

SYMBOLIC VARIETY AND CULTURAL INTEGRATION

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by

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Abstract: A unique combination of historical and cultural circumstances has contributed to two profound phenomena arising out of the early modern age: the emergence of cultural fragmentation and the revolutionary transition in symbolic structures to those in which the human subject has become the sole constituent principle of meaning and value. The creative impact of rich cultural diversity continues to this day, but cultural dispersion also exacts a toll in the absence of understanding of the relationships among symbol systems, the lack of a probing comprehension of cultural plurality, and inattention or indifference to the importance of integrative and synthetic impulses. Interdisciplinary studies may provide some of the critical understandings and processes for reducing vulnerability to excesses of cultural relativism and ideological absolutes.

I am happy and indeed honored to address an association with whose goals I am so profoundly in sympathy and which in a modest way I have attempted to promote in my own university by founding an integrated humanities program. Rather than discussing the ways toward achieving such a program, I prefer to analyze a concept that underlies all of your efforts to create some interaction over an ever-widening distance among a constantly growing variety of disciplines. I mean, of course, the concept of culture and, more specifically, how that concept has become endangered by the contemporary dispersion of symbolic structures.

1. Culture consists in the symbols that unite and direct the life of a society.

It allows its members to envision life from a common viewpoint and arms them with defenses against common dangers. More fundamentally, it brings meaning to human existence. In the words of Emmanuel Levinas, “*La culture c’est le sens venant à l’être.*” Meaning may be conveyed in many ways. It begins with naming things, as Adam did in Eden, or as the Greeks did when starting to give names to the gods, according to Herodotus. Humans are faced with the hard task of conquering their place in an environment that threatens them as much as it sustains them. Like all animals, they are forced to make their way by choosing between fighting the primitive otherness of nature and giving in to its all-comprehensive embrace. Still humans differ from animals through their symbolic activity.

2. Culture does more than equip a society with the techniques and concepts needed for coping with the material conditions of its environment. It always implies a *spiritual surplus* that urges humans to move beyond the satisfaction of their immediate needs. As Georg Simmel expressed it in his essay, “On the Concept and the Tragedy of Culture”:

Man, unlike animals, does not allow himself simply to be absorbed by the naturally given order of the world. Instead he tears himself loose from it—Somehow, beneath and above [the accomplishments of individual tasks and interests] stands the demand that through all these tasks and interests a transcendent promise should be fulfilled, that all individual expressions should appear only as a multitude of ways by which the spiritual life comes to itself.” (1968, pp. 27-28)

We attach a symbolic significance to all of our acts. Culture then consists in coherently “symbolizing” human existence. Through our symbolizing capacity, we mostly differ from animals. A symbolic act is never simply what it appears to be: it refers any activity, any representation, any purpose, to an ideal reality which possesses a different, more comprehensive, and more spiritual meaning. Through it, existence escapes the drudgery of the ordinary. Without the luxury of conveying a symbolic meaning, life and its multiple, often painful, demands would become unbearably poor. Alfred N. Whitehead wrote: “The mere toil for the slavish purpose of prolonging life for more toil or for mere bodily gratification is transformed into the conscious realization of a self-continued end, timeless within time” (1954, p. 348).

3. The unique ability of the human mind to achieve this transfer is an inexhaustible source of wonder. It puzzled people long before our scientific

and consciously artistic era. What enables a system of mostly mathematical signs to disclose even the most hidden secrets of the universe? The Assyrians and ancient Egyptians raised that question, and scientists still raise it today. The question is equally mysterious in the case of art and poetry. Are they not more than subjective emotions? Do they not give access to a higher plane of reality within which our common world becomes assumed by a supernatural radiance? Religion does so even more. Rarely acknowledged by believers, but most fundamental to their beliefs and actions is the certainty that all rituals, sacred images, and prayers intend a reality of which they “know” nothing, yet which to the believers appears more real than the actions themselves.

4. Characteristic of symbols is that they consist of an almost irreducible multiplicity of systems. Even the most archaic cultures know how to distinguish various symbolic levels. Modern anthropologists such as Malinowski and Lévi-Strauss have shown how in a seemingly homogeneous universe, archaic cultures maintain rigorous symbolic distinctions.

The multiple symbolic systems operative in a given society relate to one another in establishing that coherent and distinct totality, which we call “a culture.” When speaking of the Greek or of the Roman culture, we assume that they constituted complex webs not repeated or repeatable in any other culture. We so much take this unity for granted that we tend to lose sight of the enormous adaptability and capacity for change these systems possess before losing their identity. We also underestimate the diversity of symbolic sets operative within a single culture.

