

KANT'S THEORY OF CULTURE

The rich and the ramified implications of the concept of "Culture", as revealed by the various definitions of anthropologists like E. B. Tylor, Leslie A. White, Coon, Bidney, Parsons, Ralph Linton, A. L. Kroeber, Kluckhohn and others, suggest how hard it is to comprehend and define this concept or that it is a concept which means many things to many people. No human society exists without culture nor does culture function without society. Culture is a human product or a product of social interaction or as Bidney's definition of it would imply it is "a product of society and is acquired by man in social interaction".¹ But it is not a mere product but also "a guide for subsequent interactions" or "the conditioning elements of further action" as Parsons, Kroeber and Kluckhohn would put it. That is why culture is said to be pervasive in the sense that it touches every aspect of human life—past, present and future of human society itself. It refers to the social heritage of the people and hence Merrill contends that "the history of culture is, in a sense, the history of man as a human being."²

The existence of plurality of societies implies the existence of plurality of cultures. Each society has a culture of its own and there is also the tendency to emphasize different cultural elements by different societies. Hence the saying: "man is one but cultures are many". Moreover, "the more complex the society, and the more exposed it is to differing influences, the harder it is to identify and make generalizations about culture themes."³

Consequently, the process of identification of a particular culture requires prior knowledge of the cultural development of that particular society.

The knowledge of the cultural development of a society would be easier when approached from its functional rather than from its substantive aspect. Even here, the understanding of a culture is made very difficult by another factor. That is, a culture is generally identified only through inferences from physical behaviour, verbal behaviour, material artifacts, etc. This means that culture is an abstraction, an abstraction from the visible behaviour of individuals. It is also an abstraction in the sense that it is identified from the uniformity of human behaviour of which it is the source. Added to this, it is said that man makes his culture with his mind. All human institutions—political, religious and cultural institutions—are nothing but concrete expressions of human ideas. Man gives expression to many of his ideas in the form of symbols because only he is capable of creating symbols. Hence it is said that “culture began when man as an articulate, symbol using, primate began.”⁴ These symbols may be either specific or non-specific or they may be referential or denotative or expressive or connotative. Thus culture is symbolic in character which is easily and readily transmitted. And, in the process of its transmission, some of its elements are being lost, some changed and some added.

From the foregoing discussion, certain basic characteristics of culture can be deduced. Culture is visible, learned, transmissive, social, ideational, gratifying, adaptive and integrative. These characteristics of culture take us to the relative problems of cultural variability, acculturation, similarities, assimilation and deviation. Cultural variability may be ascribed to the variations in geographical environment, technological development, cultural drift and historical accident or chance.

This does not mean that the direction of culture is determined by environment but merely that culture must adjust to the geographical necessities, if it is to continue. Acculturation, a term often used as a synonym for socialization, refers to "the process of cultural change induced by contact with foreign cultures."⁵ Cultural similarities promote cultural assimilation. Cultural deviation, like cultural conformity, is socially determined depending upon the values and norms that the people cherish. Moreover, the process of cultural identification is often accompanied by prejudices of ethnocentrism or "the act of regarding one's culture as the center of the universe and hence as the basis for all comparisons with other cultures"⁶ against which a student of culture must take precautions. This means that identity presupposes the need for openmindedness, tolerance and wide knowledge of cultural heritage of the different societies.

Culture is generally identified through the philosophical language in which it is expressed. Philosophy sums up the cultural achievements of a society and it is taken as "a sort of cultural self-assessment." But culture differs from society to society and the existence of plurality of cultures seems to suggest the existence of many valid philosophies having distinctive philosophical traditions of their own. Although culture is identifiable through mathematics, science, literature, art, social and religious practices, since philosophy is taken as a fundamental cultural trait, the philosophical way seems to be the easiest way,

The philosophical way is the best way. Kant is a philosopher of that way. He develops his theory of culture in the 83rd section of the *Critique of Judgment*. Traces of it may also be found in his essay "The Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose". And, before we enter into Kant's theory of culture, it must first be remembered that for Kant "whatever conception of freedom of the will one may form in terms of metaphysics, the

will's manifestations in the world of phenomena, i.e., human actions are determined in accordance with natural laws, as is every other natural event. "Two things are made clear by this statement (1) Kant's theory revolves round man and nature and (2) man is a part of nature, and like all other objects of nature he is determined by natural law. But at the same time he is also to determine himself in accordance with moral law. In other words, he is both determined and free. Here Kant makes a distinction between the two senses of the term "nature". In one sense, nature limits the freedom of man, and in another sense, it is a wise creator of the conditions of his freedom. Freedom is the essential nature of man and the freedom of man implies the use of his reason.

