



## Nature, Culture and Civilization : A Philosophical Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Culture and Civilization refer to the collective creations of human beings. The paper seeks to explore various dimensions and levels of collective human seekings as well as their embodiments and articulations by analysing the categories used to capture the realms of human creations. Efforts will be made to see how these categories and phenomena relate to one another. It would also be analysed where they overlap and how they differ.

### KEYWORDS

Nature, Culture, Civilization

Culture, Civilization and tradition are some of the significant categories and domains of phenomena that have captured the attention of almost all the thinkers intending to study collective human seekings and creations. Of these, culture and civilization refer to the realms of human creations, and tradition implies how these creations are transferred through the generations. The usage of the terms culture and civilization requires a thorough deliberation as more often than not these terms have been used interchangeably. For example Herskovits holds that "one synonym for culture is tradition and another is civilization"(1948, 17). In one of the most quoted passages which is considered to provide a definition of culture, Tylor also uses the terms as synonyms. He holds that "culture or civilization is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1903, 1).

Among those who differentiate between the two, there is a divergence of opinion regarding the relation between culture and civilization. One extreme consists of the thinkers who consider civilization to be a higher form of culture. Prof. Daya Krishna's Prolegomena to any future historiography of Cultures and Civilizations is one such example (1997, 217-33). Malinowski also reserved the use of term civilization for a special aspect of more advanced cultures (1931, 621). On the other extreme lies Oswald Spengler who holds civilization to be inevitable destiny of every culture as culture becomes civilization in its decay (1961, 90). MacIver and Page too, consider civilization to be antithetical to culture in several ways (1949, 498).

The divergence of views pertaining to usage of terms culture and civilization, as also regarding their relationship, has its roots in the fact that culture and civilization do not refer to the entities lying out there in the world. They are not descriptive categories representing the realities of the world. Rather they are complex concepts employed to explore the realm of human creativity as well as the nature of human achievements. The delineation of these concepts illuminates various aspects, dimensions and levels of human creativity as well as collective seekings of humans -ranging from the factual to valueational. It also renders intelligible the relations between them.

In history of ideas, attempts to understand the nature of collective human creations have been made from divergent perspectives. More often than not such attempts reflect the general intellectual atmosphere of the times. The first kind of such attempts that we intend to explore demarcated the surroundings and entities being confronted by humans into broad categories of nature and culture.

### Nature and Culture

Initial demarcation of environment surrounding human beings into natural and cultural holds key to understanding the nature of human creations. The world in which human beings have been created is demarcated as natural world whereas the world that is created by humans has been understood as the cultural realm.

In this perspective the entire non-human reality that includes physical and biological domains is categorized as nature. Prior to human existence events and processes taking place on planet earth fell in natural domain and formed a part of natural causal nexus. The processes of evolution have also been explained to a reasonable extent by the principles of natural selection. In order to survive, species had to adapt themselves to the changes taking place in the surroundings. Only those species survived which adapted themselves. Those which failed to do so, vanished from surface of this planet. Homo-sapiens are considered members of first species that intervened in processes of nature on a significant scale, produced changes in the environment, and tried to tailor it to suit their needs. With this, the era of evolution is supposed to give way to the era of human history. This usage has its roots in the common sense view of the genesis of culture.

Common sense does not associate term culture with early humanoids -who primarily were food gatherers and hunters- as they were using the products of nature more or less in the form in which they appeared in nature. The term culture is employed in the context of societies which started domesticating animals and began producing agricultural crops. Thus cultural realm -as opposed to the natural domain- is illuminated by human intervention. This usage gains strength by invoking the fact that flori-culture, tissue-culture, etc. all involve human intervention -and it is because of this intervention that they acquire all the significance that they have. The etimological roots of the word culture also point in this direction as it is taken to be associated with tending of something, basically crops or animals. Thus, tending humanizes the process and culture differentiates human creations from natural objects, events and process.

