Abstract: Cultural philosophy is one of the leading disciplines of contemporary philosophy. The greatest challenge to it today is Naturalism, which – putting it simply – is the basing of Culture on natural phenomena. Even when this endeavor has been achieved, Culture remains in our everyday lives as it always was: its own phenomenon, which we urgently need in order to survive, and to live well. There are many interpretations of Culture, but the most important of all is Culture as a medium of coping with life and the world. A significant sign of Culture is the mastering of reality. Reality, then, is when it rains; Culture is when you use an umbrella!

Is it possible to conceive of a life without the experience of disappointment? Surely only in a world in which there is no such thing as “the unexpected.” All disappointment is a matter of unfulfilled expectation, an experience which we human beings are spared only so long as our needs and their satisfactions, our expectations and their fulfillments, coincide – only so long as life keeps its promises, so to speak. But something comparable also holds for those occasions when we feel that we cannot rely upon anything in this world, when we are prepared for anything. One who already anticipates everything need fear no bitter disappointments, no unwelcome surprises. But no one can actually or permanently live this way – to adopt such an attitude to life would exceed the powers of every one of us. And, similarly, a life in which need and its fulfillment absolutely corresponded with one another is merely the dream of a paradise from which we have long since been expelled. And yet we do not simply stand in utter or hopeless impotence before the unpredictable character of reality, a reality which can be imbued with forms of order and meaning that offer certain possibilities for human fulfillment and orientation. Culture represents the sum total of such possibilities, and it is with the existential significance of culture in this sense that the following observations are primarily concerned.

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1. The Forms of Culture

The word “culture” has so many different meanings that we may legitimately doubt whether it can be precisely defined at all. The most satisfactory course is to elucidate the concept of culture through examples. Culture is generally understood as embracing the realms of art, law and religion, but also those of science, technology, economics and politics, along with a host of associated social norms, customs and practices. Sometimes we draw a distinction between culture in the broader sense, which includes the entire life-world and its various sub- and counter-cultures, and what is often called “higher” culture: the visual and plastic arts, the world of music and literature, forms of religious belief – the cultivation of which frequently contributes to the most satisfying, fulfilling and exalted experiences life has to offer. The idea of culture thus ranges from the invention of tools and implements that simply help to preserve and maintain life itself, through to the creation of works of art which bestow great meaning and value upon our life. The “philosophy of culture” has long developed and appealed to certain oppositions and distinctions in this connection – that of “culture and nature,” for example, or of “culture and civilization.” The sort of modern philosophy of culture which operates with such conceptual oppositions generally regards itself as a form of cultural “critique.” I shall briefly consider two examples of such critique here.

2. The Critique of Culture

In the midst of the age of Enlightenment Jean-Jacques Rousseau already mounted a fundamental critique of culture in the name of nature. He felt that culture, the ensemble of the arts and sciences, had become predominantly estranged from the true end and purpose of human existence. According to Rousseau, culture had only enfeebled his contemporaries as far as morality was concerned and, instead of satisfying their true and natural impulses, had merely given rise to a myriad of unfillable needs. Rousseau contrasted this deleterious culture with the original goodness of “nature” – a familiar enough motif which can be traced all the way back to classical antiquity. Sophists like Antiphon, Cynics like Diogenes, and Stoics like Panaetius, had already repeatedly criticized culture in the name of an intrinsically perfect and uncorrupted

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nature, and in our own time “alternative” or counter-cultural movements have often enough called upon nature as the principal witness for the prosecution in the case against culture. But this approach is extremely problematic nonetheless. For, firstly, “nature” in its goodness is already a product of culture, a result and consequence of human sensibility and imagination. And, secondly, nature can only provide a critical measure for judging the true and the false once we human beings have introduced such a criterion into nature in the first place. But the most important point in this context is indicated in the following question: if the original state of nature is so perfect, why have human beings abandoned it in order to produce and develop culture at all? Rousseau, and many thinkers after him, have attempted to answer this question by appealing to the gradual emergence and awakening of the human mind in its own right, as a process of consciousness and self-reflection which ineluctably encourages the construction of culture.2

There is another kind of cultural critique which approaches the question quite differently, and criticizes culture in the name of culture itself. In this connection we could mention Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, or Benjamin and Foucault, to name only a few.3 From this perspective, modern civilization represents a universal “context of delusion,” a soulless and “administered,” world, a “one-dimensional” society, in which human beings are basically governed by prevailing structures of domination, such as technology and bureaucracy, which have now become independent in their own right. Even the “higher culture” explicitly represented by the string quartet, by painting and poetry, has come to appear suspect in their eyes since, firstly, such forms of culture have done nothing to hinder or prevent the horrors and cruelties of previous history, and, secondly, have merely served to entrench the existing state of things. For insofar as culture in this sense inwardly captivates human beings, elevating them into a nobler world over and above the material order of life, it discourages significant change in the prevailing world and thus betrays the original promise of utopia.

Thus it is no longer consciousness and self-reflection which are seen as the real agents or bearers of culture, as in Rousseau, but rather a kind of anonymous


will to domination, or to the progressive manipulation of the world. Irrespective of whether we are speaking of science and technology, of politics, economics and law, or of art, religion and philosophy – in the last analysis all of them have almost always represented forms of control and domination, ways of “appropriating” the world. But is this analysis correct? Even if the line of thought we have merely outlined here may claim some partial justification, is it actually the case that culture arises principally from human self-reflection or from an anonymous will to domination? But before addressing this question more precisely, I should like first to draw attention to the “naturalism” which probably represents the greatest threat to the idea of culture in our own time. To formulate the issue in the sharpest possible fashion, we could say that naturalism seems concerned less with criticizing culture than with eliminating its significance altogether.

