

## **“Exploring the Rich and Relevant Values of World culture”**

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### **“On Becoming a Cultured Person”**

“The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts.” Charles Darwin

1. According to historical sources, the word “culture” was originally used by the Roman philosopher and statesman, Cicero, who first used the term to refer to the activity of “cultivating the soul”;
2. In this profound classical sense, any person ardently seeking “intellectual and moral culture” should deliberately and unabashedly cultivate ‘perfection’ within and for the sake of the *polis* or of society;
3. Since the conceptual boundaries of “soul” or “self” seem to be elastic and indeterminate, we might well argue that “self- cultivation” within a thriving culture involves developing the multi-faceted art of reasoning for the sake of accommodating diverse viewpoints within the expansive circumference of the mind. It would also involve becoming morally adept at fulfilling one’s responsibilities in private circles as well as in public arenas of human encounter. “Self- perfection” would likewise include the conscious refinement of one’s inclusive feelings and affections in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Finally, this intense and inward quest for self-shaping would conceivably infuse cultural codes and practices with an ever-fresh sense of the truly human and humane as creative acts of self-discovery and cultural expression merge and syncopate in unique ways ;
4. Clearly, this call to perfection or “high culture” is deeply influenced by the quality of our parental upbringing, the quality of our education and the quality of the prevailing ethos of our community. All stages of enculturation

have a great deal to do with our ability to become a mature and creative “person of culture” – especially when the phrase a “person of culture” is used in its normative sense. To the extent that a culture recognizes and encourages the individual to progressively develop and express their vision of a nobler self and a more just community, to that extent will the individual continue to grow intellectually and morally and thereby make unexpected contributions to the common good.

5. However, to the traditional sociologist or embedded cultural anthropologist, the ideal of “self-culture” in this intellectual, moral and spiritual sense is challenging if not mistaken because it seems evident that we are social creatures who are conditioned and molded by a multitude of socio-economic, historical and hereditary forces;
  - Typically, in the early years, we receive moral training at home in terms of behavioral “dos” and “don’ts”; later, when we enter the orbit of formal education, we progressively hone our various intellectual powers as we matriculate through the tiered staircase of learning; as we enter the wider world of concrete social reality, we learn to utilize specific knowledge, skills and personal talents in our profession life; and, finally, over the arc of a lifetime, we find ourselves subtly appraised by family, friends and society-at-large in terms of our willingness to honor inherited customs, codes and laws;
  - All of the above-mentioned socializing institutions, we are told, contribute to the tapestry of our personal and collective identity – of our sense of self and our perception of other selves; from this perspective, we are all “natural purveyors” of our culture. We unwittingly extend the cultural thread of continuity of our particular collective history. This is because all growth through the spiral stages of growth is colored by established cultural attitudes. Our parents’ “dos” and “don’ts” are tacit transmitters of cultural values concerning acceptable behavior; likewise, our

school teachers transmit a sanitized intellectual picture of our collective history and cultural achievements; in society, our variegated occupations reflect and consolidate sanctioned forms of livelihood and, lastly, we find that most inherited customs, codes and laws are, in reality, crystalized cultural values;

- In the sociological sense then, the “representative man or woman” of a given culture is a more or less imperfect reflection, in miniature, of the wider, more pervasive character traits and patterned activities of their overarching culture; their “perfection” is passive and a product of their conformity to what they have been taught or more or less consciously imbibed;
- However, as we discover to our delight and to our regret, deep-seated cultural traits may be wholesome or unhealthy, life-giving or death-dealing, intellectually enriching or intellectually stultifying and they might encourage self- expressive or rigorously regulate it. So, while any person may indeed epitomize (or mirror) the primary qualities of his culture, those qualities and practices may not meet the finer criteria or heart-felt aspirations of the man or woman who seek “perfection” or who entertain a lively mental image of cultural excellence.
- This dissonance between a dimly apprehended ideal man or ideal woman and the settled contours of contemporary human culture often creates discontent or dissatisfaction in the mind of the true seeker of “self-culture”, of high intellectual and moral standards. Some unhappy souls resign themselves to their discontent and become fatalistic. Some rationalize their culture’s perceived defects by coating them over with a sentimental or romantic veneer and become smug. Others bury their dissatisfaction in a graveyard of seemingly lost dreams and impotent ideals and become cynical. A

minority of the culturally half-awake, openly rebel in a spontaneously intense, radical and often violent manner and become frustrated and often impotent revolutionaries. The more perceptive and intrepid few, however, take courage in both hands and silently and respectfully choose a different path – they become quite pioneers who conscientiously extend the perceived good of their particular culture, reject what is shown to be unwholesome and do their utmost to nurture new modes of cultural expression through consecrating their time, talent and funds to worth initiatives and noble causes;

