same way as we predicate it of other things. By its own power, human nature cannot fulfill its natural inclinations. In most cases nature itself is sufficient for other beings to achieve their ends. Human nature needs something beyond itself to reach its natural fulfillment, something that transcends nature, which has some distance from nature, to help it reach perfection. The Greeks regarded reason or mind (*Nous*) as this element. Man possesses reason, and reason is not from this world, is something divine within us. Hermetimos or Anaxagoras

said, “Reason is a god within us,” and “mortal life holds a part of the god himself.”

Reason’s divine origin helps human nature to realize itself, to move from potency to act, and achieve its end, its proper form. Culture as *paideia* is a dynamic work that reason directs upon human nature. Culture is connected with the starting point (nature as something definite but still mostly in a state of potentiality) and with the terminal point (nature actualized according to natural inclinations). We are wrong to look at culture as a creative activity that works independently of nature and natural ends. An element of responsibility always exists within culture. And culture always has a moral dimension.

The Greek conception of culture had the right starting point, but it faced conceptual perils projected by human imagination. We could always misunderstand the transcendence of human reason in relation to the world of nature in terms of pantheism. So could the Greeks. Pantheism was always present in the background of Greek and Hellenistic thought. And it reached a mature form in neo-Platonism and Stoicism.

The problem of pantheism is crucial in our understanding of culture in its relation to nature and to reason. If we look at culture in pantheistic terms, we will think that the reason does not bring nature to completion. We will think that nature is an emanation of reason as part of a downward process (*prohodos*), and that it is completed by the reason as part of its journey to return to its former high position (*epistrophe*). In this sense, reason does not complete nature. It creates nature in its phase of generation and its phase of perfection. This doctrine has an important res-

ervation: only divine reason exists; other minds do not exist. In this way, pantheism dispenses with the problem of culture: by necessity reason (1) creates nature and (2) brings nature back to its state of perfection, an ontological sublimation where a series of hypostases absorb nature.

The danger of pantheism appeared in Plato and Aristotle, with his imprecisely formulated theory of the active intellect. The Arab philosophers Avicenna and Averroes drew philosophical conclusions from Aristotle's imprecise remarks. These had later repercussions in the conception of culture and in its particular domains. Most of all, pantheism struck at the principal subject of culture: the concrete person. By depriving human individuals of our subjectivity, a pantheistic vision of reality no longer had anyone for culture to cultivate. Nature was divine reason in a degraded form. Only one reason existed, and human individuals did not possess their own, individual, minds. The human soul did not possess its own subsistence. The result was that culture lost its human profile. It no longer had a profile that was distinct from nature and God.

Through the filter of Medieval Arab philosophy and Renaissance naturalism, the pantheistic trend in Greek and Hellenistic philosophy shaped the modern and contemporary understanding of culture. The naturalism of the Renaissance was a deification of nature. The Renaissance cult of value dissociated value from nature and the real world, putting man at the same level as God. Man creates values without considering nature or natural ends. The creative act came to be regarded as valuable on its own account. In this way, the conception of the good essentially changed. The classical conception of the good was that the good was the

end and aim of potencies and inclinations. Our creative acts, if they do not take reality into account, can turn against reality with destructive force.

In this context, the Christian understanding of culture is crucial for philosophy, theology, and civilization in general. It respects the original understanding of culture as that which completes what a nature lacks. With its transcendental conception of God and its affirmation that there is a plurality of minds, it offers a rational alternative to pantheism. The Christian conception of culture is open in a constructive way to different civilizations with their different characters.

The authentic transcendence of God could only appear in the context of the existential conception of being. This conception of being shows in a radical way that only one being can be the reason for the existence of all other beings. The existential perspective in the conception of being is always threatened by some form of pantheism. We can only properly understand God's radical ontic transcendence and the doctrine of creation that presents God as the source for the generation of other beings in terms of the existential conception of being.

In this conception, people appear as contingent beings of a definite nature possessing an individual reason. The obvious difference between human beings and the world of nature does not lead to the apotheosis of man or to naturalism. Culture becomes a task or plan that we must carry out during our life on earth. The reference point and subject of culture is man, and man is also the author of culture.

In the realm of culture a vast field exists open to creativity and supernatural help. Human creativity is not crea-

tivity in the same primary sense as divine creativity, which creates from nothing. Human beings must always take material such as we find it as our starting point. The basic material with which we have to work with is our human nature. We must consider our natural inclinations, use our reason, and seek to understand the proper end of these inclinations. Since a great distance exists between the starting point of undeveloped human nature and the end, we can be open to different propositions or possibilities. As a result, we have different civilizations, and within these, different cultures. Within particular cultures, we have creative individuals who follow different paths.

Just as our reason completes what is lacking in nature within the limits of our human possibilities, so supernatural grace gives added strength to our human powers as we make our way to our proper end. Nature by itself, even with the help of human reason, cannot lead us all the way. Religion, then, must be culture's culmination of culture. Not a compartment of culture, but the keystone. The whole dynamic of the drama of human existence appears in religion, the arena where we must use our reason to overcome and realize our nature with the help of culture. In this effort, at every step, we are painfully aware of our human weakness and helplessness, with respect to nature, which we strive to submit to ourselves, and ultimately with respect to death. By our powers we cannot force open the gates of death. Religion reaches into the order of daily life. And it opens to us the perspective of eternal life.

Christianity appears to be the most personalistic way of approaching human culture. The concept of the person bears a reference to nature, reason, and subjectivity. A cul-

ture that fails to consider any one of these elements will sooner or later turn against man. Naturalism considers only this world. Pantheism treats this world with contempt. Both are incomplete. And both turn against us.

Modern thought has divorced culture from nature, has even set the two in opposition. Modern thinkers presented the opposing pairs: *Sein-Sollen* (being-oughtness) and *Nature-Kultur*. This has led to relativism and subjectivism, sanctioned by legislators and the mass media.

Where relativism and subjectivism have been embedded in institutions, they have spread into education and our attitudes. In so doing, they have led us away from our true human nature. When we deny the distinct existence of minds in individual human beings, the result is the domination of one ideology that allows no dissent. If only one reason exists, room exists for one ideology, which will dominate the entire rational sphere. The domination of such an ideology, in turn, becomes the basis for a totalitarian utopia.

Finally, the divorce between culture and the subjectivity of each individual human being has led to depravity in the application of science. Experiments in the field of genetic engineering have been notorious for their lack of respect for human individuals. Lives have been ruined and destroyed on a massive scale for the sake of science. Common in scientific experiments is to treat people as a mere objects or things, not as a subject, a person.

Western civilization today has the mass media as its spiritual, and money as its material, keystones. Its method is technology, which leads Western culture increasingly far from nature and its authentic roots. At its starting point

Western culture is alienated from nature. In its destination it is alienated from God. The entire field of individual human creativity has lost its human face, becoming instead a mechanical exploitation of the possibilities of the human brain. Our culture has changed for the worse in many areas. But philosophy and philosophers must bear some responsibility, since philosophy opened the way for culture's dehumanization of culture. Especially necessary today is that we return in a creative way to the Christian conception of culture, so that we do not destroy what is left of the human face in the face of the Earth.

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