The demarcation between evolution and history should not be postulated as a sharp division in which nature created humans through evolution -as they more or less presently are- and dropped them at the doorsteps of history where they took their own charge. Rather, as they acquired somewhat erect posture and some capacity to conceptualise, they increasingly participated in their self-creation through creative interaction with surroundings. Almost all peculiarly human capacities are products of such dialectics with nature. In this way human in-

tervention in the processes of nature not only differentiated them profoundly from lower animals, rather through it they created a world of their own, which includes not only objects, but meanings and values as well. Culture in this broad connotation means that which is socially rather than genetically transmitted, and consists of the whole edifice comprising of human creations.

This finds expression in definitions of culture provided by earlier thinkers and anthropologists. Malinowski defined culture as social heritage comprising "inherited artifacts, goods, technical processes, ideas, habits, and values" (1931, 621). Herskovits defined culture as man's "learned behaviour... (that includes) the things people have, the things they do and what they think"(1948, 625). And Sorokin defined it as "the sum total of everything which is created or modified by the conscious or unconscious activity of two or more individuals interacting with one another or conditioning one another's behaviour" (1962, 3).

Thus, the category of culture was used to differentiate human creations from mere givenness of the nature. In this way it helped understand the nature of human creations as opposed to the phenomena of nature. But it did not throw much light on the finer distinctions within those creations which illuminate various dimensions of human existence.

### Material and Ideational Culture

Initial steps in the direction of noting distinctions within the realm of collective human creations were sought to be taken by approaches seeking to demarcate culture into material and ideational aspects. They have their roots in the classification of Ogburn (1930, 330-34).

Material culture refers to the realm of human creations that are observable and are of corporeal nature. All that human beings invented on the basis of their experiences and efforts has been classified as material culture. Humans have been creating cultural objects in material form almost from the beginning. Initially these creations were in the form of arrows, tools and utensils, whereas in present era their usefulness has increased rather qualitatively. Ogburn has stressed the aspect of change in the realm of material culture. The form of material culture undergoes changes in accordance with the change of interest, capacities and environment of the people. This gets reflected in the fact that even in traditional societies, where belief-structures and ideas of the people remain more or less stable, the material dimension of the culture does not remain static or unchanged. Material aspects being concrete are taken to be measurable and are considered to be relatively simpler. Hence parts of material culture of one society can be adapted by other groups with relative ease. Material culture is considered to be consisting of the things created by humans that are important to them because of their usefulness.

Ideational culture on the other hand refers to that aspect of culture which does not have a corporeal form and affects human behaviour through ideas. The beliefs, norms, traditions and customs that develop as a result of social heritage are considered to be elements of ideational culture. This domain of culture is considered more effective in influencing human society. People face much more resistance if they do not follow ideational culture of a society, whereas the opposition in case of material aspects is much less. As a result ideational culture is considered to be of relatively stable character.

Against this approach, it may be pointed out that dichotomy of material and ideational is not tenable in cultural context owing the fact that even material cultural objects are either embodiments of some idea, or they may be conceived as means for the realisation of some idea. Thus, if contrast between realm of material cultural objects and realm of ideas is analysed, we find that material objects are serving the purpose of realization of some idea. Material objects are part of culture not only in their materiality -which is of secondary importance- rather they are more so in terms of their meaning,

sense and significance.

Thus demarcation of culture into material and ideational not being tenable fails to throw much light on understanding of human condition and processes pertaining to human destiny. Thinkers of late have tried to analyse the realm of collective human creations through the categories of culture and civilization.

