

Preface

The Definition of Culture

Culture has been defined in many different ways by cultural experts and scholars. The Encyclopaedia Britannica has so far¹ cited 164 various definitions of culture. By studying these definitions carefully, it may be concluded that some of them intend to identify certain cultural elements, e.g. scientific culture, artistic culture, literary culture and moral culture, all of which serve only to describe various aspects of the cultural phenomenon such as art. Some definitions refer to pursuant culture, and some others depict pioneer culture, although they do not directly do so.

Let us consider a simple example to elaborate on the fact that all the existing definitions fail to put forth a thorough explanation of culture. Suppose a number of people are trying to find the centre of a circle by considering many points in it. Clearly, none of them would prove to be the real centre; thus, cultural scholars and sociologists have not taken into serious consideration the true identity of man, which lies in the boundary between nature and the supernatural.

دوسر هر دو حلقهء هستی به حقیقت به هم تویوستی

“Truly, it was you who made the circle of the universe whole.” (Sheikh Mahmoud Shabestan)

Instead, they have merely studied some of the cultural elements, especially physical phenomena and cultural activities. Therefore, it is obvious that the number of physical outcomes could lead to countless definitions, much higher than 164. In proof of this, notice the neglect toward the innate virtues of culture, the aspect of virtual beauty to name one. On the contrary, culture consists of two parts: internally virtual and externally virtual. The most complete definition that can be derived from most of the present ones is:

*“Culture is the necessary or proper quality in man’s physical mental activities, based on sound logic and emotions rising from sensible evolutionary lifestyles.”*²

The elements and examples presented in the current encyclopaedias and lexicons refer to qualities of both necessity and appropriateness. In other words, they consist of proper facts and also necessities for human life. French Encyclopaedias state that:

“Culture consists of all the knowledge acquired by man or society, such as a set of activities based on various socio–historical rules, or structures caused by changes in behaviour or deeds due to specific educational conditions”

The sentences above include both, the absolute vital and also the unnecessary but proper conditions of life. However, as we will see further on, the necessities and proper conditions do not totally exclude man’s personal needs. Some experts believe that culture consists not only of the essentials of life, such as natural sciences or humanities, but only the suitable aspects worthy of forming the basis of a culture. Here we must keep in mind two important principles.

One: The more distance between culture and natural life and fatalistic facts, and also the more evolutionary virtual facts it includes, the more human it will be.

Two: The highly elevated spiritual value according to which man constantly wishes to fill every aspect and action of his life with excellent virtues.

On the basis of these two rules, some idealistic and pioneering anthropologists believe that culture has always played a major role in the evolutionary progress of mankind.

Concern about the Future of Evolutionary Culture

If a day comes when humans begin to lose the desire to reach harmony in dignified freedom, unconscious fatalism will put them in a mechanical life ignorant of the truth, and call it human unity. If someday the plague of deculturization infiltrates humans so strongly that it even ruins the common virtues of evolutionary cultures in various nations, it would unquestionably reveal the shameful incompetence of their leaders.

Despite centuries of evolutionary endeavour by holy prophets men of wisdom, moralists, and the sacrifices of those martyred for the sake of freedom and human dignity, social leaders today have not only proved themselves unable of uniting mankind in search of spiritual and behavioural harmony based on evolutionary cultural virtues, but have also lowered man to ignorant components of a machine.

They have deprived man of the glorious life he deserves, and restricted him to only the physical desires of life, such as greed for power, dominance and selfishness. On that terrible day, which might not be so distant, history’s sensitive conscience and God, who provided men with conscience to guide them through time, will take revenge on those who have demolished human dignity and values.

All authentic human cultures, holy prophets, distinguished anthropologists, moralists and those who have

contributed to the culture of man's history clearly show that the only way to establish harmony and dignity among mankind is definitely through elevated virtues and morals, not mechanical characteristics and qualities. The reason is that the more man deviates from highly moral virtues, the more influenced he will be by his natural animal self. Animals also possess this kind of self –although in a more limited form –whereas in humans it handles the essence of man, for human capacities are so many and mighty that they mutually infect the universe and their peers.

The natural self knows no sympathy, emotions or logic. It totally ignores conscience, evolution and culture. However, unless these great human virtues are achieved, human unity and brotherhood would be merely a dream, for selfishness and greed for personal desires are a natural part of the animal self, which has led to the countless wars and atrocities in the history of man.

