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Toward a "Cultural Philosophy": Five Forms of Philosophy of Culture

Abstract:
This work argues that an opportunity is being missed by the philosophical tradition, especially within philosophy of culture: an opportunity not just to philosophize "about" culture, but to embody culture and put it into practice. It argues that philosophy itself is a powerful form of culture – one that needs to be better understood and more explicitly practiced. To highlight this blind spot, the work introduces a distinction between "philosophy *of* culture," and "cultural philosophy." Cultural philosophy should be better explored by the discipline for two reasons: a clearer understanding of cultural philosophy would benefit all practitioners of philosophy; also, a philosopher of culture who engages cultural philosophy will be a more effective philosopher of culture. The goal of the project is to highlight the possibility of (and value in) a "cultural philosophy," and to serve as something of a prolegomenon toward further work in that area.

Keywords:
cultural philosophy, *Bildung*, Hadot, Anderson, Cassirer

Introduction[1]

The German philosopher/philologist Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) once wrote that "Culture is liberation, the removal of all the weeds, rubble and vermin that want to attack the tender buds of the plant … it is the perfecting of nature."[2] Philosophy of culture as a style or method of Western philosophy[3] is very often German (at least: it is generally considered to have arisen out of eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophy), and it is very often concerned with ideals of "freedom" and "perfection," just as Nietzsche is here.

As philosophy of culture has developed, there have been many variations on these themes of freedom and perfection, but I feel that an opportunity largely is being missed by the philosophical tradition (especially in its modern academic forms): an opportunity not just to philosophize "about" culture, but to embody culture and to put it into practice. Philosophers of culture often analyze various forms of culture (music, film, and so on), but I rarely see those same analyses applied to the activity of philosophy itself. I believe that philosophy itself is a powerful form of culture – one that needs to be better understood and more explicitly practiced. To highlight this blind spot, I would like to introduce a distinction between "philosophy *of* culture," and "cultural philosophy." The goal of the project is to highlight the possibility of (and value in) a cultural philosophy, and to serve as something of a prolegomenon toward further work in that area.

I will argue that philosophers of culture should place more emphasis on articulating what philosophy looks like as a cultural practice (relative to other cultural practices such as music, art, and so on). The reasons for this are twofold: a clearer understanding of cultural philosophy would benefit all practitioners of philosophy; also, a philosopher of culture who engages cultural philosophy will be (I believe) a more effective philosopher of culture.

This paper is written with two audiences in mind: the first audience is philosophers of culture specifically, and the second audience is the general practitioner of philosophy. To the general practitioner of philosophy, I want to suggest that if one wants to practice seriously a "love of wisdom" then one must begin to think in depth about the realm of culture (in the above context of "freedom" and "perfection," as a start). To the philosopher of culture, I want to suggest that it is not enough to reflect about culture; we must also learn what philosophy can contribute to culture as its own set of practices. Philosophy, ideally, should not be divorced from culture; or at least, it should not be *exclusively* divorced from culture. In other words, even if there is value in finding a reflective distance, those reflections then need to be returned and embedded into cultural practice.[4]

To be clear, my goal is not to denigrate philosophy of culture; rather, I wish to highlight the value of cultural philosophy, and to invite philosophers of culture, as well as general philosophers, to consider what it would mean to practice such a "cultural philosophy." I believe that cultural philosophy, if practiced more broadly and with more intention, would enliven philosophy (especially academic philosophy), and do a great deal of good in culture broadly.

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1) I want to express my gratitude to the editors of *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* (Editor-in-Chief Dr. Przemysław Bursztyka and Dr. Eli Kramer), and also to the anonymous reviewers of this essay, for their critical comments and helpful suggestions, which were useful to clarify the main focus of the paper.

2) Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 130.

3) What philosophy of culture might look like in other contexts is beyond the horizon of this paper.

4) This dynamic between "reflection" and "practice" will lay in the background of the paper. When I use these terms, I want the reader to understand them in light of something like what John Dewey called the "Reflex Arc," and not in terms of a strong or absolute bifurcation. In general, when I refer to the term "practice," I use it in an American Pragmatist sense, similar to the Pragmatist concept of "inquiry." Hilary Putnam has observed that "a central – perhaps the central – emphasis with pragmatism [is] the emphasis on the primacy of practice." Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, 52. See for example Dewey, "The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology"; Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*; Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear."

I understand that having these two audiences in mind will necessarily sacrifice something in terms of clarity. However, I believe it is worth the risk in order to accomplish my goal: which is to invite as many philosophers as possible to consider what it would mean to practice cultural philosophy. While the general practitioner and the philosopher of culture might come from different perspectives, the end I am advocating is the same for each. Thus, I feel somewhat justified in attempting to address both of these audiences concurrently.

To begin the project, I will provide some basic definition of terminology: specifically, my usage of the word culture (in light of various potential definitions of that term). I will follow that up with an overview of various possible forms that a philosophy of culture might take. However, my goal in this section is not to chart (definitively or exhaustively) every permutation a philosophy of culture might take. Rather, I wish to provide a sufficient enough orientation on the subject that we can triangulate the need for (and a rough sense of) a different kind of philosophy: a "cultural philosophy." I will then briefly describe what such a cultural philosophy might look like and provide two examples of promising developments in that direction. I will end the paper by discussing the value of philosophy of culture, as well as the value of cultural philosophy; my intention here is to highlight that cultural philosophy could serve purposes not being fulfilled by current forms of philosophy of culture. As already stated, I hope to demonstrate that practicing cultural philosophy could benefit philosophers generally but that it would be especially beneficial to philosophers of culture: specifically, as a way to embed their reflective (mediated) work in a rich (immediate) cultural practice.

