

An Essay on Culture

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Abstract

Despite much uncertainty about what culture is, where it comes from, and where it goes once it is gone, two core understandings are of culture as meaning and value. Both value and meaning are not well known, let alone understood. We probe some common and conventional understandings of culture, and trace their intellectual history. In the modern history of the West, Kant's philosophy bestows the highest value on Platonic or Platonist ideas and ideals. But they are already demoted into merely regulative fictions and necessary illusions. After Kant, the history of culture as value and ideal amounts to the ending of their meta-physical and trans-cendental status. Values and ideals first turn into variable and historical a prioris in NeoKantianism and Max Weber, and eventually become facts themselves – the empirical facts of beliefs about values. Nietzsche observes this history of value as an arriving, the advent of nihilism. A sign of this arrival is values being suspected as ideological rationalizations and inflations in which class or status interests and the will-to-power present themselves as Truth. In the light of this truth, culture and values eventually appear as nothing but symbolic objects and cultural capital. The nihilistic erosion of the substance of values means that culture is exhausted and finished, giving rise to, and enabling, its very flourishing as political economics, symbolic industry, and cultural administration.

It is exciting and intriguing, said Moro, to dip one's head into physics at one time, and then into metaphysics another time, and so grow old and waste away once physically, and once metaphysically.
(Thomas Bernhard, *Ungenach*)

I. Introduction

In the social sciences and humanities, the ubiquity of “culture” contrasts with much uncertainty and controversy over what, exactly, culture is, and what it is not. Though culture is not a material object and physical thing, some objects are cultural and some things are symbolic. But



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it is not so clear what makes some objects cultural and symbolic, and there may not be such a thing as a non-symbolic object at all. Come to think of it, the very idea of “object” and “thing” in their object- and thingness is cloudy and contested as well. Throughout its history, metaphysics has given various answers to what an object is, what a thing is.

Uncertainty abounds in studies of culture and cultural studies. They include such diverse specialties as gender studies, media studies, science studies, and many more coming every other day or so. Cultural and studies of culture are, and increasingly so, fragmented along many different lines of division and disagreement (LAMONT; FOURNIER, 1992). There is a sociology of culture, inheriting the tradition of sociology of knowledge, but also a cultural sociology, a cultural psychology (SHWEDER, 1991) and, of course, cultural anthropology, and vice versa.

Going back to Malinowski (1944), there is a science of culture, as well as the more recent culture of science (GALISON, 1999). The former is still torn between scientific and humanistic views and methods, and the latter is debating whether there is a unified Science with a single Culture at all. Logical positivism and analytical empiricism maintain that science is, at least, a logical unity, whereas historical and cultural constructivism claim each science, maybe even each of its sub-cultures, has its own culture or paradigm, which also change over time (BURKE, 2000).

The fragmentation of cultural studies goes along with different notions of culture prevailing in the various fragments. There is little or no common ground for understanding culture, and much disagreement over how to approach and study it. This disagreement cuts deep, and has done so for a long time, dividing the “Two Cultures” into hermeneutics and science, qualitative vs. quantitative research, or phenomenology in contrast to causal explanation (FUCHS, 1993; SCHNEIDER, 1993).

2. Culture as Capital

Despite widespread disagreements, the prevailing tendency in more recent sociological efforts at coming to terms with culture reduces it to a form of symbolic and cultural capital. This reduction indicates that no understanding of culture seems possible anymore, except in operational

definitions. Operationally, art is itself no more than an operation, which operates in such a way that it decides what art is. Art is that, and it can only *be* that, which is recognized, handled, and valued or priced as art in the field, system, or world of art, or in one of their many fluctuating niches. The same applies to literature or music and science, and any other cultural field in which symbolic commodities are being processed, produced, and consumed. Operationally, once it is, or even can be, no longer known what science *is*, in truth, it becomes a nothing and evaporates into merely “whatever” scientists are doing or say they are doing. Bourdieu (1987, 1993) sees all cultural fields in advance of encountering any of them in terms of this, his own and prior grid, as but markets for symbolic objects and the cultural capital accruing, or not, in such markets.

What, if Bourdieu is right, *is* art? In itself, in its substance, art is nothing. Art has no, or no longer, a truth of its own. The nothingness of art is indicated in the “whatever”. Art is *whatever* artists create, and an artist is *whoever* is recognized by other recognized artists. To be an artist, and a work of art, amounts to having accepted, if often controversial, status in the art world. Art is nothing as such and, as such, no work is a work of art. Art is *nothing but* that which is recognized as art in the field or system of art: “The work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art” (BOURDIEU, 1993, p. 35). In this light, one observes, but one observes not art, but opinions about it, or the institutional apparatus at work to process some symbolic objects as art, and some rare art as iconic (HEINICH, 1996).

Bourdieu and his framework and followers observe not culture, but its political economy. For them, for the mode in which they approach and perceive art, and do so in an a priori way, art itself disappears behind what they are actually concerned about: the *field* of art. The field of art is not about art at all, but boils down to struggles over symbolic and cultural recognition and domination. Art and literature are nothing but arenas for institutionalized conflicts over whose taste in art or literature becomes accepted and recognized as the dominant, authoritative, and legitimate taste:

In short, the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, i.e., *inter alia*, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers [...]. (BOURDIEU, 1993, p. 42).

In this political economics, any notion of art that transcends these operational limits is automatically suspected as an ideological inflation and rationalization. There is not, and cannot be, anything “pure” to art. Aesthetic purity is but an ideological, idealized, and idealistic misconception, driven by the interest to conceal one’s true interests behind the rhetorical frontstages of culture. By default, these true interests always and everywhere pursue status – *not* art, *not* literature, or any other culture.

Bourdieu sees an (empirical) truth *about* art, but never the (phenomenological) truth *of* art.¹ The empirical or scientific truth *about* art is the truth as it appears to an observer which is not art, and so positioned outside of art.² The sociology of art, not just its Marx/Weber synthesis in Bourdieu, sees art in its own; that is, sociological terms, not in terms of what is being observed, art itself. Luhmann (1997, p. 393) says that an empirical sociology of art as a social system requires not to ask anymore what the substance of art might be. The substance and truth of art and other values has eroded and evaporated to such an extent that the geologist Nietzsche ([1889] 1999, p. 57-58) needs to “philosophize with a hammer”, probing the extent to which substance and value and truth sound increasingly hollow and shallow.

