

## *De-Limitations of Culture*

Culture, one can say, is the process of projecting, creating, and setting limitations. It begins with such acts as much as it lives and sustains itself through them. Culture not only sets its outward, external limits serving as a demarcation between itself and an outward sphere – a realm not belonging to it, a dark zone of what was excluded; but it is itself permeated by a whole series of internal limitations. What is at stake is *in-forming* an original chaos of disorganized, fragmented, inconceivable, and raw “reality.” That is, turning it into identifiable, coherent, ontologically grounded and secured world in which we can dwell. To set cultural limitations means, then, to project particular symbolic, imaginative, social, political, religious, economic, hygienic, medical, and so forth, orders. And at the same time to exclude everything falling short of the standards provided by such orders. This act creates intelligible frameworks within which all culturally mediated human experiences, from the most private and intimate through the public and common to the most sublime ones (e.g., experience of freedom), can become meaningful. This act gives them contours, actuality, and facticity. It does not mean (or it is not to be limited to) a simple acceptance of these limitations. Rather it simply indicates that all our experiences involve encountering limitations of different kinds. And as such they [experiences] are essentially nothing else than taking a stance, position, attitude – being it active or passive, positive or negative – toward them. In other words, limits, boundaries, borders, and along with them also margins, are all-pervasive, constitutive elements of culture and of our understanding of ourselves and of reality.

It seems that there are at least three points, as trivial as they are, which need to be underscored. First, all these, foundational for culture, limitations are never purely static, rigid, nor fully objectified. They are in themselves and for us dynamic, changeable, and transitory. Their way of being is unstable, and often ephemeral and elusive. And so is our experience of them. That is why culture, and along with it our human condition, is

constantly *at the limit*. That is why culture is constantly confronted with the dark zone of what is excluded, of what lies beyond or beneath the light realm of what belongs to it and of what lies at its margins.

Second, cultural limitations are not only enclosive, but also disenclosive. They are to demarcate between what belongs to (a) culture and what lies behind its limits. Precisely by doing so, however, they open up the realm of what is other, strange, what cannot be simply appropriated. Therefore, cultural limitations by their very means send us off to what was meant to be excluded. All happens here as if culture in projecting its own identity at the same time projects its non-place, a place of its own impossibility, which as such is negatively included; thus this projection of identity takes up a paradoxical form of an inclusion-exclusion. That is, a form of an essential mixture of oneness and strangeness, of what is known and recognized and what is unknown, shadowy, marginal.<sup>1</sup>

Third, as suggested above, all cultural limitations are not simply given. In fact, in culture nothing is simply given, nothing simply happens. Thus, if limitations in all their particular forms are constitutive for culture, then what is constitutive for limitations themselves is the way of our cultural apprehension and projection of them, our culturally mediated approach toward them. And it is in this sense their very concept becomes one of the fundamental concepts of philosophical reflection on culture. In the discursive field opened by it we find ourselves within a particular hermeneutic situation where categories of culture, human being, and limitation are constantly set off against each other in a relation of mutual elucidation. We cannot understand any of them without reference to the other two; and we cannot understand ourselves in our facticity beyond the circularity implied by this conceptual weave.

Culture arises out of the act of negative distance toward what is “simply given,” to what is given in “purity” of often chaotic, meaninglessness. This act of distance is not to be identical with some turning back, or a state of indifference. It is always already a moment of creative *in-formation*, that is, of setting limitations by means of which what is given can be distinguished from anything else. It can become visible for us in its own form. That is, it stands before us as something meaningful, identifiable, and self-identical that is spatio-temporally determined and as such related to other meaningful forms. In this way cultural phenomenology refers us to metaphysics. Limitation (being it boundary, border, or limit) is to be seen here as a foundation of identity, as an ontological principle of organization, and as a consequence as something positive. If we turn our attention to the origins of Western culture, we will find at least two examples of such metaphysics.

The first one we can find in the *Book of Genesis* where the whole process of creation is presented, in fact, as the great act of setting limits by means of which an abysmal darkness of an infinite night gradually turns into an ordered universe. That is the universe divided into separated spheres and filled up with different living forms. What is significant – the Great Creator ends each day of His work by stating that all effects of limitation imposed on an original chaos are good. This iterative confirmation of superiority of what is created, that is, limited, shaped, and formed over an original element of dark formlessness and indistinction is quite telling. It expresses a fundamental affirmation of limitation regardless of its kind – being it demarcation limits/boundaries, or creative limitations making what is limited something finite, actual, existing, concrete. What is more – it articulates, by way of indirect inference, the demonic character of limitlessness, of apprehending limits in a negative mode, that is, as obstacles. Demonism, usually understood as the will of destruction is such only because it is in its “essence” determined by the will of negation of all limits.