What is Culture?

Before we can begin to discuss a philosophy of culture, the logical first step is to articulate what culture is. Like many concepts with deep philosophical content, culture is a word that people use frequently in an everyday context, and can intuitively recognize when they see it, yet would be hard-pressed to give it a thorough definition. To understand the concept of culture, it is helpful to start with the etymology: the English word culture, like cultivation, traces back to the Latin verb *colere*. The primary sense of *colere* was agri-*cultural*:[5] the tilling of the land in preparation for planting, as well as the nurturing and protection of crops. Out of this agricultural sense, the word could also be used metaphorically to represent a kind of worship or veneration (the nurturing and protection of the divine, so to speak). Cicero observed this relationship between man's agricultural capabilities and a broader spiritual project:

> We are the absolute masters of what the earth produces. We enjoy the mountains and the plains. The rivers and the lakes are ours. We sow the seed, and plant the trees. We fertilize the earth by overflowing it. We stop, direct, and turn the rivers: in short, by our hands we endeavor, by our various operations in this world, to make, as it were, another nature.[6]

This spiritual context still survives in the Italian *colere* (to venerate or revere). So from the earliest times, culture (and its etymological ancestors) has had a dual purpose: on the one hand an agricultural, organic, biological sense; and on the other hand (derivatively) a spiritual, religious, and perhaps even philosophical significance.[7]

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5) Agriculture comes from the Latin agre/agr (field) and cultura (growing, cultivation) – literally the growing and cultivation of fields.

6) Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 313.

7) Consider Cicero: "Whereas philosophy is the culture of the mind: this it is which plucks up vices by the roots; prepares the mind for the receiving of seeds; commits them to it, or, as I may say, sows them, in the hope that, when come to maturity, they may produce a plentiful harvest." Ibid., 69.

We still see this first sense in English when we speak of "cell cultures" in biology, or agricultural cultivation generally. While the second, spiritual, sense of culture might be less evident in English, there is still good reason to remember that heritage for "culture," as we shall discuss shortly.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that "culture" came to have its modern definition as a set of beliefs, practices, and artifacts associated with a particular society (often as a mark of a "civilized" society). This modern conception of culture coincides with the rise of modern anthropology and the creation of "cultural anthropology." For example, consider this definition of culture from Edward Tylor, considered the founder of cultural anthropology, in 1871: "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."[8] In other words, on this understanding culture is everything that humans do, think, believe, or create as a result of living in a group with one another (i.e., in a society).[9] Of course, this definition is very general, and as a result somewhat vague. Is culture made of beliefs, actions, objects, or all taken together? And what exactly is the relationship between culture (whatever it may be) and society? What is the mechanism by which society (groups of persons) produces culture? Is culture something that can only happen in the presence (whether immediate or mediate) of other persons?

The problem with these kinds of enumerative definitions of culture (like that provided by Tylor) is that they provoke debates on the ontological status of particular potentially-cultural objects – is this thing cultural, is that thing cultural? And this leads to more general ontological debates: how do we distinguish culture from society (or should we)? Soon we have cultural idealists, realists, and so on; these debates are quite difficult to resolve, and in my opinion can hinder progress on the relevant issues.[10] The emphasis is placed on the "objects" of culture: thus, the discussion is framed in terms of objectivity and passivity. I would like to avoid this framing, in favor of a more functional definition of culture. By that I mean a definition of culture that focuses on activity (rather than passivity) and cultural agents (rather than cultural objects). Rather than thinking about culture as a set of objects, we should think of it as a function: the rule which creates the set of cultural objects, rather than the set itself. Tylor's definition, to its credit, understands this to the degree that it references human "capabilities and habits" – however, the functional rule of being "acquired by man as a member of society" strikes me as too vague, merely pushing the discussion into sociology, rather than addressing it.

Thus, for our purposes, I will provide a slightly different definition of culture, one that I hope relates to both the original and modern uses of the term, while being slightly more operational or functional (that is: we can put it to work in a more immediate and straightforward way). I wish to argue that *culture is: everything that persons do to thrive, rather than merely survive*.[11] It is telling to me that the original organic sense of the term culture focuses on the capacity for *growth*: it is dynamic and futural, as opposed to static and present-al. For example, there is a difference between cultivation and "preservation." If my goal is simply to protect the

8) Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

9) Interestingly, Immanuel Kant actually argued the opposite point, that culture arises as a result of unsociability: "all the culture and art which adorn mankind … are the fruits of their unsociability." See Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 46. Caygill interprets this passage to imply that "Kant discovers the origins of culture in the restriction of human freedom," Caygill, *Kant Dictionary,* 149. Kant's complex position on this topic is further worked out in the *Critique of Justice* §83 where he writes that "It is hard to develop skill in the human species except by means of inequality among people" and "war is one more incentive for us to develop to the utmost all the talents that serve culture." Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 319–320. Kant tempers some of these statements by calling for a cosmopolitan civil society to govern and reign in these forces, but his position remains complex.

10) For what it is worth, when it comes to this ontological debate, I am a transcendental idealist in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer: cultural objects are symbols creating by specific symbolizing functions of *Geist*. See Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volumes 1–3.

11) I say persons with the understanding that potential non-human persons might also have culture.

existence of something (an organism, an art, a building, and so on), it would not be proper to say that I am cultivating that thing. To say that something is cultural is to say that it is oriented around the growth of the person(s) – development rather than maintenance.