An art that observed how it was being observed by sociology would feel misunderstood, even insulted, by having its self-understandings and first-order accounts debunked as ideology (KIESERLING, 2004, p. 128). So would, and does, a religion that must see itself and its sacred being explained away in terms of causal and empirical forces the religion considers not sacred, but profane. A science, to take a different example, also reacts with hostility when being told that its truth and objectivity are but ideological fictions that mask and conceal its actual inner workings. What happens when Bourdieu’s sociology of culture is applied to itself? In

1 Figal (2012) traces this crucial distinction in his discussion of contemporary hermeneutic phenomenology.

2 See, on the distinction between first- and second-order observing, von Foerster (1982).

its own light, the success his sociology has had in establishing itself as the dominant paradigm in studies of culture cannot be explained as a result of its intrinsic merits and objective truth. Rather, its success is the result of clever capital investment politics, possibly insider trading, or a Ponzi scheme (ASHMORE, 1989; SWARTZ, 1997).

What is the truth of, not about, art? In truth, Bourdieu is correct. Art really does not exist anymore – an experience which already grounds and frames Hegel's (2018) early 19th century Berlin lectures on aesthetics: "For us, art is no longer the highest way in which the truth comes into being" (p. 134), and, "for us, art is a matter of the past" (p. 16). What *does* exist, *instead* of art, are the contingent and empirical operations of a cultural machinery, the *Kulturbetrieb*. It is this machinery which sociology of art observes. The disappearance of art and the rise of the *Kulturbetrieb*, the culture industry, culture as nothing but industry, are two sides of the same phenomenon and condition. After the age of Goethe, art begins to disappear, alongside with metaphysics, which differentiates into the various sciences (BENN, 1963, p. 591). Benn himself may very well be one of the last poets of the West. The ongoing ending of art spells the rise of empirical aesthetics and aesthetic theory. The less it is known what art *is*, what art is in its own truth, the truth *of* art, the more aesthetic theories *about* art proliferate.

3. The Source of Culture as Subject and Society

The question, "what is culture?", should sound at least ambivalent by now. Culture appears prominently in the distinctions between fact and value, Culture and Nature, and the interpretation of meaning ("hermeneutics") vs. the explanation of facts ("science"). All three distinctions are ultimately grounded in the Subject/Object distinction constitutive of metaphysical modernity from Descartes to Hegel and the Neo-Hegelian Luhmann. Luhmann's (1985) "system" is built in much the same way as the idea of "Subject". Both Subject and System are conceived as the unity of the difference between self-reference and external reference. Subject and System are related; they are not identical, insofar as the Subject exists as consciousness, while the system, society, consists of communication. Still,

the Subject of Hegel and the System of Luhmann are the same, insofar as both are conceived as auto-poiesis, as a bringing forth of Self from Self into Self.

Who and how is the Subject? It is the mode of being of the human being, while non-human beings exist as substance and object (Nature). The unity of the difference between Subject and Object is what Hegel calls the “Absolute”. The Absolute unfolds itself in and through the whole history of the relations and relational possibilities between Subject and Object. The possible relational disclosures in which Subject and Object historically become who, and what, they are constitute the various modes of knowing. Hegel’s ontological trinity consists of the Who (Subject), the What (Object), and the How (Knowing) of their relations. In this relational history, which is the history of consciousness, the Absolute appears as both Subject and Object. This is the meaning of what must be two of the most misunderstood statements in the history of Western metaphysics: “The True is the Whole” (HEGEL, [1807] 1988, p. 15), and “the True is not only Substance, but also Subject” (HEGEL, [1807] 1988, p. 14).³

The Subject exists in the mode of consciousness, and is therefore a *res cogitans*, while the Object is, since Galileo and Newton, mass-in-motion, a *res extensa*. This distinction re-enters the Subject: The Subject as Subject is Mind, the Subject as Object is body and brain. The human being of Western metaphysics is a being of duality, with one mode of its being meta-physical, or cultural, while the other mode is physical, and part of Nature.⁴

The Subject is Subject insofar, and only insofar, as it identifies itself *as* Subject. In and through this self-determination, it is and becomes “free”. Fichte ([1804] 1986) discovers that the phrase, “I am I”, is tautological only when misunderstood as an empirical description of an objective fact.

3 It is this Absolute, sheltered in German Idealism up to Hegel, whose nihilistic erosion and evaporation begins after Hegel, with the Young Hegelians who transform philosophy into anthropology and sociology, and thereby the Absolute into culture and construct.

4 Heidegger ([1927] 1962, p. 41-49) philosophical efforts aim at de-structuring or “deconstructing” this meta-physical tradition, to arrive at a pre-and post-metaphysical understanding of the being of the human being as “Da-Sein”, not “Subject” (GADAMER, 1981, p. 432, VON HERMANN, 1985, p. 32). Da-Sein and Subject are two possible modes for the human being – a who – to be and exist in the world – a how.

But “I am I” is not a statement, but a *doing*, which doing amounts to the affirming, assuming, and self-constitution of selfhood. The Subject as Self is not *Tatsache* (fact), but *Tathandlung* (action), not a given datum but an auto-poiesis, a bringing itself forth into being, into its own being.

In sharp contrast, the object is not endowed, in its very substance, with the possibility of self-consciousness or being for-itself, and thus its behavior is controlled and determined by forces outside and separate from it. A Subject does what it does for *reasons*, while *causes* drive the blind movement of objects. A Subject is morally and legally accountable for itself and for what it becomes and does, while objects can neither be blamed nor sued. A Subject act, an Object behaves. This fundamental and foundational distinction carries modern ontology and ontological dualism from Descartes to Max Weber and beyond.