3. The Naturalization of Culture

Generally speaking, “naturalism” represents the conviction that the world is essentially a world of reliably identifiable things, that there is a natural explanation for everything, that reality can be known and grasped by scientific means, if not completely and exhaustively, then at least hypothetically or in principle.

More specifically, we may distinguish between a stronger metaphysical version of naturalism and a more methodological variant. According to the stronger version, the physical universe, with its more than a hundred thousand million galaxies, is simply all there is. Whether we consider the world as a whole – the immeasurable range of the cosmos – or human beings as the tiny specks of dust that inhabit it, many contemporary naturalists regard reality in its entirety as an anonymous play of blind natural forces. In this play of forces the human being, the contingent product of a long and undirected process of natural history, is simply a minuscule part of the whole, completely dependent upon the genes and neurons that constitute the organism.

In comparison with metaphysical naturalists, who present the world so described as reality in an absolute sense, methodological naturalists are principally concerned with securing the uncontestable authority of the natural sciences for the entire domain of genuine knowledge. They have no hesitation in “naturalizing” the world of consciousness or that of norms and values, interpreting the latter as emotive expressions of feelings that can be traced back to the limbic organization of the brain. Today many are even prepared to naturalize reason itself which is then simply regarded as a natural activity of the neo-cortex. For it seems easy enough to entertain the hope that both the natural and the human sciences can ultimately be united under the aegis of the former if human culture too, including the science of culture, is the product
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of natural bio-systems. The advances of modern research have already brought neuroscience, behavioral genetics, and evolutionary biology to the very threshold of the cultural and human sciences. The understanding of meaning and the construction of theoretical explanations have also come to be seen as products of the human organism – as neurological facts in their own right – just like every other cultural expression of human nature. Hence in the future, it is alleged, culture in its entirety will be explained on the basis of nature through recourse to causal-genetic methods and procedures. The increasingly widespread acceptance of this naturalization of the mind, along with epistemology, ethics, and culture as a whole, is part of this general development of our time. Prominent representatives of this general line of thought include such figures as Quine, Wilson, Kanitscheider, Vollmer, Dretske, and Stalnaker.  

4. An Unfulfillable Project

By the end of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant, in particular, had already explicitly challenged the allegedly “insolent” pretensions of naturalism, while at the beginning of the twentieth century we find the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl writing to the neo-Kantian Heinrich Rickert: “We are comrades in arms in the struggle against naturalism as our common enemy.”

Now, there is no question today that the effectively interdisciplinary investigations of cognitive science, biolinguistics, sociolinguistics and sociobiology, but also of neurology, can make an essential contribution to our specific understanding of human thought and behavior, and of the processes of value judgment and value response, as well as to our general self-understanding as human beings. We have all inherited from our ancestors certain neurobiological characteristics which allow us to see the world in particular ways, and to prefer and select specific forms of behavior over others. But it still remains unclear to what extent morality and culture are themselves rooted in nature, and to what extent they can be traced back to the laws of biology and neurophysiology. It is now regarded as self-evident that our knowledge, learning and skills depend upon certain natural dispositions and potentials. But that we are utterly and entirely determined by the latter would seem to be a catastrophic conclusion to draw since every code or form of morality

also presupposes a minimum level of autonomy. And the investigation and clarification of the biological foundations of our social behavior would still be incapable of resolving any fundamentally normative problems and questions. What is more, the causal explanation of the cognitive processes does not itself answer either the question concerning the validity of our scientific claims or the question concerning the relevant criteria of truth. Neural processes cannot tell us whether our scientific conjectures are correct, nor what it is that permits us to know or judge their truth or otherwise. Knowledge itself would become an illusion if we assumed that all our thought and action is determined by natural forces which wholly elude our grasp.

But this assumption appears to be a largely exaggerated one, even if we are probably more dependent upon primary and antecedent structures of language, upon specific genetic programming and brain processes, than we may like to concede. But we are not concerned here with speculations concerning the precise degree and extent of natural forces that lie beyond our will. We are solely interested in considering the practical implications for our culture if this theoretical perspective were justified – if, that is, human beings were an impotent epiphenomenon of anonymous or “subjectless” natural processes in a world that is indifferent to them.

Here we should have to admit that naturalism is incapable of liberating the individual from the pressure of either social need or existential questioning. For whatever the roots or foundations of our thought and action may be, we must still continue to think and act. That is to say, even if we were impotent marionettes, we should still have to “lead” our lives, and could not simply appeal to our genes and neurons to decide how to think or act. We should still have to rely – as we always have – upon our insight, intelligence and judgment, and upon the social cooperation and mutual understanding of our fellow human beings. And what is more, just as naturalism fails to unburden human beings from a fundamental concern with their own existence and significance, so too it cannot relieve them of the obligation of engaging on behalf of life when confronted with the need and distress that afflicts the world. Even if there were no such thing as freedom in itself, then freedom in the legal, political, and everyday sense, as the possibility of development and self-realization for the individual, a freedom often secured only through great cost and sacrifice in the course of history, would still remain a good that is worthy of protection.