This definition has the benefit of providing a relatively straightforward test for whether something is cultural or not: is the thing being done for the sake of survival, or not? Eating food is, therefore, not inherently cultural – it is done purely for the sake of survival or maintenance of the person. However, cooking/cuisine (as a set of practices to develop the experience of eating food) *is* cultural. Similarly, language might be argued for as a survival trait – in that it has practical benefit in that sense. However, poetry, literature, and so on are not created out of a need for survival of the person – and thus they are cultural (and indeed, language as a whole might well be cultural in the first place, depending on interpretation). Likewise, clothing might not be inherently cultural if it is being worn for practical survival purposes – but fashion would be cultural. Obviously, we could continue adding to this list, but hopefully the distinction is clear. It is interesting to note that some parts of culture (such as cooking, poetry, fashion, architecture, and so on) seem to have a relatively clear basis in practical survival activities (food, speech, clothing, shelter), whereas other cultural activities (music, art, dance, comedy, and so on) are harder to associate with some clear practical origin.

It is obvious that a distinction of this sort makes sense within a modern "evolutionary" context – but I want to be careful that we are not being reductionist about this. In the first place, I am not trying to make a distinction between the kinds of activities that lead to evolutionary success and those that do not. For one thing, many aspects of culture (that are therefore not straightforwardly about the survival of the organism) tend to correlate with reproductive success: after all, a good sense of humor, nice clothes, and being a good cook go a long way in that domain. But I also do not want therefore to go in the other direction and say that culture is *all* down to trying to convince another person to reproduce with you – because then culture becomes just another, more general, level of worrying about survival (of one's genetic line, or similar). For some proponents of evolution, if something is to have meaning or make sense, it must be articulated as having evolutionary purpose. And with enough contortions, almost anything can be argued as having evolutionary benefit (even practices I have labelled cultural above). However, I think the danger with this kind of mapping onto evolutionary terms is that it misses the deeper point.

One criterion that distinguishes cultural activities from non-cultural activities is the criteria of *freedom*. To be cultural, an act must be done freely: not as a result of coercion, or animal survival instinct. In that sense, culture should be understood in light of the German concept of *Bildung* (sometimes translated as culture or education), as articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) and others following him. The concept of *Bildung* as it featured in the Humboldtian model of higher education would prove extremely influential first within Germany, and then worldwide as other nations (including the United States) based their higher education systems on the German research institution model.[12] Along with von Humboldt, Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) "is held in the German historiography of pedagogy to be the 'founder' of the German theory of *Bildung*."[13] *Bildung* can be understood as a process of self-cultivation, self-formation, and maturation in which the person grows closer to their *ideal, free, and authentic self*. Gadamer describes the concept well, saying "But if in our language we say *Bildung*, we mean something both higher and more inward, namely, the attitude

12) For a general understanding of *Bildung* as well as its influence on American philosophy, see Siljander, et al., *Theories of Bildung*. For a primary source on the concept see von Humboldt, "On the Spirit and the Organizational Framework." For an overview of the history and development of the term see: Horlacher, "Bildung – A construction." For a modern "redemption" of the term (into a Christian Ethical context) see Herdt, *Forming Humanity*.

13) Horlacher, "Bildung – A construction," 420.

of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of total intellectual and moral endeavor, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character."[14] Education, as von Humboldt understood it, should foster this kind of self-cultivation: a cultivation and growth of our feelings of intellectual and moral striving.

The German emphasis on *Bildung* is largely responsible for the fact mentioned at the outset: that many classic philosophers of culture have tended to be German. We can see the ideals of freedom and perfection that preoccupied Nietzsche in this concept of *Bildung*. This concept would influence much of nineteenth century German philosophy (not merely Nietzsche). For example, there is an interesting connection here to Marx's concept of "alienation" and his criticism of modern labor practices.[15] In essence, Marx's criticism is that modern labor practices take "work" out of the realm of culture and reduce it to a non-cultural obsession with survival (through wages, competition, and so on). What should be an expression of personal freedom and growth becomes a depersonalized animality.

To repeat our description of culture, *culture is: everything that persons do to thrive, rather than merely survive*. In that sense, culture is rooted ultimately in the freedom of the person. Culture is both the domain in which personal freedom acts, and the precipitate or residue of free action. However, we should be careful. I have argued that all cultural acts are free, but are all free acts cultural? It might not be correct to say that culture is *entirely* synonymous with freedom. For example, some free acts might be oriented toward growth of the person, yet they might fail to produce any such growth (for example: through accident, good intention but poor execution, and so on). Would that rise to the level of culture? Similarly, some free acts may have *no* concern with growth whatsoever, or even aim for the antithesis of growth (i.e. the possibility of evil). Is it possible to have an unhealthy or even "evil" culture – one that does not aim at growth at all? Would not that betray the original organic, agricultural sense of the term?

This is a tension that would need a full treatment of its own, one that is beyond the scope of the present work. However, let us say preliminarily that all free/cultural activity is dynamic and therefore aims at *some* end. To say that cultural activity is dynamic is to say that the person is changed by their free act, even if the "direction and velocity" of that change is not always clear. Thus, what the specific end sought by a cultural act looks like, and how successful a certain cultural process is at obtaining that end, could conceivably vary radically. And it does seem to be the case, in fact, that our free actions often fail to take us in the most optimal direction of growth – or do so only ever-so slowly. Enculturation (growing and thriving) turns out to be relatively difficult. Let us assume the following organization, in terms of increasing specificity: 1) there are actions, 2) then there are free actions, 3) then there are free actions aimed at growth, 4) and finally there are free actions which successfully achieve some level of growth. One might argue that culture is already present at the second level: that it is synonymous with free action, even if that action aims at ends which seem to be destructive or evil. However, for my purpose here I will restrict the term culture to the more specific levels of three and four.

