

Is Culture an Improbable Product or the Essence of a Rich Man?

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1. Culture as an improbable topic of culture itself

The topic of culture is an apparent paradox when it comes to be questioned from the standpoint of philosophy. Culture is not a traditional problem of philosophical questioning. In fact, culture appears to be a very recent topic, and, actually, not a central one. We could even say that culture is not essential to authentic philosophical rigour: a philosophy of culture is one of those recent or postmodern variations, an application of the concept to a peripheral field. Furthermore culture does not seem to peak the interest of contemporary philosophy, which is driven by the project of rethinking the very foundations of a radical ontology or any other kind of *proté philosophia*.

So, if culture is a theme of secondary importance for philosophy, why does it have to be questioned? This direct frontal question could be modified, and the interrogation rephrased: the subject of culture has recently arisen in philosophy, but why now? Does this sudden actuality and relevance of culture mean anything? Or, which is the same question, why, after 26 centuries of Occidental thought, has culture finally come to be studied? Part of the answer could lie in the apparent synchronicity of the emergence of culture as a theme with the emergence of anthropology as a worthy domain of philosophical task, at least until philosophical anthropology be also denounced as a nonessential theme of reflection, as a simple *metaphysica specialis*. Regardless, there has been recognition of the link between culture and the being seen as the bearer of culture, that is to say Man. Nonetheless, neither anthropology nor culture have yet been acknowledged as central philosophical topics.

The parallel between culture and man continues with the method they use to define themselves. Indeed, both rely on establishing their contrast with something they are not, nature, to define what they are. This way of defining man is in agreement with what is to be found in Blumenberg's colossal Description of Man, in which he writes that

a definition is above all a determination of differences. It must guarantee that one thing cannot be confused with another. ... [this is the] reason why most of the philosophical efforts that could be qualified afterwards as anthropology were applied to the inventory of the differences between man and the animal¹.

And yet, the question "Why culture?" is as impertinent for philosophy as the question "Was ist Mensch?", since the demand of universality that philosophy pursues makes culture a purely empirical product subject to temporal, historical and geographical diversity: what philosophy names an empirical condition. At the same time that contemporary philosophy found its fulfillment in the ideal of a pure scientificity, as a guarantee of its universality. Philosophy refuses to be rooted in any discipline threatening its pretension to universality with but a hint of empiricism. For instance, when Husserl founded phenomenology as a strict science, he radically distinguished it from any empiricist temptation, he called *anthropologism* or *psychologism*². Following the same kind of reasoning, philosophy should withstand any temptation to understand quest of truth as a possible cultural phenomenon, amongst others. This risk could be named "culturalism" (*Kuturalismus*).

This leads us to ask the question of the legitimate form of universality our modernity acknowledges to itself. Science appears the spontaneous answer, as it appears to fulfill the requirements of being both beyond the contingent constitution of the empirical man, and beyond the variety of cultures and their incidental expressions.

However, in his Copernican revolution, Kant established that the demand of universality could only be met within the conditions of possibility of an experience for a reason whose expressions define the field of a possible experience "for us, men"³. It is, thus, from this standpoint that he defines any possibility that the question of thought and therefore the question about the instance that thinks,

1 Blumenberg, H.; *Die Beschreibung des Menschen*, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, p. 504.

2 Cf. Husserl, E., *Die Idee der Phänomenologie*, The Hague, Netherlands, 1973, p. 48, where Husserl opposed explicitly the transcendental philosophy to any kind of "Psychologismus und Anthropologismus", considered like merely empirical methods.

3 Cf. Kant, I., *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Hamburg, 1993, B 33, p. 63 where Kant introduces in the second edition of the KrV the famous expression "uns Menschen wenigstens", assuming thus for his thought a position of a radical finitude, based on a transcendental anthropology. On Kant's transcendental philosophy as anthropology, see Capeillères, F., La fondation kantienne des anthropologies philosophiques dans une anthropologie transcendantale, in: Berner, Ch., & Capeillères, F., *Kant et les kantismes dans la philosophie contemporaine 1804-2004*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2007, pp. 83-108.

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should be considered. In this sense, the question about the nature of man, Kant's fourth question, and the questioning of what forms what is its own - to be a being of "over"-nature - cannot be considered a minor one, as it constitutes the domain of the first philosophy, the *protè philosophia*.