Something similar also holds for the rest of human culture and civilization, which would not suddenly be rendered superfluous even if they could somehow be translated into the language of the natural sciences. No one doubts that the processes of rhythm or harmony can be explained by reference to specific temporal relations and identifiable frequencies organized according to numerical rules and principles – but is such knowledge alone
sufficient to allow us to understand a Mozart Requiem or a Brahms string quartet? Put more concretely, feelings of love may be explained in terms of the interplay of hormones and neurons, or musical notes in terms of sound waves, and colors in terms of the electromagnetic effects of specific light waves, all of which affect the human sensory apparatus to produce complex electrochemical processes in the brain. Yet be this as it may, an enduring personal relationship, a striking and memorable melody, a profoundly moving painting, remain for us what they always were: a unique experience of meaning or significance. Again, expressed in another way: the prospective student of Kant or Vico need not successfully complete the study of biochemistry before undertaking the work of philosophical interpretation. Here what is required instead is precisely certain cultural skills and accomplishments, such as the ability to write, to report and to reflect on what is read, a feeling for the aesthetic, a discriminating response to the material, a sense of judgment, and, in addition, an ample range of cultural-historical knowledge.

Nonetheless, the relation between culture, or the cultural sciences, and the natural sciences remains a tense and difficult one. It would be a spurious solution to this tension if we attempted to suppress one or another of the two sides, even if this approach might appear to be the easiest way of satisfy the general demand for a single non-contradictory account of the matter. But it is sometimes necessary to endure or sustain apparent contradictions against the illusory and premature resolution of a real difficulty.

5. Hermeneutic Self-Understanding

Even if naturalism were largely justified, we could never give up speaking of artistic understanding, of exemplary taste and judgment, of the stylistic transformations that characterize the inner development of cultural forms in general. Nor could we simply give up acting and behaving in accordance with existing customs and practices, with the prevailing moral codes, with the established systems of right and law. The hermeneutic acknowledgement of the surviving effect of the past in the present, whether it be experienced as a sustaining good or as an oppressive form of bondage, retains its own recognizable significance, as does the current discourse concerning the ambiguous character of modernity with its often contested tendencies towards rationalization, individualization, pluralization and globalization.

In all of this it is necessary to distinguish between possessing culture and being acquainted with it. None of us is simply a helpless instance of mere nature, each of us is also a creature of needs, a subject of rights, a member of a cultural community with different traditions, institutions, and forms of life.
From the moment of birth, as human beings, we find ourselves bound up in different worlds, with different origins, from which we receive not only the language and social structures which we inhabit, but also the culture that forms and shapes us. The sciences of culture, which have developed their own methods and procedures, investigate the products of culture as products of creative human activity. But these sciences are not charged simply with accumulating knowledge about culture. They are also expected to develop specific cultural skills, such as the facility for elegant and appropriate speech and fluent composition, to furnish general value-orientations, to cultivate certain basic ethical attitudes and dispositions, such as diligence, respect, attentiveness and openness, to awaken the individual to an almost unlimited readiness for dialogue and discussion. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has pointed out, we become “cultivated” not simply through the acquisition of knowledge or skill, but only when we allow ourselves to be inwardly formed and changed by them.7

In contrast to Rousseau on the one hand, who traces culture back to human reflection and self-consciousness, and to Adorno or Foucault on the other, who trace it back to structures of power and domination, hermeneutically oriented thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey8 or Hans-Georg Gadamer9 – irrespective of their other differences on specific questions – regard culture principally as something that serves the self-understanding of human beings. Here culture is interpreted as part of the process by which individuals come to an understanding of themselves and the world.

Then again, the theories of culture that Georg Simmel10 or Henri Bergson11 developed from the perspective of the “philosophy of life” emphasized the exuberant and excessive character of life itself, and saw the manifold forms and products of culture as manifestations of that life that simply reflect the immense variety of human talents and possibilities. In contrast, the philosophy of culture defended by Wilhelm Windelband12 and Heinrich Rickert13 was explicitly focused upon the central concept of “value.” On this view, the phenomenon of culture specifically owes its existence to the human appre-

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9 See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*; [*Truth and Method*].


hension of intrinsically valid and binding values such as “truth,” “beauty,” and “justice,” values which find their corresponding concrete realization in the domains of science, art and law respectively.

There is no doubt that, in one regard or another, there is some justification for all of these philosophies of culture. Yet it appears that they all still fail to explain the fundamental impulse that ultimately lies behind the creation of culture. For what is it that first incites and provokes the processes of self-conscious reflection, of world interpretation and appropriation, of mutual communication and self-understanding, of the deliberate shaping of life and its conditions, of the active comprehension and exploration of the world? To identify and describe any of these processes as the original source of culture is merely to offer the *explanandum* as the *explanans*, or, bluntly put, to disguise a problem as its own solution. For we must, on the contrary, insist on the following point: more original than all idealist self-reflection, all technocratic appropriation of nature, all hermeneutic self-understanding, all creative transformation of life, all intuitive comprehension of values, is the helplessness of the human being itself. This helplessness represents the true birth-certificate of culture. That is also why human distress makes a greater claim to the inheritance of culture than any example of human greatness and sublimity. Only if we fail to grasp this are we tempted to scorn culture as such. For culture has its root not in human failings, but in the burden of human existence itself.

Without denying the catastrophes that have afflicted the course of history, therefore, we may say this: culture is originally not so much the way in which human beings master the world, but the fundamental way in which we existentially respond to the world. And we still, always and urgently, need to respond in this way. Voltaire had already emphasized this need against the Genevan son of an artisan, Rousseau, just as Arnold Gehlen would later have to do against his Frankfurt colleague Adorno.