As consciousness and, even more, self-consciousness, the Subject is the ultimate source and origin of all meaning and all truth and all culture. In contrast, the Object can only be a passive target or reference for meaning. Ontological dualism sees culture as belonging to human beings only. No rock and no animal knows religion, art, philosophy, science. One can still speak of, for example, a “culture of objects” or a “material culture”, but in themselves and by themselves, material objects lack culture, and cannot create any. While a cultural object usually does have a material side to it, as a painting has its canvas and a Greek statue its marble, its matter is not what makes it cultural. The material substance of a cultural object is thus the proper domain not of a cultural, but natural, science. That which makes an object cultural is not its material, but “symbolic” dimension, the dimension *above and beyond* the merely material, the dimension Western philosophy and ontology call the “meta-physical” (the above) and “transcendental” (the beyond). That is to say, our understanding of “symbol” and the symbolic remains rooted in (Greek and Platonic) metaphysics. An important aspect of the common understanding dividing an object into its material and symbolic dimensions is that its material part has an objective reality, while the symbolic is merely subjective, as personal taste in cultural consumption.

In the metaphysics of the Subject/Object, Mind/Body, or Society/Environment distinctions, any specifically cultural, not material, order among objects stems from the Subject, not the Object. In Schopenhauer's famous words, the world has become the Subject's "will and representation".

4. Culture as Representation and Meaning

Much as time and space, meaning is everywhere, but nowhere in particular. Meaning can, and has been, seen as coming from the intentionality of consciousness, God, values, the ordinary semantic practices of the everyday lifeworld, the autopoiesis of communication, or the dictionary. It seems clear that meaning and culture belong together, but their precise relation is unknown. One possibility is that culture is identical with meaning. But if so, what would be its other and opposite? One past option that is no longer an (academic) option is: the barbarians, who do not simply have a different, or merely inferior, culture, but those lacking it altogether. But once the very notion of a culture outside of which there is no culture at all, or that of a privileged culture, with its hierarchical cultural order and center erodes, different cultures are just that – different. What, then, is on the other side of culture, the non-cultural?

This question is part of the debate about whether, where, and in what sense there might still be a single Culture, with a capital "C", or whether there are only many different local and historical cultures, in the massive multicultural plural (BERGER 1995, p. 30). Some defend the idea that a Chomskyan syntax amounts to a universal cultural grammar, but not the more relative and variable semantics and pragmatics of language. If there is, indeed, a single Culture spanning the entire world, as institutional isomorphism going global is wont to argue (MEYER, 2009), then how, and on what grounds, does such a universal Culture claim and achieve and maintain its legitimate authority and global dominance? If those grounds are not themselves cultural, then culture is simply the vehicle of hegemony, which would void any attempt at distinguishing culture from ideology. Once this happens, there is no longer a way out of total and mutual ideological suspicion. For then, all culture rationalizes interest, and it is interest which lies on the other side of culture and drives it from there.

This materialist understanding of culture sees it as a derivative and determined superstructure. For Marx, the superstructure is meta-physics, the metaphysics of German Idealism. Marx observes German Idealism as German *Ideology*. In this tradition, and up to Luhmann (1999), culture appears as a correlate, if not effect or echo, of social structure and material basis. Durkheimian and Neo-Durkheimian sociology of culture follow a similar logic (BLOOR, 1983; DOUGLAS, 1992), adding “group” or solidarity to Marx’s and Weber’s “grid” or stratification.

However: In the distinction Basis/Superstructure, is the unity of this difference a matter of basis or superstructure? If the distinction belongs to the superstructure, to culture, then culture cannot simply be an effect or outcome of the Basis. In this case, culture comes before basis, not after.

5. Culture as Value and Values

The etymology of the term “culture” (latin: *colere, cultura*) reveals its religious origins in the domain of the sacred (“cult”). Culture is, first and foremost, the care for the sacred space and its divine residents. To this day, the term “value” carries, at least on occasion, a faint (and steadily weakening) echo of the sacred. The sacred has turned into the highest and ultimate or constitutional values.

The closest modernity comes to indispensable values are those embedded in constitutions. While it is not impossible to change constitutional law, doing so is rather rare, and requires special procedures not applied to other law. Constitutional amendments are not routine and can be carried out only under exceptional circumstances and by special authority.

The very idea of constitutional values begins to wobble as law becomes positive, and debates erupt over where they come from, their author, source, and justification. The values we refer to in common talk are my values, yours, or our values. Values come from us; it is our valuable valuation that makes our values valuable. Nothing we do not value can be valuable for us. But our values are not their values. Who has the better values?

Sociology knows that any we is shifting all the time. Who does, and does not, belong to us may be the heat and heart of conflict. The we

becomes less real and possible the larger it gets. Maybe there are human values which embrace all of us. But it is unclear from where and which source or authority universal values and natural rights might come. At least since Durkheim, it is clear that “all of us” cannot possibly figure as an actual source for such values – if only because those already dead, and those not yet born, are excluded, and not for rational reasons. The only non-contingent; that is, obvious and necessary source in a position to bestow such rights, the Absolute, has all but collapsed, and turned into subjective preference for one religious or ideological commodity or church over another.

Who, then, are we? It is doubtful this matter could be settled by consensus. For, reaching an actual (and there are only actual) consensus, even in a limited and temporary local here and now of a situational assembly, is improbable and rare. In part, this is due to the bottomlessness or groundlessness of consensus. A first consensus requires a second consensus on the first consensus being either rational and valid or ideological, but the same distinction applies to the second consensus. Once a consensus has been reached, there is no guarantee that some will not argue later that that never happened. A consensus requires a consensus about that which is covered by the consensus. The more diffusely bounded and weakly integrated the consenting group or community, the more will controversies eventually question the depth and range of consensus. Consensus is prone to exaggerate and inflate itself, only to be sobered by depression and deflation, when trying to cash itself in. The Kant-to-Habermas hope that pure, rational, and undistorted communication intrinsically intends shared understanding and consensus has lost its credibility, and continues to lose it more rapidly now than ever before, now that all communication is turning into a *Gerede* and *Geschreibe*; into babble.