The second example we find in ancient Greek thought. Aristotle in his *Physics* states: “nothing is complete which has no end and the end is a limit.”<sup>2</sup> While explaining the meaning/s of the concept of “limit” in his

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1) Cf. Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concepts*, trans. Alexander Kozin and Tanja Stahler (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

2) Aristotle, *Physics*, 207a.

*Metaphysics* he develops the above point even further. He claims that limit is not only “the last point of each thing, i.e. the first point beyond which it is not possible to find any part, and the first point within which every part is.” But even more importantly, its concept indicates “the substance of each thing, and the essence of each; for this is the limit of knowledge; and if of knowledge, of the object also.”<sup>3</sup> What we can see in these quotes is bringing the category of limit up to the level of the principle of identity – something is, and it is what it is only as far as it is limited, and its essence lies precisely in the fact of it being limited. Limit is also brought to the level of being the basic principle of knowing. To be means to be finite, to have and maintain a stand. To know is to have a stand and accept it as limited. However, it does not indicate some static inertia, a state of affairs where ready-made forms simply stand there as wax figures waiting for our unbiased description. As Martin Heidegger put it:

This standing-there, this taking and maintaining a *stand* that stands erected high in itself, is what the Greeks understood as Being. Whatever takes such a stand becomes *constant* in itself and thereby freely and on its own runs up against the necessity of its limit, *peras*. This *peras* is not something that first accrues to a being from outside. Much less is it some deficiency in the sense of a detrimental restriction. Instead, the self-restraining hold that comes from a limit, the having-of-itself wherein the constant holds itself, is the Being of beings; it is what first makes a being be a being as opposed to a nonbeing. For something to take such a stand therefore means for it to attain its limits, to de-limit itself. Thus a basic characteristic of a being is its *telos*, which does not mean goal or purpose, but end. Here “end” does not have any negative sense, as if “end” meant that something can go no further, that it breaks down and gives out. Instead, “end” means completion in the sense of coming to fulfillment... Limit and end are that whereby beings first begin to be.<sup>4</sup>

And a bit later Heidegger adds: “Whatever places itself into and thereby enacts its limit, and thus stands, has form, *morphē*. The essence of form, as understood by the Greeks, comes from the emergent placing-itself-forth-into-the-limit.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, limitation is not to be seen as something of secondary importance, as derivative of originary being, as something restrictive. It is rather a fundamental moment of originary coming to existence and visibility, the fundamental act of becoming of what an entity is. There is a certain paradox in that – in order to be, something (or someone) has to set/achieve its own limits. Limitation – Greeks have taught us – is not some accidental, unnecessary addendum to a being, but a foundational act of achieving its own *telos* and its own form. It is the highest possible confirmation of being. What ancient Greeks have also taught us is that limitation is not to be understood as something static and closing in, but rather as process of coming to completion, to fulfillment, to ontological perfection as much as projecting itself outward, that is, opening toward other entities. In this sense, the concept of “limit” is not only brought up to the level of the fundamental ontological and epistemological (as the condition of any knowledge) principle, but it also gets an orientational function – limit, even as already given, is at the same time *to be achieved*. The good life is the life lived as a teleologically oriented process of self-limitation and self-formation: the life in which one refuses to give justice to shadowy zones of unmeasured impulses and motivations but rather imposes on them accurate, rational, and appropriate limitations. We find its exemplifications in Aristotelian practical virtue of *phronēsis*. And on a broader cultural plane in the ideal of *paideia* – finding its modern equivalent in the ideal of *Bildung*

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3) Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1022a.

4) Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 63.

5) *Ibid.*

understood as open-ended process of self-cultivation, of forming oneself into a harmonious whole in which particular, affective impulses are to be subject to the proper measure of universal rationality.<sup>6</sup> Falling short of these ideals was equal to living a disordered, barbarian life.

If limitation provides us with ontological, epistemological, ethical grounding then it is not difficult to realize that what causes in Greeks the feeling of the greatest, overwhelming horror is the impossibility to reach limit, or to lose one's limits, or to fall beyond limits of the recognized universe. It meant for them to find oneself in "reality" deprived of any coordinates, to be lost in chaos, to be faced with monstrosity or, in case of losing one's limits, becoming something monstrous. All this coincided with a radically negative perspective on the concept of infinity, which for Greeks is always necessarily a "bad infinity," is an abysmal realm of darkness, chaos, in short – evil. Whatever is unlimited, formless, shapeless, and so forth, is inferior, evil. It always partakes in nonbeing. This point with all its far reaching implications was expressed perhaps most clearly and radically by Plotinus. The substantial Unlimited is identical with substantial Evil and as such is inconceivable. We can have only some conception of it when we think:

Of measurelessness as opposed to measure, of the unbounded against bound, the unshaped against a principle of shape, the ever-needy against the self-sufficing: think of the ever-undefined, the never at rest, the all-accepting but never sated, utter dearth; and make all this character not mere accident in it but its equivalent for essential-being, so that, whatsoever fragment of it be taken, that part is all lawless void.