**6. Human Cares, Human Responses**

According to Ernst Cassirer¹⁴ and Nelson Goodman¹⁵, the source of the phenomenon of culture must be sought in the living being that essentially creates symbols and meaning for itself: in man as the *animal symbolicum*. And both are doubtless right here – albeit in a sense that neither of them imagined. What these philosophers of culture share with all those we have already mentioned

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is the simple fact that in all of their reflections on culture they too “draw freely from the full barrel.” In truth, however, culture is less the work of a rich and abundant being, than of a poor and needy creature.

As we have indicated, the naturalistic reduction, the disempowerment, of the human being to a mere offshoot of nature does nothing to relieve individuals of the care concerning their own being and significance. Human life is constantly exposed to need and difficulty, is never certain of safety and success. The ancient myth preserved by Hyginus already tells how it was “care” (cura) who originally fashioned the human being from earthly clay and claimed him for her own. And in Goethe’s Faust we find “care” similarly personified as an old woman who makes life intolerable for the protagonist of life itself, before, of course, the phenomenon of “care” or “concern” became the prime concept of Heidegger’s early work. Man is a living being beset with cares, a needy being that must not simply live, but lead its life, that must concern itself with its own life for as long as it lives at all. The human being must actively secure, sustain and affirm the life it leads. The human being can never find rest from this care and concern with itself. The idea of a life devoid of care remains for us an unfulfillable dream, as another ancient myth also reveals. According to the account which Plato puts into the mouth of Protagoras, when Epimetheus created all the living creatures of the earth he endowed them severally, each according to their different natures, with the features they needed to live and flourish: the slower and less agile creatures he made strong and powerful, while the weaker ones he made fast or fleet of foot, and their naked skin he clothed with fur or hide. At last, when it came to the creation of man, Epimetheus discovered that he had already bestowed all of his gifts, and this is why the human being is the only terrestrial creature that was left wanting, that remained naked, helpless and exposed. At a loss, Epimetheus turned for help to his brother Prometheus, who promptly stole fire from the gods to give it to human beings. Fire stands for culture – for that paltry thing which is not so much a means for understanding truth, as a means for enduring reality, something which Wilhelm Busch expressed in comic form: “It’s a really hallowed custom: who has cares, has brandy too.” At a rather different level, but

in much the same sense, Freud can write: “Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks. In order to bear it we cannot dispense with palliative measures. ‘We cannot do without auxiliary constructions,’ as Theodore Fontana tells us. There are perhaps three such measures: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it. Something of the kind is indispensable.”

That the human being is weak and vulnerable by nature, that we stand in need of culture precisely because we are so inferior to other animals in terms of physical strength and powerful instincts, is something that was already explicitly recognized by Herder. He described *homo sapiens* as “the most orphaned and abandoned child of nature”: “Naked and exposed, weak and impoverished, timid and unarmed, and – the epitome of his wretched state – deprived of all nurturing guides in life.” We find the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius voicing a similar idea in the first century B.C.: “The human infant, like a shipwrecked sailor cast ashore by the cruel waves, lies naked on the ground, speechless, lacking all aids to life, when nature has first tossed him with pangs of travail from his mother’s womb upon the shores of the sunlit world.”

In the twentieth century the principal representatives of “philosophical anthropology,” such as Max Scheler, Helmut Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen, took these insights as the basic point of departure for their own investigations. Thus we find Gehlen writing that “in contrast to all other higher mammals, the human being is primarily defined by deficiencies which, in a precise biological sense, qualify as lack of adaptation, as lack of specialization, as rudimentary formation, i.e., can described in essentially negative terms as cases of underdevelopment. The human being lacks full bodily hair or fur, and thereby lacks natural protection against the elements, lacks natural organs suitable for attacking other creatures, or indeed a body structure that is fitted for rapid flight or escape; most animals far surpass the human being as far as acuity of the senses is concerned; the human being exhibits a dangerous lack of genuine instinctual responses, and requires an unusually long period of care and protection throughout infancy and childhood.”

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being can only survive if it actively transforms “the deficiencies of its existence into opportunities for maintaining its life.” In its creaturely neediness the human being is faced with the task of “making up for the lack of means which it has been denied as a living organism […] It must devise the weapons for attack and defense which it has also been denied, just as it must procure the food it needs, but which by no means stands at its natural disposal; to this end it must actively engage with, and learn from, the objects of experience, and develop […] certain techniques and technologies.” Thus “culture” is the sum total of these modes of behavior which accomplish what Gehlen calls “unburdening” (Entlastung): “Culture is […] a second nature, that is to say: the specifically human and actively developed nature within which alone the human being can survive.” Thus the human being is compelled, by nature, precisely to create culture. And human beings require this “artificial” world of culture not merely to secure and maintain life, but also to bestow meaning upon it, to find and to feel themselves at home in the world.

