Philosophy, Culture, and Pluralism

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In this paper I outline some ways in which philosophy can contribute to the study of culture and pluralism, and how such a study may lead to a better understanding of philosophical enquiry. Building on earlier work (Sweet, 2002), I focus on four areas in which these contributions might be made. The first concerns the methodological, ideological, and historical presuppositions of culture and multiculturalism. The second area considers how philosophical discourse affects a culture's "self-understanding". The third area focuses on how (and how far) philosophy may enable a culture to allow diversity and pluralism within the larger community. The fourth area deals with philosophy's dialectical relation with culture –how far philosophy is a product of culture, and whether that affects philosophy's participation in culture. An exploration of these areas will show both what role philosophy has to play in the analysis of culture, and why it is important for philosophers –especially in the English-speaking world– to engage in the "philosophy of culture".

The diversity and richness of the cultures of the world are better known today than they have ever been. In the past 100 years, sociological and anthropological research, along with advances in communications and information technology, have not only introduced us to other cultures, but challenged our understanding of our own cultures. Yet, through much of the last century –in the English-speaking world, at least– philosophers have only infrequently written on the theme of culture. For at least the last 50 years, it has been left to scholars in sociology, history, and literary theory, such as Ernest Gellner, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, Clifford Geertz, and Terry Eagleton[1], to address what culture is, what the concept presupposes, and what implications it has in a world marked by ethnic, social, economic, political, and religious diversity.

I want to suggest some ways in which philosophy can contribute to the study of culture and pluralism, and how such a study may lead to a better understanding of the nature and contribution of philosophical enquiry. I focus on four areas in which these contributions might be made. The first concerns the methodological, ideological, and historical presuppositions of culture and multiculturalism. The second area considers how philosophical discourse affects a culture's "self-understanding" (e.g., how the philosophical perspectives of one culture have had a role in another). The third area focuses on how (and how far) philosophy might enable a culture to allow diversity and pluralism within the larger community. The fourth area deals with philosophy's dialectical relation with culture – how far philosophy is a product of culture, and whether that affects philosophy's participation in culture. An exploration of these areas will show both what role philosophy has

to play in the analysis of culture, and why it is important for philosophers –especially in the English-speaking world– to engage in a "philosophy of culture."

Defining "culture"

Before examining the issues raised above, we should consider briefly what culture is.

Perhaps the classic definition of "culture" is that of the anthropologist, Edward Burnett Tylor, in *Primitive Culture*[2]:

Culture . . . is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

Since Tylor's time, the term "culture" has come to be understood in a variety of ways, and in *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*[3], Kroeber and Kluckhohn provide 164 different senses of the term. Still, in the past quarter century, common usage has returned to something close to Tylor's definition. It seems fair to say, then, that "culture," in a broad sense, is "a collection of representations or ideas shared by and pervasive through a group of individuals, and through which persons mutually recognise one another as members of that group." Culture provides a general conception of the good, a context for choice, and a notion of public reason. Such a description should be sufficient to allow us to address the issues and concerns expressed above.

Presuppositions of culture and pluralism

The first area where philosophy might contribute to the study of culture and pluralism is in the analysis of the presuppositions of culture. ("Philosophy", here, is not simply "reasoned reflection on a topic" but, more broadly, "an enterprise that examines the foundations of a subject and provides general principles by which its most fundamental concerns can be understood in relation to one another".) Here, the existence of pluralities of cultures and sub-cultures, and the notion of culture itself, invite us to rethink (for example) what is meant by "truth" and "objectivity", and whether there is a single model of "what is rational" or, for that matter, "what is real".

Consider the following questions. What is the relation between cultures and traditions? Is a culture something that we can isolate and observe at a precise point in time? Is "culture" "dynamic", characterised by a *telos*, through which different cultures can be understood and brought into contact? Or are cultures radically

dissimilar, without any cross-cultural norms or unitary principles? These are questions to which philosophy can contribute, and its function is not just to examine terms, but the most basic aspects of human experience.

Philosophy in culture

Philosophy can –and does– affect culture. Thus, a second way in which philosophy can contribute to the study of culture is by examining how philosophy has a role in culture. The generic analytical questions that philosophical enquiry raises –what a culture takes for granted, what unifies a culture, and even whether a culture is worth preserving– help people think about a culture. Philosophy can reinforce a culture; liberal political philosophers often defend existing liberal political cultures and the institutions that are consistent with them.[4] It can challenge a culture – by calling into question its values or traditions, or casting doubt on normative principles within that culture, as "truth", the "good", and so on. Philosophy could (and has) legitimated the domination of certain cultures, insisting that members of non-conforming communities respect the general exigencies of the dominant culture –e.g., holding that private conceptions of the good have no "external" relevance and, therefore, should not be brought into the public sphere.[5] Philosophy can also reorient a culture for good or ill; for example, whether it leaves room for the "non-natural", whether its metaphysics is realist or subjectivist, how it views the nature and value of the person, and so on. Philosophy may go so far as to deny the very existence of a culture (which occurs when empires or ideologies, and the philosophers who follow in their wake, refuse to acknowledge local social organisation, values, or traditions).

One might object that these are not effects of philosophy as such, but of philosophers and of ideologies masquerading as philosophies. But even if we make such a distinction, philosophy does have an impact on culture. And philosophy may help cultures to work together when it proposes that there are principles or interests common to all cultures –matters of shared concern– and that one culture can draw on the resources of other cultures.