Where do we now stand? *Do* we still stand? Subject and consensus among Subjects, values and meaning, their source and origin, are opaque and evanescent. It seemed we knew what they were, but are no longer so sure. The values may come from us and from them, from both or even all of us, from society and socialization, from past values or tradition. They might still even be thought of as coming from above, a meta-moral

and pure authority of sorts. But: For the likes of Nietzsche and Marx, for Darwin and Freud, values actually come from *below*. In this case, the Devil is at work in the values.

6. Kant on Ideas and Ideals

Where do values come from? In the intellectual and metaphysical history of the West, the philosophy of Kant affords value as idea and ideal a prominent space and status. In Kant, idea and ideal are the closest human beings may come in their never-ending, and ultimately futile, search for the Sacred, the Absolute, the *Ding-an-sich*, the substance or truth of the world. Kant's Platonism signifies the historical moment at which Plato's "Idea" turns into the "transcendental a priori". Kant is still a hierarchical observer, since the *a priori* is prior to the *a posteriori* not in the order of time, but rank.

Kant acknowledges but two legitimate modes of knowing: empirical and transcendental. The empirical is the domain of the first-order observer, science, while the transcendental belongs to the second-order observer, philosophy. But the *transcendental* is not the *transcendent* (IRRLITZ, 2015, p. 150-153). Finite knowing is capable of reaching the transcendental, but not and never the transcendent. Metaphysical thinking that thinks of itself as absolute and transcendent inevitably leads into the errors exposed in the Kantian "antinomies" and "paralogisms" in which Pure Reason, Reason without experience, becomes entangled, and irremediably so (HOEFFE, 1983, p. 135-136).

While the transcendent is closed and inaccessible to us, it does still figure, and very prominently so, in the Kantian construction and architecture of knowledge (CASSIRER, 1977, p. 280-281). But the transcendent is sinking and shrinking into the much lesser role and rank of a merely "regulative" ideal. A regulative ideal admits in advance to its being and remaining unrealizable in any actual practice. Values are regulative precisely to the extent that they can never be real and realized. They are not to be meant literally or too seriously. That would be childish (KRONER, 2006, p. 122-128).

But Kant does think that values and ideas and ideals do still matter, since they frame what we – who? – are, ultimately, searching for when we pursue knowledge and justice. While none of these regulative values can ever be achieved in the real world, they do provide the medium and light within which we understand what it means to be “true” or “free”. Seen empirically, values, ideas, and ideals are but fictions and illusions, a pale “as if” (VAIHINGER, 1922). However, they remain indispensable for our rationalizing of what it *is* to know and act.

This Kantian understanding of (what is left of) the Absolute is still very much with us. To take but one example: Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action, a theory grounded in the “transformation” of Kantian transcendental philosophy, advanced by Habermas’ philosophical ally, Karl-Otto Apel (1973, p. 220-263). Apel transforms Kantian transcendentalism by replacing the *a priori* of the Subject by the more social and historical *a priori* of a discursive community. In a community of discourse, rational communication, communication driven solely by the non-coercive force of the superior argument, rests on the necessary illusion, the myth, that communication occurs in “ideal speech situations” – situations in which all empirical and contingent forces, such as differences between the interlocutors in power or status, are suspended. Admittedly, the idea of the ideal speech situation is counter-factual, has no place in reality and is, therefore, a utopia.

Kant is that thinker who prepares the transition from metaphysics and philosophy to the modern sciences. Caught in doubt about what philosophy can still be, at a time when all knowing becomes science, Kant’s thinking switches continuously between the transcendental and the empirical, between philosophy and science, and in this restless ambiguity prepares the ending of a genuinely philosophical, as opposed to scientific, mode of being in an understanding the world. Kant comes actually later than Hegel, because of his skepticism toward the very possibility of philosophy and its very core or essence, ontology, a skepticism not at all shared by the latter thinker.

Kant and Kantianism initiate the transformation of philosophy into epistemology. But once it becomes evident that the sciences do just fine

without epistemology and philosophical foundations, and request more funding rather than more epistemology, philosophy thinks that the only way for it to survive among the sciences is to become a science or scientific itself. In this, its analytical incarnation, philosophy declares its wholesale accordance and compliance with science or, rather, with what it thinks science is. Once philosophy ends and turns analytic, there are, and can be, no longer any genuine philosophical truths, as all truth is scientific, and so true and valid is *whatever* the scientific results are and will be.

In the end, in its ending, philosophy as analysis moves into the subservient role of spokesperson, public representative, and popularizer of science. Of late, philosophy is even trying to establish itself as experimental philosophy, a contradiction in terms and sure sign that philosophy has lost its way. What we need from philosophy is not experiments. These occur elsewhere already and conducted by scientists with actual skills in experimentation. What we need from philosophy is an idea of what an experiment is, in truth. This question cannot possibly be settled experimentally. No experiment can demonstrate what an experiment – is.

7. NeoKantian Philosophy of Value

Our question is: Who is the Subject of culture and meaning, what is its mode of being, and how can it be observed? We seek guidance from the thinking of the thinkers. For Kant, the Who of all knowing is not, not just yet, a wholly and solely empirical, but (still) transcendental, Subject. The Subject is still not an empirical person or statistical aggregate of such persons. The Subject is not yet society, either, as it becomes in Simmel or Luhmann. The Kantian Subject is still metaphysics itself – albeit in its skeptical and late appearance as (Self-)Critique of metaphysics, as *Critique of Pure Reason*. The Kantian Subject is still pure; that is, non-empirical, which is why the Subject of meta-physics cannot become an object of physics:

The unity of consciousness, which grounds the categories, is here taken for an intuition of the subject as an object, and the category of substance is applied to it. But this unity is only the unity of thinking, through which no object is given...Thus, the subject of the categories

cannot, by thinking them, obtain a concept of itself as an object of the categories. (KANT, [1781] 1998, p. 453).