For a fuller discussion of the relationship between freedom and evil, one that coheres fairly well with my usage here, one should consult Schelling's 1809 *On the Essence of Human Freedom* (commonly referred to as the *Freiheitsschrift*). As the English edition translators of the work note:

> And here is one of the central points of Schelling's approach, that evil introduces a necessary imbalance into the system of the world, that this imbalance is itself the origin and life of the system, the impulsion to the self-revelation of the absolute or God. Yet, evil is not on that account a good systemic citizen, it is essentially chaotic or anarchic and, as such, it always threatens to turn system

14) Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 11.

15) See for example Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844."

> to its own ends, to make system its servant; precisely this terrible tension is the essential medium of life, of the organic struggle of forces that constitutes the true basis of the whole. Vitality becomes the highest value, a vitality that exists only because of the ceaseless struggle of forces.[16]

Schelling offers one of the most powerful arguments for how a philosopher of culture (which, again, I have oriented around the concept of growth and thriving) might understand the problem of evil. Culture, in the sense I am using the term, is the realm in which such "organic struggles" play out in service of "vitality" (or growth).

What is a Philosophy of Culture?

Now that we have established at least a basic understanding of what we mean by culture, we can move on to the more specific task at hand: what exactly does it mean to have a "philosophy" of culture? It seems to me that philosophy can play (at least) five roles with respect to culture. Philosophy of culture might be: *descriptive, critical, processual, teleological, or cultural*. Of these five, the first four (what I am calling "philosophy of culture") are similar in that they are somewhat abstracted or separated from culture itself – in these roles, philosophy of culture is a discipline that reflects on culture, and therefore holds itself at a distance from the object of its reflections.

As a basic heuristic for summarizing philosophies of culture, I am using Aristotle's famous "four causes."[17] Aristotle argued that there were four kinds of "explanation" for any phenomena, and correspondingly we might expect to find four forms of philosophy of culture, each of which seeks to explain culture along its own "causal" axis. Descriptive philosophy of culture deals with articulating the "material cause" of culture; critical philosophy of culture deals with the "formal cause" of culture; process philosophy of culture deals with the "efficient cause" of culture; and teleological philosophy of culture deals with (appropriately enough) the "final cause" of culture. The first two forms of philosophy of culture (and their corresponding Aristotelian causes) are static/spatial, whereas the second two are dynamic/temporal. Of course, this mapping could potentially be reductionistic, but I think it is appropriate enough to be useful for our purposes here.

I should reiterate that my goal here is not to provide an exhaustive historical summary of the various forms that philosophy of culture has taken. Rather, I am seeking roughly to highlight what forms a philosophy of culture *might* potentially take, regardless of which historical figures (if any) should fall into one category (or complex of categories) or another. While I will give examples of thinkers that demonstrate these tendencies, I do not want therefore to imply that these thinkers exclusively practice one form of philosophy of culture at the expense of all others. Rather, I hope that their work will usefully demonstrate a certain approach with the understanding that their full theories are more nuanced and complex than can be captured in such a reduced context.

My ultimate aim is to demonstrate, at least in a basic way, that each of these forms of philosophy of culture are different in kind from what I will call a "cultural philosophy." This final form is unique in that rather than reflecting on culture in a mediated way, it is (hypothetically at least) *itself* an immediate cultural act.

In what follows, I will provide an overview of these five relations between philosophy and culture. It is important to remember that these roles are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Also, while I am highlighting the need for an increased awareness and practice of "cultural philosophy," I do not wish thereby to imply that philosophy of culture (in any of its four forms) is without value. Indeed, we may decide that a "cultural philosopher" may (or even *should*) take on *some or all* of those 4 roles in their pursuit of practicing cultural philosophy.

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16) Love and Schmidt, "Introduction: Schelling's Treatise," xx.

17) See Part II of the "Physics" in Aristotle, *Complete Works* Vol. 1.

Descriptive philosophy of culture is in some ways the most straightforward. In this aspect, a philosophy of culture would function in the way that a descriptive science, such as entomology, for example, would.[18] In the same way that an entomologist lays out and pins bugs to a cork board, descriptive philosophy of culture functions as a taxonomy and cataloguing of various cultural manifestations. To the extent that this kind of philosophy of culture is purely descriptive, it does not offer any judgments about cultural acts: it does not ask why, whether, or in what manner any particular objects are in fact cultural. It rather concerns itself with the complexities of intra-cultural relationships. Given that such and such a range of actions are considered to be cultural: how should they be organized and arranged? For example, music is understood as a cultural phenomenon. If that is the case, is music more closely related to poetry, dance, or film? What are the differences between jazz, blues, rock, and other distinctions interior to the category of music? These are the kinds of concerns that would occupy a descriptive philosophy of culture.