### Culture and Civilization

Humans, like other creatures live and die, but whereas other organisms neither know that they are living nor that they will die, human existence is unique in the sense that they are aware of the fact that they are living and also know that one day they will die. Humans know and think of life and death whereas other organisms merely undergo whatever is happening to them. Humans have a reflexive awareness of themselves and aspire to go beyond the immediacy of biological life. With being human a new paradox emerged on the planet, the ambiguity and ambivalence of rational animal. They transcend their natural condition without ceasing to be a part of it. They still are part of this world on which they act and reflect. But they do not understand themselves merely as organisms, rather they perpetually aspire to reach beyond themselves, towards the horizons of sense, significance and value. In this sense being human is flight of human consciousness from facts of nature towards possibility in the realm of sense, significance and ideals. Being human has value not merely as a fact of nature but more so as a creator of meaning and value. They care for their biological survival, but they care more for the values and ideals, for the sake of which they do not hesitate to put even their biological well being at stake. The examples of countless martyrs are before us who sacrificed their lives for the ideals that they upheld. This clearly shows that there are various levels and aspects of human existence which cannot be reduced to mere biological survival or well being. Corresponding to these levels and aspects there are different realms and dimensions of human creations and seekings as well. Historiographers, thinkers, academicians and intellectuals studying the processes, expressions and embodiments of human creativity have analysed the products of human creativity under the concepts of culture and civilization.

Culture and civilization both are embodiments and expressions of creative activity of human beings. They are results of creative human seekings and aspirations. Physical and biological aspects of human existence and seekings are taken to be embodied in civilization, whereas spiritual and transcendence related aspects and aspirations are taken to be reflected and expressed in culture. Civilization is supposed to be related primarily to the physical and objective dimensions of the society whereas culture is taken to be related to subjective and spiritual realm of human existence. Civilization is conceived more as related to survival and preservation. Culture on the other hand is seen as enriching realm that opens up new dimensions to human consciousness and existence. Thus, when human creativity is directed towards pragmatic and utilitarian ends, it is considered to produce civilization; and when it is directed towards expanding the horizon of human consciousness, it is said to be creating culture.

Culture is not to be confused with the arrangements that ensure survival of human collectivity. Cultural activity is much more than an activity aimed at mere physical adjustment as human aspirations and cravings are profoundly different and deeper than physical ones. The thirst of human intellect and seekings of human consciousness cannot be quenched by physical adjustments alone. Cultural activity differentiates human person from mere animal organism by breaking the shackles of domain of natural causal necessity. Through culture humans enter the threshold of symbols and meanings, which is the domain of freedom. Thus although culture is related to civilization but it is of a different orientation.

In civilization there is a necessary element of physical, biological and social adjustment. Civilizational achievements and attain-

ments endow human beings with minimum level of physical comfort, ensuring survival and preservation. In contrast to the virtues of the spirit -that are reflected in culture- civilization reflects bio-physical aspects of human existence. But it would be pertinent to note here that it has almost unanimously been accepted that necessary pre-condition for inculcation of mind in case of human collectivity is a minimum level of welfare at the level of bio-physical existence. This minimum level of comfort is managed through civilizational arrangements. Civilization is taken to be primarily associated with material well being and is considered to be consisting of those elements which are useful for human existence. They are significant mainly because of their functional aspects as they fulfill some need rooted in bio-physical dimension of human existence. It consists mainly of means useful to master the forces of nature. Civilizational attainments are taken to be of help in human 'victory' over nature. In a way they are considered to be the responses of animal in man to the challenges of nature. It is with these responses that crystallization of civilization is considered to lie. The dialectics of these responses with cultural progress transformed them into acts of collective human will being actualized into embodiments of civilizational attainments. This includes social and institutional frameworks into which humans enter in order to ensure survival and preservation of the group, as also to control the external conditions of their lives. These aspects of civilization are even more closely related to culture, but they still are distinguishable from it. Civilization is considered to be corresponding to the domain of utilities, mechanisms and apparatus which humans use in order to control the conditions of their life in the outside world. MacIver insists that "our culture is what we are, our civilization is what we use" (1955, 325). Thus civilization is considered to be concerned with utilitarian dimensions of human creations that serve as means to fulfill our needs and desires.