Kant's philosophy represents an important milestone in what Nietzsche calls the history of Western nihilism, in which the sacred, the Absolute, and its more worldly successor, the pure and logical Subject, gradually erode and disappear altogether ("God Is Dead"). In Kant, the source of all values and ideals, the Subject, is not yet nothing, but it is turning regulative and fictional – a sure sign that the Absolute is evaporating and fragmenting into humanism, empirical psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The old sun still shines through Kant, but skepticism has made its shine "pale, Nordic, Koenigsbergian" (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, p. 40).

The exasperation of any realm above and beyond the empirical and contingent continues, with accelerating speed, in Neo-Kantian theory of science. In reducing Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" to an attempt at providing a meta-physical foundation for physics, Neo-Kantianism removes the ontology from Kant, and understands *The Critique* exclusively as epistemology. Insofar as metaphysics is an onto-theo-logical observer, the removal of its ontological and theological foundation leaves only logic, and a logic only for the sciences.

In the social and historical sciences, the most prominent Neo-Kantian is Max Weber, a fallen and falling Platonist, to whom Neo-Kantianism came through his Heidelberg colleague, Heinrich Rickert. Weber premises his work on the epistemology and methodology of the historical and social sciences on the Neo-Kantian reception of Kant's philosophy as no more than a theory of experience and knowledge. Cultural values – observed now in the massive plural and lacking a natural or hierarchical order – still occupy a special role, but their status is insecure, and keeps oscillating between the transcendental and the empirical. The Subject becomes person and actor, both individual and collective, aggregate and corporate. The transcendental logic of the Subject dissolves into socio-logic and psycho-logic. The unity of the Subject fragments into the "plurality of value spheres" in Weber (FRIEDLAND, 2013), and the "diversity of symbolic forms" in Cassirer (1955). Weber holds this pluralism to be an inevitable and irreversible, "tragic", outcome of occidental modernization and rationalization. Any

attempt at re-establishing the unity of culture cannot be but prophetic and is therefore once and for all out of the modern reach. Later, the plurality of value spheres appears in what Parsons and Luhmann observe as functional and structural systemic differentiation.

Still, for Weber, cultural values, despite their historical relativity, are far from arbitrary. The values with which Weber ([1917] 1982, p. 501) is concerned as a scientist still belong to a level different from “preferring blondes to brunettes”. This level is known as “objective culture”. An objective culture exists in much the same way as language does – it has no author, is not a subjective creation, and has a reality that goes beyond, and comes before and after, persons. The values and value-relations in objective culture do vary across social and cultural space, as well as in the course of historical time. But their guiding and orienting force still “transcends” the merely subjective and arbitrary preferences of empirical persons. Objective cultural values or, as Weber also calls them, in a faint but revealing echo of Plato, “value ideas”, constitute the medium and horizon in and out of which the empirical social and historical and economic sciences of society select and interpret their objects and facts. They work much like a Kuhn (1970) “paradigm”.

Such metaphysical paradigms do change, as happens in rare scientific revolutions; they are not transcendental and universal necessities. But this does not in any way or sense make them arbitrary or “merely subjective”. Paradigms are “objective” in much the same way as institutions are. They tacitly structure the routine and normal modes of moving within a tacit and latent background. Paradigms and institutions structure common sense practices in their everyday workings and “natural attitude”. Their worldview is a “naïve realism”. Paradigms are taken for granted in normal and routine science and figure as resources, not topics, of research insofar as that research is business as usual. Paradigms become engrained as habit and habitus in the course of scientific socialization and professionalization. They are not a matter of individual choice and preference.

As regional ontologies, not merely epistemic frameworks, paradigms are a form of scientific, yet ordinary, life. They are the common sense of a scientific or intellectual community. With common sense, they share

a constitutional and chronic inability and unwillingness to observe themselves, and thereby turn themselves into a topic. In its normal and routine operations, no science asks what science is, what truth is. Questions of this kind would disturb and interrupt, not advance, science. Likewise, the question, “what is common sense?”, is not a question within and for common sense.

For Weber, a core paradigmatic and institutional value of modernity is that of the positive sciences themselves. In fact, modernity values science so much that it privileges science over all other modes of knowing, and moves toward a completely disenchanted world, emptied of all forces and beings with no scientific credentials. The truth now becomes, first and foremost, the scientific truth, and no truth claim can be upheld if it is not compatible, or can be made compatible, with what the sciences know to be the truth. Science is not just a worldview among others but stands out as *the* worldview by which all other such views must be measured. The rule of modern science is “unbrotherly”.

Occidental modernity bestows high value on the institution of professionalized and methodical research. Together with the bureaucratic state and the capitalist corporation, science is one pillar of societal and cultural modernity. What the three have in common is a formal and technical, a procedural and instrumental, rationality. In science, that rational procedure is its *method*. Methodical research as standard procedure is institutionalized in scientific communities whose work is never-ending and does not come to a halt when it has found or discovered the result or outcome for which it was searching. Any such results and outcomes are but temporary and provisional milestones in an open-ended process of cumulation and perpetual advances. It is this culture of rationality – a leftover from Reason, from *Vernunft* – that makes modernity modern.

Science is itself value-free in that what matters to it is not the values that condition and frame it, but the facts and facts alone. It is precisely this value of value-free or value-neutral science which Weber strives to defend and protect against a fusion of science and prophecy (SCHLUCHTER, 1971, p. 22). Modernity and modern science bestow value on facts to such an extent that they eventually regard values as (nothing but) facts

– the facts about values. Values are reduced to empirical beliefs in or about values. Values in themselves are nothing. What makes them valuable is but a valuation, a belief in their value, personal or collective. It is the criterion or measure of valuation which bestows value on what is otherwise, without such valuation – worthless.

Despite its centrality in the formally and procedurally rational culture of modernity, Weber also observes the existential limits of empirical science. While they find objective facts and truth, the sciences cannot establish the cultural significance and meaning of such facts and truths. No science has anything to say or recommend about how to live a good life. Left to their own devices, the sciences find themselves confronted with an unstructured and chaotic mass and mess of facts, all on an equal footing as facts, and none somehow privileged. As fact, no fact can establish its meaningful significance and cultural priority over all the other facts. No fact can decide which facts are significant in some ways and to some observers, or more significant than others. The significance of facts, their cultural meaning and relevance, is itself not a matter of facts. They assume such significance only relationally, that is, in relation to the leading cultural values. Only in the light of such values can “important” facts be distinguished from “trivial” ones, and only with the help of such values is a science in a position to employ criteria able to select which facts matter more than others: “The light provided by these highest value ideas shines upon a perpetually changing and finite part of the immense stream of events flowing through time” (WEBER, [1904] 1982, p. 213-214).