7. The Might of Reality

The human being is not only a relatively weak and vulnerable creature, as Herder, Gehlen and Plessner have emphasized, but one that also finds itself ineluctably confronted by the overwhelming might of reality itself. Hans Blumenberg has described the world in itself as chaotic, unorganized, ungraspable and unsurveyable in its totality, bereft of intrinsic meaning. The immeasurable cosmos, with its millions upon millions of flaming stars, which forcefully reveals our own insignificance in comparison with the great processes of nature, the hostile wastes of the ice-bound poles and the inhospitable deserts of the torrid zones of the earth furnish a vivid picture of the fear-inspiring and overwhelming might of reality. Human beings register the power of the world directly in the raging of the elements, in the entirely arbitrary manifestation of the unleashed forces of nature. These forces may create enormous devastation: powerful earthquakes can shake the land, convulsing and rending the ground on which we stand; the resulting crevasses can swallow up entire cities, and the flames that spring from the ruins can reduce everything to ashes. The storm-tossed ocean can likewise destroy whole

24 Ibid., p. 36; [p. 28].
25 Ibid., p. 37; [p. 29].
26 Ibid., p. 38; [p. 30]. Gehlen’s term “Entlastung” can also be plausibly rendered as “relief,” as in the translation cited here.
27 For a more detailed treatment of the themes discussed in this section, see F. J. Wetz, Hans Blumenberg zur Einführung, Hamburg: Junius, 2004 (2nd ed.), especially pp. 68-114 and 199-220.
landscapes when it rises to monstrous heights, causing huge surges, known in Asia as “tsunamis,” to penetrate far inland, where they weaken and eventually dislodge the higher ground they encounter, tearing whole regions into the ocean. Nor should we forget the power of mighty avalanches, tempests, tornadoes and lightning strikes, of volcanic eruptions whose far-flung rain of ash and streams of molten lava, as we know from history, have often entirely buried and smothered inhabited regions beneath their mantel.

As far as nature itself is concerned, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, avalanches, subsidence, forest fires, periods of drought and aridity, storms and floods, are not catastrophes at all; it is only by human beings that they are experienced as such since they often claim so many victims, devastate the most beautiful of regions, destroy entire towns and cities. But such natural catastrophes shake not only cities, but also social systems and dominant systems of thought. Sometimes they even endanger the prevailing order and structure of morality, produce social chaos, and shatter traditional forms of religious belief.

Amongst the most famous natural catastrophes recorded in western history we may recall the annihilation of the ancient city of Helike by tidal wave in 373 B.C. and the destruction of the allegedly “blessed” region of Campania, including the town of Pompeii, through the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 B.C. For examples of famous earthquakes, we may think of the devastation of Alexandria in 365 A.D., of Antioch in the Middle East in 526, of Constantinople in 557, or of the Portuguese capital of Lisbon in 1775. In more recent times most natural catastrophes have involved storms and floods, followed in significance by earthquakes, forest fires, drought, and avalanches. It is quite true that modern civilization and its technology, and thus human beings themselves, have actually caused a series of well-known natural catastrophes. The ancient Greeks and Romans had already produced massive processes of erosion through the practice of uncontrolled deforestation, and stretches of arable land had fallen prey to the sea even then since the soil could no longer support the pressures to which it was exposed. But however much human beings themselves have been responsible for natural catastrophes of one kind or another, it would be wrong to believe that terrible natural events as such could ever entirely be prevented. Such events epitomize the overwhelming might of reality which can often provoke fear, terror and panic, produce grief, confusion and despair, and will, one day, claim the life of every one of us. Thus natural catastrophes can be read as metaphors for everything terrifying that eludes our control, that teaches us how vulnerable and insignificant human beings are – ephemeral creatures that are easily destroyed.

Now both these aspects – recognition of our own weakness and recognition of the threatening might of the world – would certainly lead to a pro-
found self-devaluation of humanity if it were impossible for us to generate some form of all-embracing meaning. Thus it was, according to Nietzsche, that in the European world the illusions of Christianity were able to bestow “an absolute value upon mankind, in contrast to its actual smallness and contingency in the stream of coming to be and passing away, thus preventing man from despising himself as man.”

The psychoanalyst Alfred Adler defended a similar perspective and claimed that human beings, in view of their own tiny and helpless insignificance measured against the mighty scale of the world, are inevitably afflicted by a “feeling of inferiority, inadequacy and insecurity.”

In ever new variations, he emphasized that “the beginning of all psychological life is fraught with a more or less deep-seated feeling of inferiority,” one that, on the one hand, leads the individual “to consider himself small and weak,” but yet, on the other, also spurs him on “to neutralize this tortured feeling of inferiority.” All human striving for power, recognition and superiority, according to Adler, ultimately serves to “compensate” for the deep and acute sense of our transience, finitude and helplessness. In this regard, it seems no accident, for example, that the stutterer Demosthenes eventually turned into an outstanding orator, and that Beethoven, afflicted with incipient deafness, became a great composer nonetheless.

We should not, therefore, be asking: “How outstanding must a human being be in order to accomplish great things?,” but rather: “How small and insignificant must a human being feel if he or she is to be capable of accomplishing something great?” The task of transforming the feeling of human unworthiness into some sense of the meaning and value, of the fundamental worth, of our existence is one to which humanity finds itself called again and again. And here human beings are by no means entirely helpless in the face of their own weakness or the threatening might of the world. For they possess the particular gift of compensating for their powerlessness by constructing significant narratives, by framing rules of human conduct, by developing techniques and technologies of the most varied kind, whereby they simultaneously distance themselves from the overpowering character of reality, and thus succeed in orienting and stabilizing a life with its own cares and concerns.

30 Ibid., p. 71; [p. 66].
31 Ibid., p. 72; [p. 67].
32 Ibid., p. 76; [p. 70].
8. Apotropaic Strategies

A simple truth finds expression in the saying, “When it rains, it’s nature, when you’ve got an umbrella, it’s culture.” In this sense the entire history of culture can be read as a way in which human beings assert and affirm themselves against a potentially overwhelming world. All the interpretive schemes of different epochs – whether they be mythical narratives, religious doctrines, cultic rituals, metaphysical systems and *summae*, and in part even the edifices of scientific theory – can be seen as attempts to redress the unbearable helplessness of our own existence, to evade the unendurable power of a reality ruthlessly indifferent to our needs. Without wishing to deny the variety and originality of human cultures, each of which possesses its own kind of language, technology, art, practical and scientific knowledge, religious outlook, and its own social, economic and political forms of organization, all cultures have one thing in common: they work to diminish both the life-threatening weakness of the human being and the monstrous power of the world.