Islamic culture has thus shown great concern for the future of modern societies. Yet, some Western scholars have not only foreseen the demise of Western culture, but also believe it to be happening at the moment. Albert Schweitzer thus describes the critical state Western culture is in:

*“It is obvious to everyone that we are heading for cultural self–destruction. What is left for us today is by no means safe, for it has not come under destructive pressure yet, and is surely too frail to be able to resist it. Modern man has much less capacity for culture nowadays, because his environment has damagingly degraded his spirit.”*³

Schweitzer believes that industrialized man is devoid of freedom, unable to focus his thoughts, incomplete, and in danger of losing his human self. He further adds:

*“Society has developed so sophisticatedly that it can secretly control men, and has made him so dependent on his society that he gives up his entire aspect of thinking and reasoning... therefore, we have entered a new era of medieval times. Thought has deliberately been abandoned in the name of freedom and men are controlled by their societies. We have inevitably lost faith in the truth because we have sacrificed our mental independence. We have disturbed our own mental–emotional balance. Inadvertent attention in any aspect can lead to thoughtless establishment.”*⁴

Schweitzer considers “inadvertent struggles” another characteristic of industrial societies. During the last few centuries, men have been working like machines, not human beings. The essence of humanity has been contaminated, and never generations lack the necessary factors for human evolution:

*“Adults are drowned in work, increasingly submitting to superficial disturbance absolute passiveness; ignoring their own “ego” and deviation has become their physical need.”*⁵

In his conclusion, Schweitzer emphasizes that man should reduce the pressure of his worldly struggles and avoid frills

Schweitzer; a Protestant, agreed with the Dominican Reverend Eckhart that

*“Man should not submit himself to the spiritual isolation considered 'selfishness; he should actively contribute to developing his society to the highest possible level of morals. If nowadays only few people still possess human emotions, it is because they tend to sacrifice their piety and moral values for their own native land –they never exchange cultural values with other societies that could guide them toward high spiritual development.”*⁶

Schweitzer then concludes that the current social and cultural foundations are leading us to a disaster that precedes a second Renaissance even greater than the original– unless we wish to self–destruct

*“During the second Renaissance, mentally originated activities will prove crucial; in fact, mental activities have been the only logical and practical principal man has come up with in his historical evolution ...I have no doubt that if we act thoughtfully, the revolution will take place.”*⁷

However, the second revolution may be, its basis will definitely be moderate selfishness, greed for power and pleasure, for without religious influence, the revolution would be impossible. It is quite likely that it be a religious revolution, which Islam –especially the Shiites –have been a waiting, in order to form a divine global society.

It is a certain fact claimed by scholars of the humanities and positive philosophies that in our era, crucial changes are on the horizon. Whatever kind of evolution it may be, it will certainly concern human beings. In assessment of the coming dramatic evolution, two major theories have arisen:

The First Theory: pessimistically believes that human beings are heading for spiritual and moral breakdown. Even if humans are not totally demolished, they will become selfish, greedy living beings lacking logic and conscience, drowning in their desires, and have no choice but to fit in the machine like nuts and bolts.

The Second Theory: an optimistic one, states, “The evolution will once again revive original values by considering man's intrinsic capacities for evolution, and thus regain him his true self.”

Evidence shows the latter to be preferable, provided cooperation –and if necessary, even sacrifice on behalf of the leaders of the society alongside men of true wisdom and authentic scholars of culture and humanities. But if, Heaven forbid, the selfish and power–greedy keep on injuring humanity, and neglect the suicidal fall that awaits all of us, the underlying evolution will definitely follow the first, pessimistic theory –if, of course, it does not lead to the annihilation of the world and its dwellers. According to that theory, humans will be degraded as worthless as gears in a machine.

Considering man's intrinsic need for seeking excellent values and his long–established passion for evolutionary culture, and having in mind God's unquestionably wise will, we support the second theory, and predict a prosperous and encouraging future after man undergoes a great deal of suffering. Among the primary reasons for our logical optimism is the fact that man possesses the virtual desire for excellent evolutionary culture, and is always eager to protect himself from various events that threaten

mankind.

The Importance of Research on Definitions of Culture

In this section, after examining comprehensive definitions of culture in various peoples and nationalities, we will come to the undeniable conclusion that since mankind essentially desires culture; he will prevail amidst all forces, greed and sensuality. As the glorious Koran says:

*“God sends down out of heaven water, and the watercourses flow each in its measure, and the torrent carries a swelling scum; and out of that over which they kindle fire, being desirous of ornament or ware, out of that rises a scum like it. So God strikes both the true and the false. As for the scum, it vanishes as jetsam, and profits men abiding in the earth. Even so God strikes his examples.”*⁸

قرن ها بکنشت این قرت نویست ماه ان ماه است و آب وان اب نیست

Centuries passed; and came a new one; the moon is the same, but not the water.