While cultural values orient and guide science in its selection and interpretation of significant and objective empirical realities, the *validity* of such values cannot be established by means of empirical science and its facts. There is, for Weber ([1904] 1982, p. 213), no possible transition from facts to values, no possible way of deducing the validity of values from the reality of facts:

The ‘objectivity’ of social science depends on the relation between the empirically given and the value ideas. Only these ideas can give meaning to the facts. But the facts can never prove the validity of such value ideas empirically.

This lack of objectivity is what, after Weber, makes values relative and contingent, pushing them more and more towards the subjective or even arbitrary realm – at which point values turn into mere facts, facts about beliefs in values, shedding their origin in the sacred and absolute further still (FUCHS, 2017).

In the metaphysical history of value sketched above, values begin as sacred and absolute, then become critical and transcendental, only to turn into more relative and contingent historical and cultural *a priori*s, in the plural. The breaking apart of facts and values, of science and morality, of objective and subjective worlds, and the reversal of the hierarchical order among facts and values eventually lead to values becoming facts themselves – the scientific facts about values. And since there is no objective reality to values at all, values eventually turn into *beliefs* in or about values (MARTIN; LEMBRO, 2020, p. 66). Values turn from transcendental conditions of experience into objects of experience and a matter for opinion surveys. The history of value amounts to a steady and steadily accelerating nihilistic erosion of the sacred, the Absolute, the Truth.

8. The Nihilistic Ending of Culture

In Marx and Engels ([1845] 2010), and Nietzsche, another critical turning point in the history of culture and value is taking place. For them, values become ideological and lose all connection with both the transcendental and the transcendent. In fact, the very idea of a world that transcends the material or real world becomes suspected of ideology. Together with Freud and Darwin, Marx and Nietzsche belong to the age of the suspicious observer, an observer suspicious of the very possibility of philosophy as meta-physics. Marx and Nietzsche subject the meta-physical to ideological and psychological critique, unmasking metaphysics and the metaphysical world, the world of the highest values, as an interest-driven idealization and fiction. Their work amounts to a reversed metaphysics, to the reversal of the hierarchical distinction between values and facts, such that culture and values now appear as epiphenomenal and superstructural appendices of a real and material and objective basis – initiating a true revolution, a reversal, of the metaphysical world.

In and through this reversal, the metaphysical world is beginning to collapse altogether, and succumbs to a world with but one dimension, the one-dimensional world of empirical, physical, and material reality – the “real” world. Once the real world, the world of empirical facts and cases known to objective science, has established and consolidated itself as the only world there is, and can be, it has nothing left to distinguish itself *from*, and so melts and flattens into but one reality and dimension. This is the world as *Gestell*, *Betrieb*, and culture industry (KISIEL, 2014).

From Plato to Hegel, this real world is the world of the senses, the world as disclosed by the senses, the world as that which is given – *datum* – to the senses. For Nietzsche, the fusion of Platonism and Christianity into idealism is driven by the self-concealing will to devalue this entire sensory world and this entire bodily life as but one immense error: “The treacherous and blind hostility of philosophers toward the senses – how much mob and middle class there is in this hatred! [...] The history of philosophy is a secret raging against the preconditions of life [...]” (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, # 461, p. 253). Nihilism means that this Platonic-Christian true world is coming to an end, which makes his thinking the last (reversed) metaphysics of the West (HEIDEGGER, 1975, p. 8).

Nihilism is the ongoing collapse of traditional metaphysics and the Western metaphysical world, the steady de-valuing of the highest Western values. Nietzsche thinks in terms of values and sees the history of metaphysics as the history in which the highest value, the true world, loses its value and becomes worthless. The range and depth of nihilism is not limited and restricted to some parts or periods of Western culture. Rather, nihilism *is* the history of the West, is the essence and logic of that history, the history in which the “true world finally becomes a fable” (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1999, p. 80-81). Nihilism annihilates all of culture or, rather, the very turning of the Absolute into a cultural value is already the work of nihilism. Nihilism amounts to the dying and death of the Christian God, but not God only. Rather, nihilism annihilates the very idea and possibility of a higher, moral, just, and true world altogether (HEIDEGGER, [1950] 2003, p. 209-267).

Nihilism is also any attempt at updating or reforming the highest values, since such attempts only advance nihilism by escaping from it, into cosmetic fixes and hastily repaired and refashioned values (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, # 30, p. 20-21). For Nietzsche ([1889] 1968, p. 222), the more secular, humanist, democratic, communitarian, communicative, and communist utopias are such attempts at saving the true world by promising and projecting it into the real one. Nihilism as thought by Nietzsche is perfectly compatible with religious belief, since a God in the head is already dead, being reduced to opinion and survey.

Nietzsche himself was not a nihilist. For his thinking is driven, in its entirety, by the will to overcome nihilism, in the frantic search for a new God, outside of Platonism and Christianity. Nihilism is not personal or collective belief; rather, nihilism is the turning of the Absolute into belief. The nihilism that makes Nietzsche tremble is not as harmless as opinions, or even a worldview. It is not an intellectual movement among others, much less a philosophical position or doctrine. Nihilism goes much deeper than mere and harmless academic skepticism about the attainability of truth.

Rather, philosophy as such, Platonic-Christian metaphysics and ethics and aesthetics in their entirety, is nihilist through and through. It is nihilism because it thinks nothing of life. It distrusts and devalues life and the body with its unreliable senses. Nihilism is condescendence and distrust in the will and the appetites. Nihilism is an ending, the ending of its own beginning, the beginning of metaphysics as ontotheology. Nietzsche sees the origin and history of the West as the religious and moral damnation of, and revenge against, this world and this life in it as they really are. All Platonism and idealism condemn this life and this world as a nothing. For them, “this life is irremediably in error and sin, this world is no good, there must be a better one, a true world” (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, # 401, p. 216).