When means for somewhat secure bio-social life are secured, human creativity turns towards realm transcending the world of mere utilities. This domain of non-utilitarian but meaningful and significant creations that is important to humans not as means to something else, but as end-in-itself -is the realm of culture. In culture there is a definite movement away from bodily and material, towards spiritual. It is not merely a response of animal in man to a challenge of nature, but a pursuit of human will and consciousness that is profoundly different. It is a voyage aimed at discovering moments of bliss that are of intrinsic value as opposed to any pragmatic and utilitarian price tag attached to them. Human existence reveals itself in various types of activities. Culture is related more to those human aspirations, expressions and seekings that are considered important as ends-in-themselves. It consists of those moments of human life which are considered intrinsically important. In moments of life considered to be forming a part of civilized life, we reach out to the outer world in search of things, techniques and institutions which are considered useful. But it is an important aspect of the ontology of human existence that they constitute and venture into a realm that is trans-biological and trans-natural, and does not have much relevance for their bio-physical and even social needs. Human being is a being that seeks a relation of reflexive awareness vis-à-vis the totality of existence. As Sartre puts it rather elegantly, being human "is a being such that in its being, its being is in question" (1962, 630). They not only try to find meaning of human existence by questioning their own being, rather when they fail to find any pre-given meaning, they make it meaningful through pursuits aimed at open horizon of future. These pursuits are flights of human consciousness in the contra-factual realm of ideals, symbols, values, etc.

No doubt human being is a citizen of the natural world and also of the civilization. This citizenship is a sort of ascribed citizenship that he or she lives with, but only as part of an achieved citizenship of the entire universe, which is achieved by making the entire existence an object of his/her reflection. Humans try not only to make sense of their own existence, rather they attempt to understand meaning of the whole existence. As Heidegger puts it, human being is a being such that "in its very being that Being is an issue for it" (1978, 12).

Humans are citizens of the realm of meanings also, and it is this meaningful manner of being a citizen of domain of sense, significance and value that they belong to the cultural world as a citizen. Thus they take their life of facticity of being a creature with needs and desires, and also their belonging to a civilization, only as a part of their life as a resident of cultural realm constituted by pursuits of ideals, values, etc. -i.e. seekings and aspirations which are not part of domain of utilities, but are meaningful and significant nevertheless. It is not a mere accident or a coincidence that in human realm pursuits of non-material nature such as seeking truth, goodness and beauty are considered more blissful as compared to pleasures that are related more to the satisfaction of bio-physiological needs. For a citizen of cultural realm, being human consists not in pursuing the business of living by divorcing it from realm of values, but in an unrelenting quest for apprehension and realization of values that do not contribute only towards the nitty-gritty of biological living, to which mere animal form of life is condemned. Human creativity in the domain of culture breaks new grounds and enriches human existence by expanding the horizon of human consciousness constituting new realms hitherto non-existing.

Thus culture is related more to non-utilitarian aspects of human creations. But their being non-utilitarian does not mean that they are unimportant. Rather they are significant as they are blissful and satisfying in themselves. They provide humans a self-satisfaction of a profoundly different kind that imparts hitherto unexisting meanings to human life. It seems plausible to say that culture is related to non-utilitarian aspects of human creations that are important not as means to something else, but are more significant as they are self-satisfying for human intellect. Being aware, self-conscious, reflective and imaginative creatures, humans refuse to slumber in the domain of entities that are immediately useful to them for fulfillment of their naturalistic needs. Mediated by culture, human consciousness liberates itself from the chain of causal necessity and enters the realm of sense, significance, ideals and values. Human plunge into this realm is guided by creative aspirations, seekings and longings which inform the uniqueness of human self. It would be pertinent to note here that these higher seekings and aspirations are as real in the context of human ontology as are the needs and desires normally associated with animal nature. Cultural consciousness, though it deals with meanings, symbols and values, has an important bearing on real life of humans. Any aspect or phenomenon related to human existence does not remain isolated from others. Rather more often than not they mutually call one another. They reflect and inform, and are reflected and embodied in human creations. Everyday life-situations involve a dialectical interaction of functional and significant; of useful and meaningful; of pragmatic and non-utilitarian but important. A cultured person satisfies his or her needs in a manner that goes a long way in the realization of values. Lives of such persons are living examples of how utilitarian activities can become a part of reflectively chosen values. Thus, culture imparts significant and transcendent worth to every-day life-activities of human individuals.

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