To my knowledge, very few "pure" philosophers of culture (and by that I mean academic philosophers who specialize in philosophy of culture) focus primarily on descriptive philosophy of culture. It is much more common to find descriptive work as a minor component accompanying broader theoretical goals. However, if we expand our understanding of philosophy, we will find that descriptive philosophy of culture is common among academics in other disciplines (especially cultural anthropology and similar), as well as in popular culture (for example: professional critics). I take these pursuits to still have relevant philosophical import, even if the work is not being done by professional philosophers. Among academics, descriptive philosophy of culture is most characteristic of those thinkers who emphasize ethnographic data, for example the work of Bronisław Malinowski, who described his work by stating that:

> The field Ethnographer has seriously and soberly to cover the full extent of the phenomena in each aspect of tribal culture studied, making no difference between what is commonplace, or drab, or ordinary, and what strikes him as astonishing and out-of-the-way. At the same time, the whole area of tribal culture *in all its aspects* has to be gone over in research. The consistency, the law and order which obtain within each aspect make also for joining them into one coherent whole.[19]

As the ending remarks of Malinowski above indicates, it may be fair to say that few thinkers focus *exclusively* on descriptive work, even among anthropologists. Even the work of Franz Boas and his school of anthropology, which is one of the most exclusively descriptive schools in terms of overall character, still makes room for critical, processual, and teleological reflections on culture. As Boas says:

> It may seem to the distant observer that American students are engaged in a mass of detailed investigations without much bearing upon the solution of the ultimate problems of a philosophic history of human civilization. I think this interpretation of the American attitude would be unjust because the ultimate questions are as near to our hearts as they are to those of other scholars, only we do not hope to be able to solve an intricate historical problem by a formula.[20]

Critical philosophy of culture, on the other hand, is concerned exclusively with the judgment claims that a descriptive philosophy of culture would avoid. It is primarily concerned with determining the "function" by which

18) Of course, it could be questioned whether any science is ever *wholly* descriptive.

19) Malinowski, *Argonauts*, 11.

20) Boas, "The Methods of Ethnology," 314.

some things are, and others are not: cultural. What are the boundaries between art and non-art, between eating and cuisine, between wearing clothes and fashion, and so on? Does this act or object count as cultural? Why does this count as culture, and (perhaps the most difficult) how does it count as cultural? Whereas descriptive philosophy of culture is concerned with a "positive" project of laying out the entirety of culture, critical philosophy of culture is concerned with a "negative" project of determining the boundaries, horizon, and limits of culture – in other words, the "form" of culture. In this way, critical philosophy of culture is "critical" in the sense that Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) articulated, in that it: "does not consider the question objectively, but in relation to the foundation of the knowledge upon which the question is based."[21] In other words, culture is not considered purely objectively, as if a brute existence – it is considered in light of the (symbolic) function by which its constitution is enacted.

To my mind, the most systematic articulation of a critical philosophy of culture is given by Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) in his three-volume *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. In it, Cassirer utilizes a cultural phenomenology to describe and discern the *forms* present in our culture (understood as a horizon of meaning created by a variety of human work). Culture is thus the resulting form (or residue) of the action of cultivating our own human possibilities, insofar as those possibilities make us intelligible to ourselves. As Cassirer says:

> If all culture is manifested in the creation of specific image-worlds, of specific symbolic forms, the aim of philosophy is not to go behind all these creations, but rather to understand and elucidate their basic formative principle. It is solely through awareness of this principle that the content of life acquires its true form.[22]

Cassirer will outline three primary symbolic activities (workings) which contribute to a functional understanding of man: language, myth, and objectivating knowledge. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* serve as "critiques" in the Kantian sense: they outline the functional "rules" (what Cassirer above calls "formative principles") by which we populate descriptive categories such as language, myth, art, and so on.

As a positive and negative pairing, descriptive and critical philosophy of culture are best performed in concert, so that the internal and external relations of culture can be articulated and understood in light of one another. If we focus only on a critical philosophy of culture, we clarify the horizon of culture without shining a light on the content of culture itself. Likewise, if we focus only on a descriptive philosophy of culture, we emphasize the parts of culture at the expense of an understanding of culture as a whole – the horizon of culture remains vague, and (if we have no functional rule to determine what counts as cultural) we risk bringing objects into our description that are not properly cultural at all (i.e., that are about surviving rather than thriving, or lack freedom). As Cassirer points out: "A philosophy of culture begins with the assumption that the world of human culture is not a mere aggregate of loose and detached facts. It seeks to understand these facts as a system, as an organic whole."[23] Understanding the various expressions of culture as a (functional) unity is the goal of a critical philosophy of culture.

Process philosophy of culture (along with teleological philosophy of culture) takes a somewhat different approach to the question of culture. Both descriptive and critical philosophy deal with culture in a largely static, coordinate way – the dynamic aspect of culture (the fact that it changes over time and aims at certain

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21) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 484/B 512.

22) Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Vol. 1, 113.

23) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man,* 278. For more of Cassirer's work on culture, see Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture*; Cassirer, *Logic of the Cultural Sciences*.

ends) is presupposed, but never directly considered. Process philosophy of culture directly addresses the dynamic, processual, aspect of culture. It seeks to identify the ways in which culture changes over time, and the mechanism by which those changes occur. It takes the picture of culture that is given by the combination of descriptive and critical philosophy of culture and asks: how did we get here? Could we have gotten somewhere else instead? It traces the history of cultural forms and the ways in which they have morphed over time. Can we identify patterns in the free cultural expressions the persons make? Is the presence of a certain cultural form (film) for example, adequately presaged by earlier cultural forms? How does creativity affect the history of culture?

Process philosophy of culture is likely inaugurated (at least for modern western philosophy) by Giambattista Vico (1668–1774) in his *New Science*.[24] Isaiah Berlin depicts Vico as arguing that "true understanding of human history cannot be achieved without the recognition of a succession of the phases of the culture of a given society or people."[25] In other words, culture needs to be understood as a "succession" or process. Vico famously described these phases of culture as the ages of gods, heroes, and men. While the modern thinker perhaps most associated with process philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), is usually thought of as a mathematician and metaphysician, it has been argued by David Hall that Whitehead "is primarily a philosopher of culture,"[26] and I agree with Hall that Whitehead provides a thorough (albeit sometimes abstract) metaphysics which can be used to analyze and understand culture.