Plotinus continues his description of the Absolute Evil by using characteristics such as "Undetermination-Absolute," "Absolute Formlessness" and adds that its place is "below all the patterns, forms, shapes, measurements and limits."<sup>7</sup> What we are confronted with here is not only granting the ontological priority – as it was in Aristotle – to limitation, but with an equation of limitation (of whatever kind) with the good. What is striking in this image of the abysmal, dark, dis-ordered realm of evil is that it is created by means of a simple negation of the well-grounded, light, ordered realm of Being. It is as if in order to conceive Being we have to face its other side, its exiled twin-brother.

Thus, one can say in the simplest possible words that what distinguishes ancient approach toward limits is the affirmation of their positivity. And it seems that precisely here lies the difference between ancient and modern approach. In modernity, limits became much more ambivalent. They still play this foundational role, providing modern individuals with basic means of orientation, of knowing-where-we-stand, of self-identification. On the other hand, they are experienced in their negativity, as restrictive, oppressive, as something to be opposed, modified, transgressed. It seems that in modern times neither of these two options can play an exclusive role and be sufficient. This ambivalence is without doubt founded on the significant shift which has taken place in the modern cosmology, which has replaced the ancient image of the finite, well-ordered, all-encompassing cosmos with the image of the infinite (marked with chaos and contingency) Space. Furthermore, the cultural reality has become incomparably more dynamic, complex, fragmented, chaotic, and transitory. It clearly affects the way in which modern individuals experience and understand themselves, in how they create their identities within this wide-open, unstable ontological horizon.

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6) For highly original and inspiring application of that category in the context of the contemporary American culture see Laura Mueller, "Modern Socratic Dialogue and Resilient Democracy: Creating the Clearing for an American Bildung," *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4, no. 4 (2020): 83–104. <https://doi.org/10.14394/eidos.jpc.2020.0042>.

7) Plotinus, *Enneads*, I, 8, 3.

However, at a closer look we can recognize clear and essential affinities between the ancient and modern perspectives. It is true that in both the Holy Bible and ancient Greek thought we find the highest possible confirmation of the positivity of limits. And yet, within the same horizons of meaning we can find surprisingly opposing views if we turn attention more closely to anthropological reflection. On the one hand, we have the biblical story of an original transgression which had turned humans into undefined and undetermined beings from that moment on marking them by liminality. On the other hand, we have an image of the human being as presented by Greek tragedy – a paradoxical being who desperately celebrates his/her finite character by uncompromising obedience to his/her limits and, at the same time has to find justification and means for his/her actions (meaning – project limits). The latter aspect is clearly visible in the myth of Prometheus (perhaps the most “modern” of all ancient tragic heroes) who by the act of original transgression inaugurates human culture and bestow on humans a difficult gift of permanent self-creation. The mentioned ambivalence is clearly visible in its both aspects, for example, in Sophocles’ *Antigone* where the protagonists of the tragic conflict give full justice to their own limits and, in a sense, find in this act the completion of their being. And yet, in the same tragedy we find the stationary song – “The Ode to Man” – which presents the human being as the strangest among all creatures. He/she is characterized as *pantaporos* and *aporos*, which means – as being helpless by nature he/she has to, in an arbitrary way, invent the means of his/her existence, the tools which will allow to establish their own world. But the human being is also *apolis* which is to say as being pre-determined by his/her own political and historical place (*polis*) is at the same time out of this very place; that is, homeless – without place, without structure, without order and limit. He/she is so since all of these coordinates have to be projected by him/her within a non-transparent horizon of his/her destiny.