The narratives of myth already serve to domesticate nature’s power to inspire terror by naming its threatening phenomena, by distributing the powers of these forces of nature amongst different gods which can then be placated by magical or ritual practices and thereby rendered less dangerous to human beings. Myths and religions are human constructs which are supposed to serve the needs and interests of human beings. They are means of coming to terms with reality, of helping to diminish the horror that arises from the threatening might of the world. As Cicero put it, the fear of catastrophe already prompts human beings to believe in the gods. Myths and religions transcend the hopes and anxieties of earth-bound mortals, with all their fears and wishes, and in addition furnish some kind of justification for the world as it is. Myth and religion, like reason and metaphysics, transform reality into something ordered, usual and familiar, and divest it of that original strangeness which human beings have continued to fear to this day. While *mythos* bestows a kind of order through its tales and narratives, *logos* does so by recourse to concepts and philosophical systems. But the modern natural sciences also contribute to the domestication of an otherwise overwhelming reality. The laws formulated by science explain the world in which we live, its predictions protect us from dangerous surprises, and its technical-practical achievements ameliorate and improve the character of our ordinary daily existence.

Yet the “unburdening” and protection which we seek from immediate nature nonetheless remains an unattainable goal. The untamed forces of nature, which can only be kept at bay with the utmost effort, nonetheless repeatedly penetrate the defensive barriers of culture behind which human beings have withdrawn the better to endure life and the world. Human beings in their weakness must contend and engage again and again with the preponderant
power of reality, and this holds equally for archaic and for modern humanity. To this day natural catastrophes remind us that our happiness and well-being can never simply be taken for granted. Now, as in the past, such catastrophes still unleash panic and terror and thereby call for strategies of cultural processing. What is demanded in such situations, above all, is a great readiness to help one another, and, especially, a sovereign acceptance of the essentially mortal and vulnerable character of human beings. But religious, philosophical and scientific interpretations can also assist us to come to terms with catastrophic events since a disaster whose causes we can reconstruct is often easier to bear than merely chaotic events with an unknown and impenetrable background to them. As a rule, what is known provokes less terror than what is unknown.

In the history of culture in general, natural catastrophes are usually divested of their horrifying anonymity by ascribing them to nameable and divine powers. The figure of Poseidon, already described by Homer as the “earth-shaker,” was once regarded as a very god of catastrophe. In antiquity the god of the seas, capable of rousing and whipping up the ocean, was also seen as the god of earthquakes. With regard to the question why the gods created natural catastrophes in the first place the ancients gave a number of different answers. Those versed in such matters sometimes traced these events to conflicts amongst the Olympians, but again might equally interpret them as ambiguous warnings to mankind, as omens of misfortune yet to transpire, or as signals through which Zeus would announce the imminent disaster. But the most widespread conception of natural catastrophe interpreted it as divine punishment for some human transgression. It was believed that the wrathful gods sent earthquakes, floods and similar disasters to avenge the violation of the ethical order. For human beings should also learn to see that their own strength is as nothing in comparison with the power of the gods.

Many of these notions continued to live on within the newly emergent Christianity. Here again natural catastrophe was interpreted as an expression of divine will and castigation, of holy wrath aroused by human transgression. More specifically, it was seen as a means of leading erring believers back to the path of virtue. Such catastrophes were intended to awaken sleeping souls and thereby bring them to resolution, repentance, and conversion. In this sense they vouchsafed to human beings the possibility of rethinking and reorienting their lives. In ancient times generally the identification of the raging elements with divine forces helped to make the incomprehensible appear more comprehensible. Individuals no longer felt so utterly and helplessly abandoned to the might of reality. Sacrifices, prayers, petitions, and other rituals of expiation, the construction of temples and other places of worship, all offered the possibility of placating the divine powers and preventing future catastrophes. Human beings sought to avert the disaster before it arrived.
Another cultural strategy for coming to terms with the catastrophes arising from the overwhelming power of nature was furnished by the project of rational explanation. Both approaches to this question — that of religious interpretation and that of scientific causal explanation — have competed with one another for centuries, even if the former was once the more common and the latter is now more dominant. We already find the ancient philosophers of nature, such as Thales and Anaximander, attempting to account for earthquakes and tidal waves without appealing to divine action or intervention, even if it is only today that we have come to possess more precise and reliable knowledge concerning the geophysical factors and conditions behind such events. In our own time the rational pursuit of causal explanation has almost entirely marginalized belief in divine powers in this respect, and the thought that such natural catastrophes can no longer be interpreted as forms of divine punishment can actually prove a source of solace for human beings. In this sense, the scientific explanation of the world itself still helps to overcome our human fear before the “raging elements” of nature. For rational comprehension of the overpowering reality that lies beyond our power can certainly be understood as a means of banishing the anxiety which the threatening world provokes. Science can help human beings to establish some distance between ourselves and this terror-inspiring reality by divesting it of its sinister and uncanny aspects and dimensions. Nonetheless, the uncontrollable character of reality can never utterly be exorcised.