In referring to “Greek culture,” we easily lose sight of the internal conflicts and ideological strivings that threatened to tear it apart and ultimately ended up doing so. We isolate and blow up a characteristic image of a culture. In recent years philologists and anthropologists have been compelled to revise one-sided descriptions of such comprehensive concepts as Roman, or Greek, or Islamic culture. It is true though that some factors within a culture actually tend to assume control of all others. In much of Western medieval culture, religious symbolization came to dominate all others. Similarly, in the late 17th and early 18th century the success of the physical sciences came to define the cultural climate of the age. Scientific descriptions were accepted as ultimate definitions of the real. Their authority continued throughout much of the 19th century in France and Britain, even though at that time social sciences came to compete with them for supremacy. The principal point is that we must remain conscious of the variety of rivaling systems within a single culture. Interdisciplinary education may serve as an

effective means for bringing some order to the chaos resulting from such a phenomenon.

5. Each culture imposes a moral responsibility upon its members. It presupposes an ideal of the person which its members are supposed to recognize. In the later part of the modern age, we have all too easily assumed that this ideal is limited to social and technical progress. Kant, one of the first philosophers to write on this subject, insists that there is a difference between culture and civilization:

We are *civilized*—perhaps too much for our own good, in all sorts of social grace and decorum. But to consider ourselves as having reached morality—for that much is lacking. The ideal of morality belongs to culture; its use for some simulacrum of morality as the love of honor and outward decorum constitutes mere civilization. (1784/1963)

Kant may have been too severe. The love of honor and civil graciousness are also aspects of moral living, as the poet Schiller reminded him. But his warning about the inadequacy of technical or scientific “progress” as a moral ideal of culture was fully justified. Too often we view ourselves as superior to all previous generations. Perhaps we are, but not because we have built a more complex civilization. Indeed, I wonder whether we have sufficiently developed the moral virtues needed to use responsibly the enormous forces of technology we have introduced into the world. Are we moral enough to cope with our scientific and technical inventions?

6. The idea of progress raises yet a further question. Culture consists not merely of a multiplicity of symbolic structures within an organic unity. There are many cultures, each one different from others. Together they express the fullness of humanity, which only at the end of time will be complete. Hegel described this cultural history as “a succession of spirits, a gallery of images, each of which is endowed with all the riches of the one Spirit” (1807/1977, p. 492).

To do justice to the idea of culture, then, we ought to become aware not only of the many symbolic sets within the organic unity of one complex whole, but also of the relation of that one whole to many others. Hence, education should not only be interdisciplinary but should also include consciousness of cultural plurality. Yet in advancing this goal, major mistakes have been made. All too often a multicultural education has resulted in a cultural relativism that refuses to assume the cognitive and moral demands of one’s own culture. In the education of undergraduates and even more of high school students, multiculturalism ought not to occupy a major place in

the curriculum. Recent experiments in multicultural education of students who possess no more than a superficial knowledge of their own literature, social structures, and thought, have led to disappointing results. The purpose of intercultural studies consists not in smoothing out oppositions to a point where all cultures become “integrated” within one general, but contentless idea, but rather in deepening the awareness of cultural interconnection.

As they have become more conscious of the intricacy of a culture, even of its thought patterns and its complex affective and emotional responses, some contemporary thinkers have abandoned the faith in our ability to ever fully understand the presuppositions of *their* culture, and, of course, even more, that of others. They are resigned to settle for an “intellectual conversation” (Rorty) or an “uninhibited communication” (Habermas), and to abandon the universal categories upon which a discussion of these matters used to be based. Of course, one cannot make absolute claims for cultural relativism. Yet, we may make a legitimate claim that philosophical absolutes must be preceded by some cultural hermeneutics.

7. Precisely in this respect our age confronts us with unprecedented difficulties. Even in the recent past a culture rested on religious, philosophical, and social traditions shared by most of its members. Members of the culture might strongly disagree on the implications of that tradition. But at least they remained capable of understanding one another, as they spoke a common language. Until the 18th century, Western Europeans recognized such basic ideas as world, person, and transcendence from the perspective of common principles. Their understanding of the symbolic structure of their spiritual universe was essentially identical, however much they disagreed on its applications. In our modern culture, that fundamental agreement, forged from the basic principles upon which this common tradition rested, has come under severe strain. A critical event in late-medieval theology has much to do with this change. Let me first briefly sketch its precedents.