Negotiating cultures and pluralities

Culture is valuable; so is the integrity of culture. But problems arise about whether diversity may be limited, and whether a culture –particularly one that professes to respect pluralism– has an obligation not only to tolerate the existence of other cultures, but to favour their development. A third way in which philosophy can contribute to the

study of culture and pluralism, then, is by providing a means of "negotiating" among cultures or pluralities.

Philosophical discourse has been held as a model for a "public reason" in such a context. It claims to provide a way of understanding and "negotiating" the tensions that arise among cultures; explaining how one culture has obligations towards another, or why individuals should be allowed to change their cultural affiliation –though also how cultures can impose obligations on their members. Cultures are not self-legitimating, and philosophers must consider whether cultures are equally valuable– whether they ensure the accountability of elites, or allow for social and economic activity to be engaged in, in a way that empowers the whole.

Some say there is a negative side to this claim to "negotiate culture". They point out, for example, that political philosophy in the United States frequently reflects assumptions that are virtually uniquely American. Particular philosophical approaches, then, may be ideological. This tendency is particularly apparent when philosophy from one culture engages another culture (e.g., western philosophy in India or Africa). Philosophy has here been accused of marginalizing or destroying cultures by putting limits on the questions that can be asked (e.g., excluding religions and traditional ways of thinking) or establishing norms of reason and value (e.g., of the individual, of the good of "communities") that had a different role in the context concerned. Because philosophical views can be so culturally-laden, philosophers do not see that they are biased or blind to the dynamics of other cultures.

Culture and philosophy

Some have argued, therefore, that the preceding view of philosophy as a "public discourse" makes a number of assumptions –e.g., that there is something shared (such as a universal human nature) that allows such a cross-cultural discourse, that cultures and the values they reflect are commensurable with one another, and that philosophy is not implicated in culture. Challenging this suggests a fourth area in which philosophy can contribute to the understanding of culture and pluralism.

Clearly, cultures influence the problems and questions philosophers pursue –they provide the discourse and values in which philosophy begins. They also influence the material environment in which philosophical questions are raised; economic production creates goods and opportunities for leisure –in which philosophy is done. (This seems innocuous, but it is not.) Culture suggests, as well, what counts as philosophy (as distinct from history and religion); this, too, seems innocuous –and, again, it is not. And, further, culture influences what counts as a "satisfactory answer". If philosophy involves getting our understanding of reality "in order", culture gives us a notion of what a meaningful order might be.

Nevertheless, just because culture influences how philosophical questions are expressed and answered, it does not follow that philosophy is entirely determined by culture. The study of the *history* of philosophy, for example, reminds us that there is not just one approach to philosophical enquiry. Indeed, it asks why certain issues were raised, may suggest that issues can be better grasped by seeing them in different contexts, and encourages us to ask questions about *our own* presuppositions. None of this entails that there are *no* common principles. In fact, since philosophy raises questions concerning culture, there is reason to believe that, where there is philosophy, we will find cultures seeking to articulate a similar set of questions.

The relation between philosophy and culture is, plausibly, a dialectical one. The introduction of a philosophy into a different culture may suggest other ways of explaining or defending what one is interested in, or a culture may have us rethink philosophical views that we formerly took as given, or show what a philosophical position involves, what its benefits and resources are, and so on. Thus, even if philosophies presuppose cultural values, philosophical analysis is the best tool we have to assess cultures and philosophies themselves –and thus to "rise above" particular cultural limitations.

Of course, any philosophy we appeal to in "negotiating" cultures and pluralities must be one that is at least self-reflective, and which can recognise (and therefore reconsider) its starting points. Philosophy must be employed with care, but it may nevertheless allow a way of addressing the competing claims of different cultures. And thus, it can help to build bridges and allow communication among cultures.

Exploring interrelations

There is much philosophical work to be done on the phenomenon of culture, particularly given the existence of cultural diversity. And it seems that a case can be made for claiming that philosophy has a role to play in the analysis and study of the *concept* of culture – that it can affect culture (e.g., how we understand and deal with other cultures), and that it has a role in "negotiating" or communicating among cultures, even though it is involved in a dialectical relationship with culture. Philosophy clearly is necessary and important in understanding culture.

Philosophical enquiry must take into account the cultural context in which its questions arise. It is inculturated, but not a slave to culture. It is not so closed within culture that it cannot provide tools for analysis and communication among cultures. And there may be, as well, a core of philosophical questions –the nature of the real, the principles of value, and the nature and destiny of humanity– that we find in all cultures. The theme of culture, then, is one which philosophers –particularly in the English-speaking world– should actively engage.

NOTES

1   Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity, and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, and *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983; Fredric Jameson, "Culture and finance capital" and "The brick and the balloon: architecture, idealism and land speculation" in *The Cultural Turn: selected writings on the postmodern*, London: Verso, 1998, and *Theory of Culture: lectures at Rikkyo*, Tokyo: Y. Hamada, 1994; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf, 1994; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: selected essays*, New York: Basic Books, 1973; Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

2   Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*, 2 vols., London: J. Murray, 1871.

3   *Culture: a critical review of concepts and definitions*, by A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, with the assistance of Wayne Untereiner and appendices by Alfred G. Meyer, Cambridge, MA: The Museum, 1952.

4   See Rorty's essay "Solidarity" in his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: *Cambridge University Press*, 1989, and his "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality," *On Human Rights*. The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1993, ed. S. Hurley and S. Shute, New York: Basic Books, 1993, pp. 111-134

5   See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 236.