And, in this connection, we should remember not merely the blind violence of external natural catastrophes, whose mighty blows repeatedly threaten to demolish the protective wall of culture, but also the forces of inner nature in human beings: the instincts, sickness, and death. As if they had fallen out of the usual order of nature, human beings must create an artificial world in which they may continue to live, in which the painful consciousness of their own finitude can be pacified or alleviated — namely the world of culture. Yet however much culture may rebel against the confining yoke of the past, or offer the individual some temporary foothold or support, the existential solitude, incompleteness, and limitation which characterizes life itself cannot really be overcome. It is true, of course, that medicine, morality, law, and religion, in their different ways, have erected strong bulwarks in order to keep the potentially overwhelming inner nature of the weak human animal in check, to diminish its power and tame its wildness. These aspects of culture have developed successful means of promoting and preserving physical health, rules of conduct which encourage human self-control and regard for others, and consoling structures of meaning that furnish some orientation for our life as a whole and allow us to come to terms with instinctual renunciation, with pain and grief, with death. But these elementary forces of inner nature also repeatedly shatter the solid defensive barriers of all meaning-besowing culture.
9. Culture - A Form of Self-Defense

In addition to everything that has already been said, we must acknowledge the following: even if culture succeeds, in part, in establishing some distance between ourselves and the overwhelming power of reality, it may still be experienced – as our examples of the express critique of culture have shown – not merely as a kind of “unburdening,” but sometimes also as a burden in itself. Thinkers such as Georg Simmel33 and Sigmund Freud34 have even defended the view that human beings inevitably feel a certain discontent even in the most just and most outstanding possible culture because every culture demands some instinctual renunciation of human beings, because the rules, dogmas, and meaningful forms and structures of culture repeatedly come to petrify and to weaken the life drive of the individual. This, they claim, is the tragedy of every culture, even though there is no “state of nature” devoid of culture to which we might turn as a possible alternative.

What is more, the undoubted achievements of science and technology reveal an ambiguous face of their own. On the one hand, they erect a protective wall against the overwhelming character of reality and expand the opportunities for creating and developing specifically human conditions of life; on the other hand, they are equally a source of innumerable forms of concern and anxiety – and in this connection we only have to think of modern biotechnologies and potential ecological crises. However resourceful human beings may be in challenging the might of nature, they also appear remarkably inventive in bringing about new natural catastrophes on their own part. The greenhouse effect and the global warming produced by industrial emissions and the constantly growing number of cars and airplanes, together with the increasingly frequent catastrophic floods that result from these developments, appear in this respect to represent the greatest threat in the contemporary world. But it would be a mistake to believe that we human beings were the cause of all natural catastrophes and, however careful and protective we may be in relation to nature, we will continue to be confronted with earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, hurricanes, avalanches and inundations, along with death and disease. The might of nature can never be completely broken by human means.

In addition, it is evident that modern science projects the image of an entirely “disenchanted” world that appears to leave little or no room for trusting the myths, religions and species of metaphysics which have arisen in the course of history to help us to affirm life and find ourselves at home in the

33 See G. Simmel, “Der Begriff und die Tragödie der Kultur,” in Philosophische Kultur, pp. 245-277; [“The Concept and the Tragedy of Culture,” in Simmel on Culture, pp. 55-75].
34 See Freud, Civilisation and its Discontents.
world. But even if many today are just as critical of traditional religion and metaphysics as they are of the more recent utopian conceptions of human progress – and it no longer seems possible to deny the collapse of what Lyotard calls the grand narratives\(^{35}\) – it is still the case that most people remain receptive to symbols, images and narratives of the most various kind, and likewise to art and literature, in order to live more easily with their archaic fears, their feelings of dereliction, their sense of the excessive demands made upon them by the world in all its strangeness. Such things cannot be deconstructed.

Schopenhauer already recognized art as a possible way of momentarily escaping the distress of our own existence.\(^{36}\) He claims that one crucial means of achieving this is the aesthetic semblance of works of art which can console us without deluding the individual with false utopias of a better life. According to Nietzsche, after the death of God the world can only be justified as an “aesthetic phenomenon.”\(^{37}\) Art alone can lend some meaning to our earthly life and “transform that disgust at the thought of the horrific or absurd character of existence into notions with which it is possible to live.”\(^{38}\) At any rate – Nietzsche claims – the naked truth concerning the meaningless and overwhelming nature of reality is unbearable to us in view of its brutal harshness. And that is why, amongst many other things, we need art in order to veil such terrible knowledge from our sight: “The truth is ugly – we have art in order that we may not be destroyed by truth.”\(^{39}\)

Quite apart from the disturbing question of whether this conception of the task of art demands more of it than it can ever deliver, and irrespective of the admittedly numerous other roles and meanings which may be ascribed to it, art undoubtedly does, like culture as a whole, make its own specific contribution to the “unburdening” of human existence. This is as true of “light art” with its preference for a predominantly harmonious and agreeable style, as it is of the youthful “pop scene” with its interest in active participation and ecstatic self-abandonment; but it is also true of so-called “high culture” and its claims to a far superior level of artistic quality, including its most select and avant-garde representatives. For there is no question that even apparently life-denying and pessimistic works of art, or the specifically modern forms


\(^{38}\) Ibid., p. 57; [p. 46].  