عدل ان عدل است وفضل ان فضل هم ليك مستبدل شد این قرن و امم

Justice and greatness have not changed; however, this century and its people have. After all these centuries,

قرن ها بر قرن ها رفت اي همام وین معانی بر قرار و بر دوام

O important one, none of these concepts have been affected

شد مبدل اب این جو چند بار عکس ماه و عکس اختر برقرار

The water in the stream has changed, but the reflection of the moon and the stars remain.

بس بنایش نیست بر اب روان بلکه بر اقطار اوج اسمان

So its base must be high in the sky, not in the water.”

The main reason for studying the supplied definitions of culture in the best-known encyclopaedias and some lexical and sociological references is to prove whether all societies of mankind believe that the true meaning of **culture** includes the proper, deserving human evolution or not, and that even if the selfish, greedy or nihilists attempt to degrade it to a paradise of banal phenomena which they call culture, it would still be false and antihuman.

It is the variety in scholars' points of view in interpreting culture that has brought about a myriad of definitions, whereas they are all in agreement about the main core of culture. As we will see later on, some of the current differences are due to time and some popular phenomena, and some others are caused by environmental features and various perceptions of ideologies. For example, **farhang**, the equivalent in Farsi for *culture*, means to pull⁹; it also refers to a branch bent down and covered with soil to help it grow, and able to be planted elsewhere.

The Arabic equivalent for culture, **al-thiqafa**, means triumph, intelligence and skill, and also means talent for science, crafts and life nature.¹⁰

In French, **culture** has derived from the Latin word **cultural**, which means cultivating the earth for agriculture; in also means planting.¹¹

In the German language, it conveys raising bacteria and other living matter on a background of prepared food; cultivating and protecting farms; and also a new group of organic living matter.¹²

And finally, in Russian it means determining the extent of man's influence on nature and his achievements in doing so.

Interrelations among Definitions of Culture

Taking the various concepts of culture throughout history into consideration, we can form a comprehensive definition: a general concept conveying victory, cunning and understanding in Arabic; planting and farming in Persian; and cultivating the soil and agriculture in Latin.

However, our studies do not intend to prove that culture shares the same etymology in all lexicons and encyclopaedias around the world. But we are confident that the word culture and its synonyms in the lexicons of nations of ancient civilizations, all generally convey planting, capability of agriculture and organic life heading toward all features of fine intelligent and artistic life.

In Search of the Comprehensive Valuable Truth called Culture

Let us presume the term conveying fine valuable culture in different ethnic groups and nations throughout history –that undergoes virtual changes and has recently found entirely new meanings –is

culture, which in ancient Persian means laying down a branch in order to raise it as a shrub, and has gradually changed to convey wisdom, education, and great intelligence. Let us also presume that the word “**culture**” has been used in its filthiest ways. However, changes in a word's meaning cannot demolish the concrete truth in *logical life*.

For example, consider the Persian word “**qanoon**”, which means a musical instrument. Years later it was used to convey the truth, or an important lifetime spent interpreting the truth. If we suppose that in some societies, tyrants use such words as they desire regardless of the true meanings they have, should we come to the conclusion that **qanoon** has lost its fixed meaning which refers to the relationship between man and his own self, God, the universe, or his fellow men? It would definitely be wrong, for the events depicting the relationship between man, God and other beings are unquestionably unchangeable, even if they are not termed **qanoon**.

In the next chapters, we will strive to find the fixed comprehensive truth which, whatever called, never loses its crucial role to man –unless man gives up his identity in his world of machines to such an extent that his life, soul and true self are totally demolished; or as Tyler has said, “evolve into an intelligent ape¹³ and eventually become a part in the machinery.

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1. Up to 1952.
 2. Of course, the above definition only applies to pioneer societies, whereas pursuant culture does not focus on progress or evolution.
 3. To Have or To Be? by Erich Fromm.
 4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. The Koran, Mc Milan, 1991; Sura Ar Ra’ad 13:17
 9. The Dehkhoda Persian Encyclopaedic Dictionary
 10. The Jahangiri Dictionary.
 11. Larrouse Dictionary.
 12. Duden Dictionary.
 13. Edward Burnett Tyler (1882–1917), distinguished English anthropologist.

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