Teleological philosophy of culture is closely linked to process philosophy of culture; enough so in fact that it was a serious question for me whether to make a distinction between them. And yet, I do believe that the orientation and practice of each is different enough to warrant such consideration. Teleological philosophy of culture is also concerned with the dynamic aspect of culture, however, whereas process philosophy of culture is concerned with the parts and minutiae of dynamic culture, teleological philosophy of culture is more holistic (thus this pair mirrors the descriptive/critical pair in that way). A helpful, if potentially reductionistic, way of understanding the difference between the two is that (what I have called) process philosophy of culture is oriented as "coming from" and teleological philosophy of culture is oriented as "heading toward." Of course, this means that the distinction between the two is somewhat a matter of perspective and orientation. However, teleological philosophy of culture is characterized by a concern with the *telos* or end which cultural acts are aiming toward. Its primary concern is not with the "process" by which culture unfurls, but rather with the ideal end at which culture is aiming. If we are meant to understand culture as a kind of growth, teleological philosophy of culture asks: what are we growing into? What are we becoming?

Teleological philosophy of culture (in the modern western era) largely traces its roots back to Kant, who wrote that "only culture can be the ultimate purpose that we have cause to attribute to nature with respect to the human species."[27] However, it would be fair to say that the most mature expositions of this position do not come until Hegel and Marx. This may seem strange, as both Hegel and Marx tended to use the actual term "culture" in a limited Herderian sense (linking culture explicitly with the Enlightenment):[28]

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24) Vico, *The First New Science*. Vico would later release a second (1730) and third (1744) edition of the *Scienza Nuova*.

25) Berlin, *Vico and Herder,* xvii.

26) Hall, *The Civilization of Experience,* x.

27) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §83, 319. Kant in this passage defines culture as "producing in a rational being an aptitude for purposes generally (hence [in a way that leaves] that being free)." Culture exercises humanity's ability to set purposes for itself; but it does not restrict humanity to any certain purpose.

28) See for example Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* 294–364.

> In Hegel's works, the term "culture" played a somewhat insignificant role, and appeared sporadically beside such terms as *Bildung* and *Aufklärung* which Herder had earlier used interchangeably with "culture." Marx was very strongly linked to that aesthetic and general philosophical tradition.[29]

Nevertheless, it has been argued that both Hegel and Marx's projects demonstrate a continuation of Kant's teleological understanding of culture: Kant's "account of the conflict between the oppressed masses and the luxurious but superfluous masters anticipates the master-slave dialectic of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Marx's claim in the *Communist Manifesto* that the 'history of all hitherto existing societies has been the history of class struggle'."[30] Both Hegel and Marx see culture as a dialectical progress toward some telos, and speak of it in those terms. While there is some discussion of the "process" by which culture unfolds, the greater emphasis is upon the telos/end toward which culture is progressing.

What is a Cultural Philosophy?

That leaves only the fifth relationship between philosophy and culture, which I have already indicated is somewhat unique – a *cultural philosophy of culture*. Whereas the first four forms all seek to offer some explanation of culture (and thus are removed and abstracted from culture itself), cultural philosophy of culture (or more simply: cultural philosophy), does not explain culture – *it is itself cultural*. Philosophy of this kind is not an analysis of culture; it is an instantiation of culture. As a cultural act, it is therefore an act that persons do not have to perform (it is free), and nevertheless we "philosophize" for the sake of growth. This is philosophy not in its academic or theoretical aspect, but philosophy as a way of life; as an orientation, a way of being in the world. In this case, philosophy (as the literal pursuit of wisdom) becomes a certain kind of cultural action; in the same way that a painter paints as an act of self-cultivation, or a dancer dances, a philosopher philosophizes. Philosophy of this kind does not describe or explain culture in a mediated way; it en-cultures, as an immediate act.

This last "cultural" form of philosophy of culture is in some ways the most unique, but also the most mysterious. In an interesting twist, the reflective power of philosophy of culture that is trained so carefully on other cultural forms has, historically, often failed to explain what it means to philosophize as a cultural act. I see this as a major oversight in the tradition of philosophy of culture. It seems more straightforward to understand what it means to paint, or to sing, or to cook, and so on – but what does it mean to "love wisdom," or to philosophize? Is it possible for philosophy not merely to analyze culture, but to contribute to it? Is it possible for philosophy not merely to offer an explanation, but to provide us a path for self-cultivation and growth? If so, what does that path look like? How is it to be distinguished from other cultural forms? This is a significant challenge for philosophy of culture moving forward: the challenge to articulate not a "philosophy of culture" but rather a "cultural philosophy." Answering that challenge would, I believe, go a long way toward vitalizing philosophy, bringing it out of the academy and into the agora, and even (hopefully) reinvigorating and fertilizing culture as a whole.

My purpose here, as stated at the outset, is as something of a prolegomenon to a cultural philosophy. Fully articulating what that would look like is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to point to at least two promising paths forward that I believe are engaged in cultural philosophy in an interesting way. The first is the work of Pierre Hadot (and others) on philosophy as a way of life.[31] Hadot defines philosophy as

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29) Kloskowska, "The Conception of Culture," 33.

30) Caygill, *A Kant Dictionary*, 150. For the passage Caygill cites see Marx and Engels, "Communist Manifesto," 482.

31) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. First published in French as *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique,* revised and expanded in the 1987 second edition. See also Chase, et al., *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

"a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to be more fully, and makes us better."[32] This emphasis on growth and concrete action cohere well with the concept of culture, and cultural philosophy, as I have defined them. Hadot identifies what he calls "spiritual exercises" that originated in Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy before being borrowed and modified by the Christian tradition. These exercises vary somewhat from school to school, but could include: "research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), listening (*akroasis*), attention (*prosoche*), self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and indifference to indifferent things."[33]

These exercises provide an interesting angle on what the practice of cultural philosophy could look like: providing content for the questions, "what does a philosopher do?" or "what does it mean to love wisdom?" Hadot is not, I think, normally considered a philosopher of culture.[34] Perhaps this is because philosophy is not often considered to be a cultural act. Nevertheless, I think his approach should be instructive for philosophers of culture also interested in being cultural philosophers.

Another philosopher that I believe has done good work in using cultural philosophy to enrich his philosophy of culture is Douglas R. Anderson.[35] In his 2006 book *Philosophy Americana: Making Philosophy at Home in American Culture,* Anderson reflects on "the relationship between American philosophy and other features of American culture. I am interested in how philosophers work in this culture."[36] Anderson integrates his view of the philosophical life into culture more broadly, seeing philosophy as something "already in the world"[37] that should be pursued in a lived and vital way; it is a human endeavor just as integrated into everyday life as the urge for music, film, literature, and so on. Furthermore, this approach to cultural philosophy serves to enrich his reflections on philosophy of culture, especially his work on American(a) culture. Anderson, and the like-minded thinkers that he is in dialogue with (including contemporary thinkers such as Henry Bugbee, Gloria Anzaldúa, Bruce Wilshire, Randall Auxier, Crispin Sartwell, and John Kaag), represent another interesting approach to what I have called cultural philosophy.

The Potential Value of a Cultural Philosophy

Hopefully, we have established, at least in a provisional way, what a cultural philosophy may look like, and how it differs from philosophy of culture. Now we come to the final question, and in some ways the most important: what is the value of a philosophy of culture, and the value of "cultural philosophy"? And specifically: what is the value of cultural philosophy to a philosopher of culture? To address this point, I will start by discussing the general value of philosophy of culture; I will then raise some questions about how philosophy of culture should be best practiced (and by whom). I will then make the case that practicing cultural philosophy, in addition to its own benefits, would make one a better philosopher of culture (and a better philosopher).

Let us start by remembering the purpose of culture. Culture is that process by which persons grow and thrive beyond their present state. It is an attempt not merely to survive or maintain, but to better oneself and become more than one is. The cultural pathways toward growth are incredibly numerous – humans do all sorts

32) Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 83.

33) Ibid., 84.

34) With some exception. See Kramer, "Philosophical Wandering."

35) See for example Anderson, *Philosophy Americana;* Anderson, "Philosophy as Culture."

36) Anderson, *Philosophy Americana*, ix.

37) Anderson, "Philosophy as Culture," 145.

of varied things to enrich and fertilize their lives, from popular forms such as art, sport, or science, all the way down to much more niche pursuits. The forms that culture can take are therefore incredibly broad, which can cause problems, but that also means that it is broadly appealing. There are times when "practical" concerns must take precedence in one's life, as of course: in order to thrive one must first ensure that they will be able to survive and provide themselves with the basics of life. But many people today have the luxury of unparalleled access to enculturation, at a level perhaps unequaled in human history. While the "humanities" are still occasionally denigrated as frivolous or distracting, most agree that the democratization of the cultural sciences (beyond just the wealthy) is a worthy public good. Given that a baseline of survival has been established, it only makes sense that we would wish to "become more human," to thrive and grow as a person and as a community of persons. And culture, in all of its manifestations, is product and process of that desire.

Therefore, just as with any endeavor that is worth pursuing, it makes sense that we take the practice of culture seriously. And that is exactly what the four "reflective" forms of philosophy of culture aim to do. They reflect carefully on the content, form, process, and aims of cultural forms. The goal, then, is that we learn to enact culture in the best and most proper manner that we can. Given that persons seek, through culture, to thrive and grow – what are the best forms of culture to accomplish that aim? Who is most suited to any particular cultural art/science? How can we get the most out of our cultural practices? Can we learn to be intentional about our self-cultivation, as opposed to only performing such cultivation in a haphazard or fragmented way? For anyone who values culture as I have described it here, I believe that the utility of such reflective exercises should be obvious. If a person wants to ensure bodily health, they will of course seek to do so using the best practices; likewise, if someone wants to enrich themselves culturally (spiritually? mentally? emotionally?) it only makes sense that they set about that task with some care and conviction.

Therefore, I believe it is clear that reflective philosophy of culture is useful as a set of practices for learning the art of self-cultivation. However, what is less clear to me, and may require some consideration, is *whether philosophy of culture is best practiced by "merely reflective" philosophers*. A merely reflective philosopher would be, in this context, someone who specializes in the theoretical study and practice of culture but does not themselves necessarily contribute to culture or heavily participate in it – as opposed to the artists, writers, chefs, athletes, and so on who are actively engaged in the original creation of culture, or in systematic cultural self-practices. In this case, a philosopher of culture could be compared to a personal trainer who does not themselves work out, or perhaps a math teacher who never makes any mathematical calculations. They are experts on the intricacies and history of an activity that they do not themselves partake in; endlessly speculating on culture, but never participating in it. What would be the role of such a person?[38]

One possible argument for the value of a specialist such as this is that many people who are actively engaged in cultural practices either do not have the time to engage in such reflection or may not have the capacity to do so well. Afterall, it is possible that an artist might be great at what they do, without ever having reflected on the actual process or overall meaning of their actions. It is therefore helpful to have a person who devotes their time exclusively to these broader, more general considerations. This creates a more equitable division of labor, where the philosophers of culture develop theories which inform the practice of the cultural agents, and the practice of the cultural agents informs the theories of the philosophers. I am open to the possibility of this line of thinking, but at the same time I have some reservations.