Platonism has ruled Western philosophy up to Hegel.⁵ But Nietzsche’s adversary, Platonism in all its forms and modes, is not so much the

5 “The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato” (WHITEHEAD, [1929] 1978, p. 39).

philosophy of Plato himself, but the “vulgar” Platonism taught in the late Greek schools and in Christian clerical and scholastic theology. His nemesis is that “Platonism for the People” called Christianity (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, # 438, p. 242).

Nietzsche is a thinker and, as all thinkers, thinks the truth of what there is, the truth of Being. In truth, nihilism is the very history of the Western world in its inner core and logic. Nietzsche ([1889] 1968, #2, p. 3, original emphasis) thinks nihilism as the historical onto-logic of the Western world:

What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer be averted: the advent of nihilism [...] For some time now, our entire European culture has been moving toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer thinks, that is afraid to think.⁶

But does Nietzsche here not say that nihilism will be in the future (“next two centuries”), that past and present were and are save from and spared nihilism? No, since Nietzsche observes the *advent* of nihilism. An advent is a coming, an arriving. An arriving cannot come toward us if it has not departed and been underway for a very long time already.

9. Truth as Will-to-Power

Nietzsche’s metaphysics is the metaphysics of the will-to-power (POEGGELER, 1963, p. 104-135). Insofar as the center of metaphysics is ontology, the will-to-power is the name for Nietzsche’s fundamental ontology. It should always be written and thought of as a compound and unity, will-to-power, since there is neither a will without power, nor a power without will. Nor is that which the will wills a goal or purpose outside of it, which it has not reached yet, but strives to obtain, at which point will will rest. The will wills only itself and wills itself into out-willing itself in growing ever stronger. The will is the essence and engine of what Nietzsche calls “life”. In this perpetual over-powering of itself, any goals

⁶ Written in the late 1880s.

and purposes the will sets for itself and its life are but temporary and provisional presentations and re-presentations of itself. For will is will only as long as it surpasses itself and moves beyond any and all of its resting states and phases. This arrest and rest is what Nietzsche calls “truth”, into which a regime of truth settles as its accepted and established mode of being – for the time being.

The will-to-power Nietzsche thinks has nothing in common with the machinations and operations required to get into political office, no matter how high the position of that office may be. The will-to-power does not stop or end when power has been secured. Power, understood with Nietzsche, cannot really be possessed or had, least of all by persons and their ability to will, desire, or want. The will-to-power does not have the same presence as the “mental states” of psychological and the “propositional attitudes” of cognitive science.⁷ Instead, the very idea of mind as propositional attitude is one way in which will cements its reign – as computer, as computational mind and reality. A science does not discover will-to-power as fact; instead, the turning of the world into a fact is already an accomplishment of a will that wills not in the way that persons do.

The will-to-power is never at an end, as it always remains and eternally returns to itself. It does not will to have power in order to then, once it has that power, do something else with that power, something that is not itself power. Rather, the will-to-power is the will-to-empower itself into its own and continuous over-powering.

Though Nietzsche sometimes couches his terms in naturalistic semantics, his philosophy is a reversed metaphysics, and not an empirical psychology. It is not any empirical science, not even a physiology, although Nietzsche does often refer to his thinking in biological and physiological terms. However, the terms, “biology” and “physiology”, do not refer to an empirical or positive science, but a meta-physics, and as such go beyond science. Nietzsche was not and is not a scientist, but a philosopher, a thinker,

7 Understanding mind as propositional attitudes or beliefs levels and annihilates the differences between those attitudes – excluding, for example, the phenomenon of “mood”, of being in a mood, from understanding mind altogether. For a mood is not in us as an attitude or intention; rather, we are in it. Mood is existential, not propositional.

both of which are very different from scientist, scholar, or researcher. Therefore, Nietzsche's notion of "life" is not biological or physiological, either, or a matter of a merely regional ontology. Rather, "life" is understood metaphysically, and constitutes the very core of Nietzsche's fundamental ontology. This ontology is an ontology of life as will, as energy, as appetite. In other terms, Nietzsche's thinking is ontological, not ontic, concerns Being, not beings or regions of being, and strives to be much more than a science among other sciences.

The will-to-power is not an object known to science. It is not the will as commonly understood in psychology and common sense, as but one of the human faculties among others. The reality of the will-to-power is not a fact that could be established by any science. For psychology and science are themselves and already particular manifestations of the will-to-power, and so is their appetite for facts and solid coordination and classification systems. This is an appetite not for the truth as such, pure and innocent, but for cementing and institutionalizing will at a point in its life when it feels exhausted and yearns for solidity and closure. But the sciences do not uncover this ontological Truth; they are part of it, they are *in* this Truth. As normal institution and routine daily operation, the sciences organize a regime of truth, an "order of discourse" (FOUCAULT, 1971). This order of truth is what the will-to-power requires for its reproduction and representation. When it outgrows itself and its truth, the will-to-power surpasses and extends itself, growing into a center and monopoly of truth, into an imperial totality.

Can any knowing be interested – only in itself? The very idea of a knowledge that is "pure" and purely rational, a logic interested in nothing but itself, belongs to the myth and error of the true world in which Platonism and its descendants remain stuck and trapped. The will-to-truth is but one manifestation of the will-to-power. It is thus senseless to cite Nietzsche in support of the idea that "truth" can be spoken "to" or against power. For truth is but the ontology of power itself, as one of its ontic appearances and incarnations.

The other manifestation of the will-to-power, the counter-movement against nihilism as Platonism and idealism, is art. In Nietzsche's ([1889]

1968, # 853, p. 451-453) re-evaluation and reversal of the traditional values and their ranked order, art is “worth more” than truth, and we need art so as to not despair of life. The usual interpretation holds that Nietzsche here advocates art as an escape from truth, which is a romantic notion at heart. In fact, though, art is worth more than truth because, unlike truth, art not only consolidates, stabilizes, and protects the status quo of a regime of power, but exceeds it in an excess and ecstasy of power, surpassing its status quo and unleashing its forces. Art is growth and increasing strength of the will-to-power, while truth indicates consolidation and fortification of what has already been accomplished and secured. Never is art in Nietzsche a cultural field or social system. For art and truth are thought metaphysically, and thought so for the last time, until Heidegger’s struggles with post- and pre-metaphysical art and truth.