\(^{39}\) F. Nietzsche, *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 13, p. 500 (from the *Nachlass*).
of music, poetry and painting which are experienced as atonal, dissonant and difficult, nonetheless provide those who appreciate them with a kind of aesthetic pleasure, and thereby help them too in the task of facing their own existence — irrespective of whether art pacifies or stimulates their experience of life, provokes reflection on life, society and the world in general, or simply allows them to see things in a fresh and novel manner.

At the back of all human culture, therefore, we may always detect a struggle to challenge the threatening power of reality, to respond to the weakness of our human life and the external might of the world. Every culture is a way of making good a fundamental deficiency or lack, a form of human self-defense: need and distress is, indeed, the mother of invention.

In the western intellectual tradition there have been many thinkers who have characterized human life either as frail, wretched and impoverished, or as great, rich and sublime. Yet there have also been some, such as Montaigne or Pascal, who have recognized that humanity is both great and wretched, both significant and nought. 40

Here I propose a third approach: the human being may be presented as great and sublime because this being is so slight and insignificant — a weak and care-afflicted creature inhabiting an overwhelming world. Human beings are thrown back entirely upon their own resources not only with regard to matters of physical self-preservation, but also with regard to all those questions concerning how we lead our lives, how we orient ourselves toward particular values, how we interpret that world. The vast cosmic spaces that surround us, at any rate, are silent with regard to the question how we are to see things and how we are to shape our lives. This precarious situation, compounded by the anxiety that we may not be able to meet the challenge of reality, has allowed humanity to accomplish great things in the course of history, amongst which we must reckon the innumerable products of culture through which we have sought to grasp reality and to engage with it. From this perspective, the incalculable wealth of culture is less a sign of the creative versatility of humanity than a testament to the poverty or indigence of our afflicted existence, to the anxieties and insecurities of a life that needs shielding from the overpowering might of human inner nature and alien outer nature.

Such testaments to human indigence include not only the poor house and the mad house, but also the Dome of Saint Peter’s in Rome or the Palace of Versailles in Paris — and not only such obviously tragic works as Gustav Mahler’s Kindertotenlieder or Benjamin Britten’s War Requiem, but also such festive pieces as

Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks* or the Orchestral Suites of J. S. Bach. It is an illusion to think that culture has forfeited the image of its poverty and wretchedness simply through the richness and splendor of its creative products. It is a mistake to believe that culture has relinquished and expelled every testament to human need and indigence. On the contrary, all cultural achievements – including works of art – testify far more powerfully to our fragility and neediness, to the questions which concern us for as long as we live, than to the undeniable wealth of our gifts and talents. There is no cultural expression of human strength that cannot also be interpreted as a sign of the weakness of the human creature.


Theophrastus, the presumed author of the pseudo-Aristotelian “problema” XXX.1, seems to have been convinced of something similar. For he already asks: “Why should it be that all outstanding men – whether they be philosophers, statesmen, poets or artists – are melancholics?” With this question he laid the ground for the view that great creative individuals are often and characteristically marked by a brooding sadness. This perspective gained ground towards the end of the fifteenth century in particular, when the Italian humanist Marsilio Ficino expressly linked melancholy with the creative spirit in a paradigmatic fashion. In the Christian Middle Ages, on the other hand, melancholy, or *acedia* as it was called, was still generally condemned as a grave and blasphemous sin.

With respect to western history as a whole, we can say that melancholy was sometimes interpreted as a sickness – as a pathological affect – and sometimes as the characteristic nature of creative individuals. In this latter sense it was frequently associated with the creative impulse, with dark and probing thought, indeed with outstanding genius itself. Whether we think of Raphael, Dürer, or of Caspar David Friedrich – all were reputed to be melancholics who were grieved by the failings and deficiencies of life and the world, who sensed the insuperable limits and restrictions of finite existence,
who recognized every human weakness, but thereby also glimpsed a state of blessed perfection that was never vouchsafed to them. According to Lord Byron even the most joyful or serene of artists was ultimately a brooding melancholic whose unfettered enthusiasm and love of light and life was inevitably accompanied by a certain tendency towards the deepest darkness. In a similar fashion the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard could ask: “What is a poet? An unhappy person who conceals a profound anguish in his heart but whose lips are so formed that as sighs and cries pass over them they sound like beautiful music.” From all this it is clear that the earnestness of life, to echo Schiller, can indeed hide behind the joyful serenity of art.

We can illustrate the point even more vividly with another example from the history of culture: when elaborate wigs and high-heeled shoes became all the fashion in Europe with Louis XIV, when French cuisine, with its strong sauces, its overcooked vegetables, its pies and dumplings, first evolved, such novel things were soon regarded as a sign of the highest culture. But the wig only became the symbol of a privileged life style because Louis XIV was almost entirely bald, the high-heeled shoes were originally favored because the Sun King was rather short in stature, and French cuisine with its soft and pureed preparations – basically a degenerate form of aristocratic Italian cookery – principally recommended itself because the absolute monarch had lost his teeth. In this sense we can say that all human culture is a testament to poverty which human beings constantly produce anew – not as something like a moral failing, but as a witness to their own limits and weaknesses. Culture is the expression of the human neediness and finitude for which it seeks to compensate in our constant struggle with the overwhelming power of the world. For this reason, all critique of culture – in view of the old truth that too much familiarity only breeds contempt: nimia familiaritatis parit contemptum – must be presented with great caution, undeniably important though such critique may be. As care-afflicted beings intrinsically marked by lack we cannot afford to relinquish a single form of potential satisfaction and fulfillment. For there is already too little of the latter in a world which, again and again, makes such great demands upon our patience and endurance.

(Translated from the German by Nicholas Walker)

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