As such, the human being is at once always pre-determined and painfully undetermined, always miserably behind and at the same time before him-/herself, factual and still possible. In other words, to be human necessarily and essentially means to project oneself, to *in-form*, to give shape to oneself, to take a stand and gets some constancy, even if only transient. To be human means to resist a demonic temptation of falling into monstrous limitlessness and a futile ego-centric desire of self-inifinitization. But this human self-actualization can be done only from within particular cultural universes of meanings by attesting, affirming, contesting, and transgressing them. To project oneself is to *in-form* worldly things, to set limitations to the other entities as much as being subject to limitations coming from them. Culture as being itself indefinable is this relentless activity of de-limiting, where facticity and possibility, transcendence and immanence, oneness and alienness, visibility and invisibility, human and inhuman (and simply non-human), remain in a creative tension. In doing so, it creates meaningful frameworks and orders within which humans make the effort of self-understanding and self-actualization. Since these orders have always necessarily inclusive-exclusive nature, they are accompanied by the spheres of indistinction. That is why very often the most important and fascinating things happen at the margins. Not to mention those taking place just beyond/beneath the limits.

The Thematic Section of this issue starts with the essay by Professor Zofia Rosińska presenting an in-depth analysis of boundaries in culture. She begins by stating that boundaries are all-pervasive components of culture and of all our experiences. Her inspiring analyses focuses especially on the problem of transgression and resistance whose concepts appear to be constitutively weaved with that of boundary. In Rosińska’s view, culture from its very beginning (in both the chronological and logical sense) is based on drawing/encountering boundaries, transgressing them, and confronting consequences of that act: consequences providing conditions for a new constellation of meaning. But – Rosińska asks – does it mean all boundaries can be transgressed? And if so, then should they be? These questions clearly indicate that that problematic of boundary is not axiologically neutral. She also focuses on the subject in question in case of art, which itself is a space of transgression of reality and as such poses an interesting problem of the boundaries between reality and imaginary worlds.

Readers will find a fascinating analysis of the phenomenon of addiction in the perspective of German idealism in the essay by Maciej A. Sosnowski. The author first shows that in the Kantian perspective an addiction can be understood as a desperate attempt to transgress, in a momentous experience, the totality of what is experienceable and in such a way jump beyond any limits into the sphere of the unconditional: into infinity. In Hegel's transcendental view an addictive behavior is seen as an automatized fulfillment of the desire for life in its absolutized particularity, which is equal to falling into vicious circle of subjective self-infinitezation.

Two interesting approaches to boundaries in the case of gardens are presented in the essay by Mateusz Salwa. On the one hand, we can treat them as impregnable limits between humanized nature and wilderness; cultivating a garden would be here equal to drawing a strict line of separation between two irreducible realms, and a garden itself would be a particular order carefully designed and excluding ("vomiting") everything which is alien, that is, does not correspond to the initial idea. On the other hand, gardening itself is seen not only as an opening to otherness, but is also as a process in which both humans and non-humans "participate ... in processes of 'co-becoming'."

Agata Bielik-Robson in her highly original interpretation of Bruno Schulz' novels takes us for a philosophical-theological journey through the margins of reality. Schulz' admiration for all unfished, provisional, stumbling, retarded, trashy forms of life, for all the involuntary immigrants from the normative center of the universe is analyzed in the light of kabalistic tradition. In this perspective all these forms carry a messianic promise. They introduce, by the simple fact of their imperfect, incomplete, half-shaped existence, a possibility of decentralization and pluralization of being – outside of law, beyond any pragmatics, against any teleology. And precisely as such, and only as such, they are reminders of a creative potential, "the original, still unexhausted power which once, before the creation, blissfully filled the pleroma of the Infinite."

Also Andrzej Leder invites our readers to look, so to speak, behind the scene. In his very interesting and thorough analysis of the contemporary social-political domain he questions the conditions of possibility for reaching the limits of visibility by particular social/political/ethnic groups. He claims that most of the symbolic means of representation fail to adequately represent many social and political groups partially because they are still immersed in historically (over)determined social imaginaries, partially because visibility in a social-political domain "is decided in continuous conflicts that distribute importance across the human world. If anything is to be discernible, it must acquire a disclosing weightiness." In such context there is one symbolic field – Leder claims – which is at least promising in any attempts at taking off the veil of invisibility – the language of economics.

Our Forum section consists of two contributions not necessarily unrelated to the leading motif of the issue. Wojciech Kozyra in his very intriguing and impressively well-researched essay questions the theological thesis connecting the so called supersessionism with the Holocaust. In accordance with his convincing diagnosis it was rather anti-supersessionism – in the form of German neo-Marcionism – which by rejecting any affinities between Judaism and Christianity provided a theological ground for the tragedy of the Jewish people. In this cultural process of an over-passionate and complete separating of Christianity from the tradition of the Old Testament a very special (and inglorious) role was played by Kant. In the second of the essays gathered in the Forum section Charles Herrman presents a thorough and, beyond any doubt, groundbreaking analysis of the necessary and sufficient criteria for distinguishing signs and symbols.



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