- But, it might be asked, how is it possible to pioneer a new cultural pathway (or reinstitute an old and forgotten one) if, as many sociologists claim, man is overwhelmingly conditioned and shaped by an admittedly vast array of cumulative, cultural forces?
- Well, a first response might be to extract a lightning-bolt statement from that passionate, American radical, Tom Paine. Paine said in his revolutionary pamphlet, *Common Sense*, “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” This is a powerful and potentially culture-transforming declaration that is always contemporary to those who seek excellence in any and every sphere of endeavor. That one sentence alone could dispel the dark clouds of despair or cowardice in the minds and hearts of many – as it did for many a colonial farmer and tradesman that was stirred to action by Paine’s *Common Sense*.
- In another of his writings, Paine makes an even more intriguing but nonetheless complementary point when he says that to the young person waking up to the wonders of life, the whole world has just been newly created; it is just now “fiat lux” to the innocent and untried; the world, to the young and the young-at-heart, is entirely virginal; humanity has just begun and it is up to each one – and

others of his generation – to discover its promise and, in some sense, to create the globe anew.

- If we accept Paine’s statements as true, the question then becomes, “How can we accommodate the potency of cultural conditioning and yet accept the concrete fact that each individual is an “original” and an “originator” -- with unknown potential for self-improvement and cultural uplift?”
  - We can accommodate both truths because of the ever-present potential and potency of free will. Our cultural upbringing can shape the contours of selfhood and society to a very large extent but it cannot do so to a determinate degree – the spark of free will is always present even if it burns low;
  - The vitalizing presence of free will and the electric surcharge of a deep resolve can galvanize the individual into becoming an active purveyor of the best in his or her culture and not simply a passive reflection of its present promising but nonetheless imperfect state;
6. Well then, how does a man or woman become a creative “person of culture” – again, using this phrase in a normative and not simply in a descriptive sense?
- The man or woman who wishes to aim higher, who seeks in some sense “perfection” or the compelling desire to actualize a higher ideal within society, will not passively accept his culture – however glorious it might be;
  - A truly “cultured person” will consciously appraise the collective character of his cultural inheritance in terms of some adopted template of human perfection or excellence; as a result of this scrutiny, he or she will slowly learn to sift out the wholesome from

the deleterious, that which is refined from that which is crude and likewise learn to discern that which ennobles man from that which debases him;

- In a word, a “cultured person” will modify, refine or reject cultural traits and conventional practices by using the Archimedes lever of Socratic self-inquiry, by sober reflection and by making micro- efforts to enhance the texture of one’s culture;
- In the highest sense, a “person of culture” will learn to develop and exercise the power of discretion or the ability to appraise ideas, codes and practices – not only of his own culture but of all cultures of which he might be aware;
- A cultured person is, in effect, either building upon or going beyond his familial upbringing, his education and the host of coalescing influences that moor him to the cultural foothills of the tried and the true; he climbs upwards and thrives in the reinvigorating air of mountain altitudes by willingly entertaining horizon-expanding perspectives, ideas and values through self-education and through dialogue with other similarly committed souls;
- In the modern Western sense, a “cultured person” is expected to cultivate a fundamental attitude of “liberal mindedness” or an intellectual openness to ideas and peoples that reduces insularity and narrowness which are the hallmarks of the ignorant, the self-sealed and the selfish;
- The mental mobility of the cultured – of those who seek to cultivate the highest human powers – is truly admirable. Such individuals will be unafraid to look back to previous historical epochs and to learn from past cultural heroes and heroines. He will likewise be unafraid to scan contemporary cultures – whether they be allies or enemies of

one's nation-stage – in search of truthful and humane ways to nurture excellence in all forms of cultural expression: in art, in literature, in music, in architecture, in social organization and in philosophical openness;