What is meant by freedom of man? Kant distinguishes between three types of freedom—moral freedom, cultural freedom and freedom of discipline. Moral freedom makes man responsible for his actions. Cultural freedom is that which produces institutions and government. It provides the necessary conditions in which the development of moral freedom is possible. There is, then, the third kind of freedom, freedom of discipline. It consists in the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires. "While cultural freedom consists in the freedom to transform nature, freedom of discipline consists in emancipation from nature. History begins with cultural freedom, but ends with the freedom of discipline. Therefore, writes Kant, "Man is destined by reason to live in a society with men and in it to cultivate, civilize and moralize himself by means of art and sciences. "

Thus, Kant holds a teleological view of nature and attributes a rational purpose to it. Anything that is not meant for use or anything which does not fulfil its purpose for which it is created is a contradiction in Kant's theory. This includes either a living organism, or an arrangement (social or political), or both, Kant

calls it ethico-teleology. Nature has value and it helps man to prepare himself for what he himself must do in order to be an end-in-himself. Here Kant raises three questions regarding man as an end-in-himself. (1) What now is the end in man? (2) What is this end which is intended to be promoted by means of his connection with nature? (3) Is this end to be found in man himself? Kant first answers the last question in the affirmative and then proceeds to answer the first two. If it is the end which is intended to be promoted by means of his connection with nature, then "it must be of such a kind that man himself may be satisfied by means of nature and its beneficence" or "it is the aptitude or skill for all manner of ends which he may employ nature both external and internal"¹⁰ Kant calls the former as happiness and the latter, culture.

Happiness, according to Kant, is "a mere *idea* of a state, and one to which he seeks to make his actual state of being adequate under purely empirical conditions."¹¹ For Kant, this is an impossible task because by an *idea* he means "a concept formed from notions and transcending the possibility of experience..."¹² Moreover, man's conception of happiness often fluctuates because he projects this idea of happiness himself, projects it in different ways, alters his conception of it so often, and, arbitrarily seizes it as an end before himself. This raises the basic question: What, in fact, constitutes happiness which would never be attained by man?

Any attempt to answer the above question would only be merely arbitrary and dogmatic. The reason for this is that man's own nature is such that he cannot rest satisfied with any enjoyment whatever. Nor has nature favoured man over all other animals to enjoyment. More often he is met with natural calamities like plague, famine, flood, cold, attacks from animals,

etc. Above all, man himself adds further to his misfortunes and misery of his own race through his inventions, power, wars, and so on. From all these, Kant comes to the conclusion that happiness of man cannot be the ultimate end of nature, nor is man himself destined for that. As the sole being upon earth possessing understanding, he is destined for some other higher end which must ultimately be found only in man and not outside of himself. But, where in man, at any rate, are we to place this ultimate end of nature? Kant answers this question by saying that it is to be placed in man's "capacity for setting before himself ends of his deliberate choice"¹³ or in the "capacity to take ends as one's motive" as Patrick Riley would put it. This capacity is what is known as culture or to quote Kant, culture means "the production in a rational being of an aptitude for any ends whatever of his own choosing, consequently of the aptitude of a being his own freedom..."¹⁴ Only this capacity or culture which transcends the relative ends of natural inclinations like the individual happiness can be the ultimate end of nature.

Now, this takes us to the last question viz., How to identify this capacity or culture in man? or what are the means which nature employs to bring about the development of the innate capacities of man? Kant recognizes several forms of culture but he does admit that not every form of culture can fill the office of this ultimate end. He separates two elements of culture from the rest namely skill and discipline. Skill means "the principal subjective condition of the aptitude for the furthering of ends of all kinds"¹⁵ It is positive but by itself, it is incompetent or inadequate to assist the human will in its determination or choice of ends. It has to be disciplined. And discipline consists (as pointed out earlier) "in the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires." Therefore, it is negative. In other words, if skill develops an "aptitude for ends," discipline lets us take the "ends of reason" as our ends.¹⁶

Kant is both pessimistic and optimistic. He is pessimistic about individual success but optimistic about mankind. The fulfilment of the natural capacities of man requires a vast length of time. It may require a series of generations in which one generation passes on its enlightenment to the next and finally reaches the goal of human aspirations, i.e., the development of the germs implanted by nature in human species. For this, nature has endowed man with reason and freedom of will, which make clear the intentions of nature. Nature intends that man should be a maker of his own destiny. It is not the well-being but the *self-esteem* of man that is more important. Man must make himself worthy of everything. As an individual, Kant says, man is mortal, but immortal as a species. And here we see Kant's anticipation of the modern conception of culture as "super-organic in character" or that culture is held by individuals, but that its existence is independent of any particular individual.¹⁷