As power, knowledge is the will to overpower and conquer what is known (NIETZSCHE, [1889] 1968, # 480, p. 266-267; # 499, p. 273). The instruments of this attack and conquest and subordination are: ordering and classifying, reducing and deducing, simplifying, measuring and quantifying the world. In this way, the world, as raw chaos and complexity, can be rendered into a form more amenable and conducive to domestication, caging, and taming. It becomes more calculable in the process. Knowledge does not copy or mirror the world but transforms it into a settled and controlled object that can be planned and engineered. The truth is what emerges in the operational and administrative service of power. The truth is the truth of this operation, and remains its truth only, until the operation expands, and with it its truth. This truth is not a matter of correct propositions that correspond to reality, but of a regime and its institutions, in and through which truth, its own truth, is being routinely administered and dispensed, certified and credentialled.

In Nietzsche’s (reversed) metaphysics of life as will-to-power, to know is not to discover, but to integrate what is not yet known into the already known. To know is to subsume, to see a new case, eventually, once it has been normalized and re-normalized, as but a confirmation of an already familiar rule and regularity or pattern. To explain means to render plain that which is not, not yet –plain, a reduction of the unfamiliar to the

familiar. In their routine and quotidian modes of operation, regimes of truth are interested in stability and reproduction, and cannot handle obstinate and resistant exceptions and drastic surprises all that well. The logic of knowledge is not and never and nowhere pure and purely logical, but obeys the will-driven appetite of truth regimes. Their truth is a manifestation and condition of their lives. What is Life?

Nietzsche sees truth regimes in the “physiological” terms of their “life”. Regimes of truth are adaptive and organic metabolisms, which swallow and digest whatever they encounter, to make it their own and part of themselves. Truth is the settled outcome of a regime’s metabolism, in its normal and routine maintenance. Truth is metabolic habit, steady state, and *eigenvalue*. Metabolism accomplishes the decomposition and recombination of what a regime encounters, consumes, and feeds into itself. Only then can it assimilate and incorporate whatever it grasps and grips into itself, maintaining its life. Truth is whatever stability and certainty a regime requires to reproduce and consolidate itself. In contrast, art is that which allows such a regime to grow and exceed and transcend itself.

All knowing for Nietzsche ([1889] 1968, # 636, p. 339-340) is perspectival in that it has its own optics. Its optics is the selective and self-centered optics of its own life. Since Nietzsche understands life not biologically or psychologically, but metaphysically, perspectivism and observer-dependency do not in any way or sense mean that knowledge is subjective belief. For Nietzsche, truth is not a matter of statements and propositions, and not of theories or systems of such propositions, but of institutions and organizations. Their truth is their mode of consolidating themselves, as they settle in their domains. A regime of truth, such as medical and clinical science, sees all it can see in its own perspective and truth. The light the regime shines on the world is but its own light, the light that advances its truth, and expands its reign of its truth in a quest to aggrandize and inflate itself. Then, it claims to be the *only* light, such as the Light of Reason, the light en-lightening the Enlightenment.

Regimes of truth are viable only as long as they keep expanding. They are greedy institutions, working relentlessly to produce and reproduce – not truth, but themselves. Knowledge work is the impure work of purification and idealization. As such regimes reproduce over time, their truth begins to appear natural, obvious, and self-evident. A truth becomes institution

once it is in no further need of justification. Truth becomes natural in, and as, the regime's common sense. As the truth of (a) common sense, power has become so powerful that it recedes behind obviousness and normalcy. The truth as will-to-power has become a total institution and apparatus, the apparatus of normal science, the machine of culture as political economics, the commodification of religion as market. The ongoing ending of culture implies, and prepares, the very rise and thriving of culture as organizational politics and frontstage rhetoric. The values become occasional, occasioned by celebrations of virtue and purpose. They surface when there is need to appear generous. Values turn into advertisement and public relations.

In, and as part of, this ending, it is no longer being questioned what art – is, what literature is, or science, and how they differ from philosophy, which is also not sure about its own position. The substance keeps eroding. The whatness of art and literature is no longer an acceptable concern. Nihilism is art being reduced to aesthetics and taste, to what pleases and entertains. Literature melts down to writing with an eye toward literary award politics.

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Recebido em 15/08/2021
Aceito em 29/09/2021
Versão final em 11/04/2022

Um ensaio sobre a cultura

Resumo

Apesar da enorme incerteza sobre o que é a cultura, de onde ela vem e para onde vai quando desaparece, há duas compreensões fundamentais sobre a cultura: como sentido e como valor. Tanto sentido quanto valor são conceitos pouco conhecidos e ainda menos compreendidos. Nesse ensaio, investigamos algumas versões convencionais da ideia de cultura e traços suas origens intelectuais. Na história ocidental moderna, a filosofia de Kant concede o valor mais alto às ideias e ideais platônicos. Após Kant, a história da cultura enquanto valor e ideal perdem seu status meta-físicos e transcendentais. Valores e ideais se tornam a priori históricos e contingentes no NeoKantianismo e em Max Weber, e eventualmente se convertem em fatos – os fatos empíricos sobre a crença em valores. Nietzsche observa esse desenrolar da história dos valores como o surgimento do niilismo. Uma evidência desse surgimento é a suspeita em relação aos valores, apresentados de forma suspeita como racionalizações ideológicas em que interesses de classe ou status se apresentam enquanto Verdade. Sob esse prisma, cultura e valores eventualmente aparecem como nada além de objetos simbólicos e capital cultural. A erosão niilista da substância dos valores significa que a cultura está esgotada, permitindo sua ascensão e interpretação enquanto economia política, indústria simbólica e administração cultural.