- And, most importantly, a “cultured person” who seeks to “cultivate the soul or self” will be fearless in daily Pythagorean self-examination since the latter activity often reveals prejudices that inhibit the unfoldment of a universal perspective and of expansive sympathies toward other cultures and their variegated inhabitants;
- Clearly, then, becoming a “cultured person” calls for cultivating a “discriminating eye” – the mental eye of rational reflection and of insight into the essentials that bequeath greatness to a culture and its peoples. But becoming a person of true culture also calls for something more: the virtue of magnanimity. There is perhaps no better description of the “magnanimous soul” than that given by the English metaphysical poet, Thomas Traherne:

“Magnanimity includes all that belongs to a Great Soul; a high and mighty courage, an invincible Patience, an immovable Grandeur which is above the reach of injuries, a contempt of all little and feeble enjoyments, and a certain kind of majesty that is conversant with great things; a high and lofty frame of spirit, allied with the sweetness of Courtesy and Respect; a deep and stable resolution founded on humility without any baseness; an infinite hope and a vast desire; a Divine, profound, uncontrollable sense of one's own capacity; a generous confidence, and a great inclination to heroic deeds ....”

- The spirit of “magnanimity” involves drawing ever wider circles of inclusion. In light of this Emersonian challenge of overcoming exclusivist tendencies, the truly cultured and magnanimous person of today should seriously reflect on the need for: reestablishing understanding, respect and affection between the sexes – both at home and at work; for infusing new currents of love and responsibility into the nuclear and extended family; for finding tenable political solutions to the volcanic tension between earned wealth and entitled commonwealth; for fostering a dynamic relationship between the verticality of merit and the horizontal expansiveness of equality in society and in education; the need for creating multiple non-violent forums for constructive social change among the diverse and the disenchanting; for integrating the right of free speech with the duty of respecting the religious feelings and cultural differences of fellow world citizens;
- It is but fair to say that the cultured person of today cannot afford to reside in an ivory tower of academic exclusiveness or sit quietly in an arm chair of self-isolation. To analyze and criticize the world from afar – detachedly – is necessary and unavoidable but it is rarely inspirational and redemptive unless followed by concrete proposals and personal example. Thus, the truly cultured person must engage him or herself in authentic efforts to address the compelling needs of the hour – however minuscule those efforts might appear in the myopic, circumscribed opinions of others. In this sense, Tom Paine was right. We do have it in our power to “create the world of man afresh”. But this is a clarion call not only to intellectual awakening but to “right action” in many different but compatible senses. The present historical moment is indeed tumultuous but the future is open and ready to welcome its non-violent pioneers who dare to try, fail and then to try again. Their conscientious efforts will not be condemned to mirror the fruitless labors of the deposed and selfish king, Sisyphus, but will actively reflect the benevolent sacrifices of



the noble Titan, Prometheus. The latter suffers for his compassion actions but he does so willingly, and, his patient travails on behalf of man eventually summons the indomitable Hercules who comes to his rescue and restores him to his regal condition among the immortal of Olympus.

- In closing, one might offer one of many possible portraits of the man or woman who ardently desires to be a person of “world culture” – an active citizen in the “invisible community” of those who seek the true, the good and the beautiful in all its variegated forms:

“The person of “world culture” will be educated and literate at some meaningful level. Whether taught in village schools or in academies, he will master the skills needed to calculate and to communicate. He will not be limited to or overly affected by his participation in any particular profession or his membership in any social or economic class. He will be culturally ‘liberal minded’ but not necessarily a political liberal. If wealthy by birth or profession he will strive to be free from possessiveness and will take pains not to provoke resentment in people of lesser means. He will consider himself a trustee of his wealth and knowledge and will gladly contribute his time, money and energy to worthy local and international causes. If poor by birth or by circumstance he will shun envy, cultivate contentment and labor diligently. As much as possible, he will seek to be well-versed in the treasures of his own culture first: literature, music, art, drama and the like. But, beyond that, he will seek to understand and appreciate the contributions to world civilization by peoples of diverse cultures – past and present. He will salute and honor the highest values of the heroes and heroines of previous generations and will likewise seek out the buds of the truly human and the humane amongst his fellow citizens. He will have a strong sense of civic responsibility and an abiding concern for the well-being of the *res publica*. He will be spontaneously gracious to people of

different religions, cultures, races and classes such that they feel at ease in his presence. He will inwardly revere excellence and outwardly embrace those who embody it. He will be, above all, a learner and a sifter of all things human and will not fail to honor everything which seems wholesome and good as he artfully carries out his manifold responsibilities to his family, community and those beyond. In a word, he will be humble and self-confident, wise and magnanimous.”

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