The means which nature employs to bring about the development of the innate capacities of man is that of antagonism within society. Antagonism, in this context, means the *unsocial sociability* of man.¹⁸ Man's inclination *to live in society* and *to live as an individual* and the expected mutual resistance all around, provides an opportunity to awaken his powers. He cannot bear and yet he cannot bear *to leave* others. To him hell is 'other people', but yet he cannot live without them. This understanding of the natural conflict in man is the first step towards culture and towards the gradual development of his talents. Man transforms his *pathologically* enforced union with others into a moral one. All his talents would remain hidden for ever, if he had not been endowed with these asocial qualities. He would remain "as good natured as the sheep" and would scarcely render his existence more valuable than that of the animals. It is nature's intention to foster the social incompatibility of men.

“ Man wishes concord, but nature knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord. ”¹⁹

The unsocial sociability of men creates competition among them. Competition breeds inequality. Inequality is the means by which skill is developed in the human race. “ Skill can hardly be developed in the human race otherwise than by means of inequality among men, ” writes Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*.²⁰ Inequality leads to the division of society into two classes viz, the higher and the lower. The higher class, usually a minority, who apply themselves to science and art (Kant calls science and art as “ the less necessary branches of culture ”) are provided with the necessities of life by the majority. Hence the higher class keeps the masses always in a state of oppression. In course of time, the culture of the higher class spreads to the lower class. As a result luxury or “ devotion to what is superfluous ” begins. It begins to be prejudicial to what is indispensable. And with the advance of this culture, misfortunes increase equally on both sides. Misery and misfortune are the means by which nature tries to attain its goal.

This does not mean that man has to submit himself to these evil forces. Instead, “ the evils visited upon us, now by nature, now by the truculent egoism of man, evoke the energies of the soul, and give it strength and courage to submit to no such force, and at the same time quicken in us a sense that in the depths of our nature there is an aptitude for higher ends. ”²¹ But this aptitude for higher ends can be developed only by discipline of inclinations. If the first step towards culture can be called “ culture by way of skill ”, the second step can be called “ culture by way of discipline. ” Human inclinations, according to Kant are, “ a great impediment to the development of our humanity. ” They have to be disciplined. And in this respect, nature gives us that education that opens the door to higher ends than it can

itself afford. Through fine art and sciences we come to admit the possibility of universal communication. In fact, they have "the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interest of social communication."²³ They introduce polish and refinement into society and make men civilized beings. Thus nature educates man through culture. Culture is a bridge between nature and man and through culture a new way of thinking in terms of humanity in general.

But this nature education or nature's intention that man should accomplish the development of all his natural capacities or the highest purpose of nature and also of man can be fulfilled only in a free society with utmost freedom and with the specification and preservation of the limits of this freedom. For this, man needs a *just constitution* which can provide *freedom under external laws*. But the problem of establishing *just civil constitution*, Kant admits, is the most difficult task for mankind. It is difficult because while living in a society, man desires a law to impose limits on the freedom of all and at the same time wants to exempt himself from it wherever he can. This problem can be solved only at the end because "man needs for it a correct conception of the nature of a possible constitution, great experience tested in many affairs of the world, and above all else a good will prepared to accept the findings of this experience."²⁴ Rarely one would find these three factors together, and that would be possible, according to Kant, only "after many unsuccessful attempts."

Conclusion: And finally the question arises: Has nature's education of man begun? Two hundred years back Kant wrote: "Culture, considered as the genuine education of man as man and citizen, has perhaps not even begun properly, much less been completed."²⁵ But today, we can definitely say that nature's education of man has already begun. A cursory glance into the

recent international events is sufficient to prove this. Today, the world is faced with the menace of nuclear overkill, with no end to the stockpiling, deployment and development of new and more parsome weapons. The super powers of the world now—days are engaged in a deadly arms race. Governments of underdeveloped countries are slowly becoming mere pawns in the escalating world arms race. Many of them have become 'play grounds' for the nuclear powers to play their "endless game" of arms race. The result is that whole world is talking of peace. The issues and facts concerning peace and disarmament are being seriously discussed. Added to this, the recent meetings of heads of states like USA, China, Britain and India, are a sure sign of the growing awareness of the need for peace worldover. Progress can be made only slowly. Does not Kant speak of slow and gradual progress? Surely, men are progressing; they become more and more cultured and the days perhaps may not be far off for men to become civilized also.

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NOTES

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