It makes a certain sense that the people most equipped to say something valuable about culture are the people who practice it most deeply and thoroughly. Therefore, I am inclined to give a certain weight to the theo-

38) Of course, it goes without saying that many philosophers of culture do, in fact, also contribute to (or practice) culture in a variety of ways. The question is the value of a philosopher of culture *qua* philosopher of culture.

retical considerations of cultural practitioners that I may not give to philosophers of culture. Thus, it may be that an artist (and so on) is more equipped to perform philosophy of culture than someone trained exclusively as a "reflective" philosopher. However, I do think that there is plenty of variation here; some excellent artists are poor philosophers, and some excellent philosophers are poor artists. Of course, the ideal circumstance is to have someone well practiced in a cultural form who is also well trained and suited for philosophical considerations. Such persons would be, obviously, somewhat rare.

Another, similar, line of thinking would come from the standpoint of a philosopher of culture as an educator. In this case, the philosopher abstains from spending time on particular cultural practices in favor of educating future generations concerning the history of culture or ideal cultural methods. This argument suffers from a similar complaint as above; that it would still perhaps be better to have a practicing cultural agent teaching about culture than to have someone trained as a philosopher teaching about culture. However, we might counteract such a critique by noting that education itself should be understood as a cultural practice; therefore, being an educator might itself give the philosopher adequate insight into culture that can then be shared with students. However, at least in the US, most professional philosophers are given almost no training in education as a history or practice; therefore, any philosopher who is practiced in education as a cultural activity likely was forced to stumble into that on their own. Being a philosopher is, in many cases, in no way synonymous with being an educator.

We might then conclude that philosophy of culture is often only valuable to the extent that it is practiced by a person who is well-versed in cultural actions of whatever kind. It might be the case that an academic philosopher could fit such a description, but they would need to ensure that they are actively engaged in culture (either as a producer or practitioner), and not solely divorced from culture, always remaining at an abstracted, reflective distance. I am open to the possibility of a philosopher of culture who is highly divorced from culture (i.e., whose activities rarely orient around thriving) that nevertheless has useful and helpful insights, but I assume that to be the exception, not the rule.

Thus, while there are many obvious values associated with the practice of "reflective" philosophy of culture, it is possible that those values are not being fully utilized or capitalized upon: at least if the philosophers in question are understood as simply providing descriptive, critical, processual, and teleological "commentary" on culture. Reflective distance is valuable, but it loses much of its value if it never gets re-embedded in concrete action; and reflection should always be informed by concrete culture. The ideal philosopher of culture is one whose practice and reflection are tightly interwoven. Thus, to the extent that someone is playing a purely reflective role, I believe that their contributions to culture (and philosophy) will suffer.

It is here that I believe we can begin to understand the value of a cultural philosophy to a philosopher of culture (and indeed to philosophers more broadly). If it is possible that pursuing wisdom as a philosopher could indeed constitute the kind of cultural process of growth and self-cultivation that we have discussed, then it might actually be the case that philosophers *are*, in fact, ideally suited to provide explanations for the ideal content, form, process, and aims of culture. In that case, the philosophical pursuit of wisdom would not only provide the theoretical tools to explain culture, but also provide the practical experience with culture that could ground those theories in concrete practice. But of course, this assumes that the philosopher is actually being effectively trained to engage in the pursuit of wisdom as a process of growth and self-cultivation. To that end, I believe that philosophers of culture should be playing a bigger role in educating philosophers broadly on how exactly to engage in the pursuit of wisdom as a cultural activity. In the same way that "philosophy of art" might help artists to grow as artists, we also need a "philosophy of philosophy."

I have argued above that articulating how philosophy itself could be understood as a cultural practice is perhaps *the* major task for philosophy of culture. If such a project is possible, it would ground philosophy

of culture such that (as long as the philosopher also practices *cultural philosophy*, and not only philosophy of culture) a philosopher might be able to make significant and valuable contributions to culture. Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper, but I hope that it takes a step in the direction of articulating such a system. Learning to practice philosophy as a way of life, or as a cultural pathway that leads to growth and thriving should be given more attention.

To summarize in a simple and direct way. I believe that all philosophers should carefully consider in what way their philosophical practice truly leads to increasing wisdom (growth, thriving) – if our philosophy is not "spiritually nourishing," so to speak, then something is amiss. But if the culture of philosophy is not as nourishing as it should or could be, who better to improve that culture than philosophers of culture (who should be best equipped to suggest improvements to the culture of philosophy)? For that reason, I believe that philosophers of culture should place more emphasis on articulating what philosophy looks like as a cultural practice (relative to other cultural practices such as music, art, and so on). The reasons for this are twofold: a clearer understanding of cultural philosophy would benefit all practitioners of philosophy; also, a philosopher of culture who engages cultural philosophy will be (I believe) a more effective philosopher of culture. I believe that, if performed correctly, philosophy can and should be a vital component of a rich cultural life – equally as nourishing as music, art, fashion, cuisine, and so on. Let this be a small step in the direction of that goal.

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