It is not surprising then that we will encounter here two of the only philosophers who radicalized the Kantian revolution, by making the fourth question the center of their thought. In so doing, they came to refer the nature of man to the product of his activity, his demiurgic ability: the protean field of culture. For neither Ernst Cassirer, nor Hans Blumenberg is it possible to separate the nature of man from the essence of its activity as a product: culture. The very definition of man as a symbolic animal for Cassirer means that the essence of man manifests itself in his tireless capacity to produce meaning through the process he terms "formgiving" (*Formgebung, Gestaltung*)⁴. Although this nature is not conceived by Cassirer as an essence in a metaphysical sense, Blumenberg nonetheless considers the cultural nature of man a problem to be dealt with. In the speech dedicated to Cassirer he pronounced when he received the Kuno Fischer prize, Blumenberg insisted once more on the fact that the cultural nature of man should not be considered evident (*selbstverständlich*), just as it is not evident that there could be culture—and anthropology—instead of nothing. We will see in what ways it is possible to confront these two approaches to the phenomenon of culture.

2. The sumptuousness of Cassirer's symbolic animal

The radicalism of Cassirer's thought comes probably from the fact that he took Kant seriously when the latter defined the task of philosophy as the necessity to renounce the *proud name of ontology*, to reduce its aim to an analytic of reason itself⁵. Assuming that reason cannot be reached directly, but only through its own production, and its universal form—note this is the very definition of *transcendental*—Cassirer developed his work around trying to measure all of the implications of this revolution: the realm of the human production and its laws is the realm of the experience. The transcendental conditions of possibility of symbolic production correspond to the conditions of the experience of any possible world. With the same radicalism, Cassirer limits this "analytic" to the very extension of the capacity of the symbolic animal to extend and use his unique and

4 Cf. Cassirer, E.; *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, Hamburg, 1995.

5 Kant, I., *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, *op. cit.*, A 247/B 308, p. 296.

infinite ability to produce, feed and be fed by the movement of symbolic renewal, which means the infinite dynamic of culture to be developed. In this case, the very question of the nature of culture cannot be answered although the reflection takes the nature of *Mensch*, human beings into consideration. This anthropological turn is not an arbitrary decision, but is commanded by the very nature of the possibility of reflection itself, on itself: how is thought—in all its expressions, variety and modalities—possible? Consequently, in a very Kantian fashion, Cassirer responds that the question of the nature of culture—which we have seen to be the same question as that of the nature of man—cannot be answered by the questioning of the origin of the phenomenon. The reason for this is that this kind of preoccupation is still totally metaphysical, that, in a sense, it presupposes that it would be possible for the reflection to “jump” out of its very conditions of possibility, which are purely symbolical. The fact is nobody, during the search for an answer about the nature of cultural being, can spare what enables his very research, which is the symbolic nature of its questioning. The question of the “nature” of the symbolic, its “essence” can never be answered through a merely genetical method, which presupposes a way of regressing before the moment we became “symbolical Beings”, that is, human. It would be the same question as “what was the world before we became human?” We know that this question can only be answered by poetry, imagination, whose production represents the very first product of symbolic realm which is ours, is always ours. For Cassirer, life can only be conceived within culture, wrapped in symbolic diversity. We are *immer schon*, always already in side the symbols. No regressive quest, no boundary experiences can lead us “out” of the world, because there is no world outside the symbols, no exteriority to it, and neither anteriority.

By virtue of these “forms” mankind attains proximity to the world and a distance from it which no other creature possesses. If we are to identify this process of delimitation, to draw a line of demarcation between mankind and the totality of the world of living things, this can occur only by taking the concept and structure of this configuration as a starting point, and by trying to grasp not so much its development as its content. No metaphysics and no empirical fact will ever be in a position to illuminate the “origin” of this configuration in the sense that it puts us back at the temporal starting point that it permits us immediately to eavesdrop on its beginning. We can never penetrate back to the point at which the first ray of intellectual consciousness broke out of the world of life ... A strictly naturalistic anthropology must undertake this attempt

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again and again, for its "possibility" depends upon the success of this attempt. But this attempt always turns out in the end to be circular: in the end one can "develop" out of elements nothing other than what had been already implicitly attributed to them, no matter how concealed this tacit assumption has been⁶.

The life in the symbolic realm, the participation in the dual activity of cultural dynamic, as synchronical *forma formans* and *forma formata*, is what Cassirer names an *Urphänomen*, an originary phenomenon, impassable and founding at the same time. This is what was so clear to Heidegger in the Davoser debate, as he declared that the *terminus a quo* of Cassirer's philosophy was not very clear⁷.