8. For ancient Greeks, the cosmos included humans, the physical world, and even the gods. Cosmos, or *physis* as the earliest philosophers called it, was not only the all-inclusive principle of reality, but it also provided its rational justification. The religious culture of Israel had, of course, a profoundly different conception of reality. Here all depended on one creative principle which had brought all the rest into being. The Creator, according to this view, was not part of the reality of nature or of the human race. He was their *cause* and, as such, conveyed to them some of his own intelligibility. Despite essential differences, the Hebrew and later also the Christian and the

Muslim views of reality remained remarkably consistent with the classical one on the central thesis that all reality (including that of the mind) continued to derive both its being and its intelligibility from a single source—whether it be nature (*physis*) or God. The nominalist theology of the 14th and 15th centuries changed this condition.

Theologians continued to assert, of course, that all things causally depend on the Creator. But in their efforts to raise the attribute of divine omnipotence to an absolute level, those theologians, inspired by the philosophy of the Franciscan William of Ockham, asserted that the Creator was not bound by the laws of his creation, neither by those that rule the mind nor by those that regulate the physical universe. Those laws, they asserted, existed only through a free decision of God, not through any intrinsic necessity; nor is God permanently bound by the decision. He could change the laws at any time. Thus with one stroke the theologians removed the inherent intelligibility from the nature of things. No *a priori claims* could be made about the world on the ground of divine perfection. God is free to create or not to create and to create in any way He pleases. The Creator is not a *model* of creation. He stands entirely above it. Hence the task of establishing rational order is left entirely to the human mind's own efforts. As a result, the mind becomes the sole source of meaning. By observation, by trial and error, the mind has to find out what is compatible with its own nature and then declare this compatibility the very definition of objective intelligibility.

I have terribly simplified one of the most complex occurrences in Western intellectual history. A more nuanced report of it appears in my study, *Passage to Modernity*. The full impact of this revolution appeared much later. How fundamental it was, however, even in the man who most strongly fought to restore the total reliability of mental and physical laws, René Descartes. Having redefined intelligibility as being exclusively established by the human mind, he nonetheless repeated the blatantly nominalist thesis that the truth of mathematic equations depends on a divine decree. What always had been a unified synthesis now became fragmented into three separate spheres: a physical nature subject to mechanical motion, a meaning-giving human mind, and an inscrutable Creator withdrawing ever further from his creation. Eighteenth century philosophers more and more began to question the reality of this distant principle which never interfered with the world once it was in motion, and which might have been in motion from all eternity.

Once the human subject became the sole constituent principle of meaning and value, tradition lost its former authority. Each group, indeed each individual, saw him or herself constrained to make sense of the world and

of the self. Suddenly an enormous multiplicity of symbolic systems became conceivable. New interpretations of the physical universe followed one another in rapid succession: mechanism, organicism, magnetism, etc. By the end of the 18th century a series of political and social revolutions had begun in Europe which culminated in the 20th century battles between nationalism and communism. In our own time they have mostly been replaced by an equally acrimonious struggle between secular and theocratic societies. Art and aesthetic theories have also overturned tradition. Art has ceased to be imitation: more and more it has come to mean expression. Within a span of less than a hundred years, romanticism, realism, impressionism, expressionism, cubism, and various forms of structuralism followed one another.

9. The emancipation from a pre-established order has resulted in a “big bang” of symbolic creativity. The systems created as a result are subject only to self-given rules. The fragmentation that has followed has given contemporary culture a kaleidoscopic fascination. Each of these symbolic structures—literary, artistic, social, and political—tends to spawn a small universe of its own. Nor can we truly share these “miniverses” as common possessions. In much of contemporary art and poetry, for instance, the reader, viewer, or hearer is invited, often required, to recreate the artist's private world into a private world of his or her own making. Even literary or artistic criticism, rather than bridging the gap between creator and receiver, merely expands the number of private possibilities, eclipsing original meanings by equally private new ones. Postmodern culture, the consistent heir of the fundamental principles of modernity (despite its family quarrels with it!) presents an exciting spectacle.

Yet such unrestricted creativity exacts a toll. Symbolic structures integrated within a coherent culture have traditionally functioned as beacons of meaning on our journey through time. If we abandon the attempt to integrate them into some kind of coherent synthesis, they cease to provide guidance. They then turn into mere games—words or forms with all the glitter of glass beads (Hess's *Glasperlenspiel*)—that cease to lend meaning to existence. This, I take it, is what Daniel Bell meant when he wrote: “Modernism has beyond dispute been responsible for one of the great surges of creativity in Western culture...” (1978, p. xxii). Yet there has been a price. One cost has been the loss of coherence in culture, particularly in the spread of an antinomian attitude to moral norms and even to the idea of cultural judgment itself.” Today science, art, and religion have turned into private domains; they are no longer integrated. What remains is what T.S. Eliot called “a heap of broken images,” wobbling beacons in an unstable universe. Once the

cultural synthesis has broken up and the human person has become the sole source of meaning, this fragmentation is inevitable. It was only resistance to change that prevented culture from forthwith splintering into the unlimited diversity we are witnessing now.