3. Blumenberg and the improbable nature of culture

It is precisely this *a priori* condition of any possible experience that causes doubt in Hans Blumenberg. Joining also the anthropological problem to the nature of culture, the attempt of Blumenberg's philosophy to answer the fourth Kantian question leads him to reappraise the existence of the human as a matter of course (*Selbstverständlichkeit*). On the contrary, the first move of founding his own anthropology goes through a new kind of reflexive requirement:

As philosophy is a deconstruction of self-evidences (*Aber sofern Philosophie Abbau von Selbstverständlichkeiten ist*), a philosophical anthropology should deal with the topic of whether the physical existence is not already the result of those abilities granted to Man as "essentials" (*wesentlich*). Thus, the first statement of a philosophical anthropology should be this one: it is not so obvious that human being should exist⁸.

Which means in other words: it is not obvious that culture should be. Contingency is thus the primary condition to think both anthropology and culture. But this new and radical position should not be understood as a regression to the precritical position of the problem of man and culture. Blumenberg does not pretend that the

6 Cassirer, E., *Zur Metaphysik der symbolischen Formen*, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-7.

7 Davoser Disputation zwischen Ernst Cassirer und Martin Heidegger, in: Heidegger, M., *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Frankfurt am Main 1991, pp. 288-9.

8 Blumenberg, H., *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, Stuttgart 1999, p. 114.

alleged contingent nature of culture should authorize us to return to the state "before" it, to determine the reasons that caused man, this "animal born young", to have recourse to all kind of strategies of roundabout, of detour, what Cassirer defined as *Kunst des Umwegs*. Nevertheless, Blumenberg cannot avoid considering that the *terminus a quo* of the symbolic animal is too easily taken for granted, because,

this theory of Cassirer gives up on explaining why man have recourse to "symbolic forms", the fact that they appear in the world of culture allows to derive from an *animal symbolicum* who exteriorizes his "essence" into his creations. For an anthropology of the "rich" man, based on a guaranteed biological existence, or at least not questioned, the cultural shell of the symbolic forms goes on growing, layer after layer. The enrichment of the naked existence does not keep any functional relation with its possibility of existence⁹.

In a time of genuine modern functionalism, neither man nor culture has an assured essence to rely on. But the lack of essence of the human being cannot be explained only by a simple *flaw* of the human constitution. The definition of man as a *Mangelwesen*, a flawed being, cannot be understood in a simple biological sense, since there is no possible empirical anthropology for Blumenberg¹⁰. The topic of the default has not been a central component of reflection neither on man, nor on culture. The possibility of considering it as a subject coincides with the human interrogation on his cultural nature.

But this question is not one of those so-called *everlasting questions*, whose identity and eternity Blumenberg questioned critically, since their possibility rests on the concept of substance (paradoxically, the basis of Blumenberg's critique to the argument of the everlasting questions that haunt the modern ages is definitely grounded in the fundamental and seminal distinction of Cassirer between the concept of substance and the concept of function)¹¹. The form and aim of our interrogations are also a product of the historical process of self determination of man. In this sense, the fact that we question the nature of culture—and its human

9 Blumenberg, H., *Wirklichkeiten in denen wir leben*, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

10 Cf. Müller, O., *Sorge um die Vernunft*, Paderborn 2005, p. 142.

11 Cf. Blumenberg, H. *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt 1996, Part I, chap. 6 where we can find the systematical application of the cassirerian distinction between the concept of *substance* and the concept of *function* as representing the revolution of paradigm that defines modern thought; see Cassirer, E., *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. Untersuchungen über die Grundfragen der Erkenntnis-kritik*, Berlin 1910.

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producer—is an immanent result of the continuous process of *autopoiesis* of culture. The way in which Blumenberg questions the layering process of cultural coats as a so-called “given evidence” is to replace it with its temporal development, which means that there is not any kind of pre-determined pattern to this evolution. This is why Blumenberg claims that it is not obvious that man—and of course its cultural products—should ever exist: because, as a topic, there is no metaphysical reason or guarantees that neither man nor culture should be or become a matter of reflection and, as such, come to exist within the realm of representation. In this sense, any kind of fundamental reflection on culture must be integrated in a history of the Spirit, a *Geistesgeschichte*. The historical nature of culture constitutes its “essence”, but a dynamic, functional essence. In Oliver Müller’s words,

Historicity belongs fundamentally to Blumenberg’s version of an *animal symbolicum*. The Historicity is a symbolic form, that corresponds to the «unity» of Man (*Mensch*). ... The historical Reason is also a cultural Reason¹².

It means that the consequence of the idea of culture as a product of an activity leads to the impossibility to found it in any kind of metaphysical fundament. This applies to man also, as a possible matter of culture itself. Man could appear, and, as Foucault once prophesied, man could disappear. There are no guaranties that culture—or man—could be an actual subject of the very own development of culture. It has not been the case during centuries, which indicates that what we just recognized as the “essence” of man could once more be forgotten or avoided.

12 Müller, O., *Sorge um die Vernunft*, op. cit., p. 258.

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