10. The present condition has resulted in what we have come to call a cultural “alienation.” Rousseau, Hegel, Simmel, and others assumed that any culture by its very nature estranges humans from an original state of immediacy. In any society, conflicts arise between social institutions and cultural artifacts on one side, and the search for meaning which these objective forms were meant to satisfy on the other. Every culture creates objective forms which later generations no longer recognize as their own. No culture, then, escapes alienation altogether, and, as Sigmund Freud observed, the more a society becomes cultured, the more painful restrictions it exacts and the more demands it makes. But in comparing our own complex cultural condition with that of earlier generations, we cannot but conclude that our experience of the inadequacy of contemporary culture in conveying meaning to our lives differs from past dissatisfaction more than only in degree. For reasons I have attempted to explain, our culture experiences greater difficulties than any previous one in integrating its diversity into an acceptable synthesis. After the fragmentation of the classical synthesis in the late-modern epoch, meaning, once held to be inherent *in the very nature of things*, became the exclusive attribute of the human mind. If the mind alone imposes rationality on the real, the ideas of an established world order and of a tradition based upon that order lose their authority.

Here then lies the main obstacle to a philosophical integration of culture in the modern age. Where the component principles of culture have become separated from one another, the real no longer appears as a coherent totality. Can modern culture ever reunite those *disjecta membra*? The fragmentation of culture coincided with the modern shift of meaning toward the subject. An emphasis on the creative, human subject is not necessarily fatal to cultural integration. The early humanists and many of the Renaissance artists and scientists strongly felt an enormous confidence in their own creative powers. But Michelangelo and Galileo, no less than Plato and Dante, regarded that creativity itself as a *given*, not a power which they had created themselves. The principle of subjectivity cannot be abandoned. Trying to do so is like attempting to de-invent science. But the crucial issue is whether subjectivity is compatible with a more fundamental *givenness* that includes the creative subject itself.

Contrary to Greek thought or medieval theology, the human subject in modern culture mediates all principles of reality. Yet the idea of a meaning-giving subject does not in principle exclude the essential givenness of that subject itself. Such early-modern thinkers as Nicholas of Cusa, Erasmus, Pascal, and Malebranche succeeded in securing the self a central position within a reality conceived as fundamentally given. The brokenness of the modern worldview directly results from the axiomatic position of the subject as *ultimate*. A primary condition for any reintegration of modern culture is that the creative subject be rooted in a comprehensive givenness without thereby losing its own meaning-giving function.

Conclusion

I have tried to show why some integration of the many aspects of culture is needed. A primary function of cultural symbols is to introduce some meaning into the intolerable arbitrariness of life's contingency. Even a single symbolic system functions as an ordering principle. Culture requires a dynamic integration of a plurality of symbolic structures. The present difficulty of achieving such integration has followed in the wake of the cultural fragmentation of the early-modern age. Yet we cannot dispense with the impulse to overcome sheer multiplicity. Unless the diverse symbolic units of culture are grounded in a synthesis sufficiently comprehensive to assign to each its own place in an orderly totality, our partial syntheses tend to inflate their relativity into ideological absolutes.

Biographical Note: Louis Dupré (PhD, University of Louvain) served as the T. Lawrason Riggs Professor in the Philosophy of Religion at Yale University from 1973-1998 and is now Professor Emeritus in Religious Studies. He previously taught philosophy at Georgetown University. He has been President of both the American Catholic Philosophical Association and the Hegel Society of America. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a foreign member of the Royal Academy of Arts, Sciences, and Letters of Belgium, Dupré has published such books as *The Starting Point of Marxist Philosophy*; *Kierkegaard as Theologian*; *The Philosophical Foundations of Marxism*; *The Other Dimension* (translated into six languages); *Transcendent Selfhood*; *A Dubious Heritage*; *The Deeper Life*; *Marx's Social Critique of Culture*; *The Common Life*; *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*; and *Metaphysics and Culture*. He has edited or co-edited four books and has published some 200 articles, mostly in philosophy. His most recent book, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture*, was published by Yale University Press in 2004.

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