Summary of course C.7-5: Elements of Cultural Philosophy (1994–1995)

General

This course examines the phenomenon of culture as the totality of means, values and meanings through which human beings understand reality and address the challenges of their existence. Starting from a lemmatic and axiomatic definition - in which culture, following Arnold Toynbee, is understood as humanity's creative response to social challenges - the course analyses how cultures are structured around identity, tropological figures of speech (metaphor and metonymy), and structuralist systems of signs.

Through hermeneutics and the ABC theory of interpretation, the course demonstrates that every cultural value judgement is shaped by deeper underlying presuppositions, while Vladimir Solovyov's hierarchy of values (shame, compassion and reverence) reveals the conscientious core of human civilization.

In an extensive series of selected topics, the course then analyses the ancient multicultural thought of Herodotus, the Platonic relationship between archetype and image, the transition from myth to rationality among the Sophists, nominalism since William of Ockham, and the contemporary postmodern crisis of foundations. It concludes by advocating the conscientious re-establishment of culture in the face of the looming threats of nihilism and cynicism.

1: The Concept of Culture, Definition and the Challenge of Existence

Cultural philosophy approaches the phenomenon of culture through various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in order to gain a clearer understanding of its nature and all-encompassing scope. At its core, culture is defined as the way in which human beings understand reality and creatively resolve the unfinished tasks or problems of their existence. The course uses a working model or lemma, namely the definition proposed by the British cultural historian Arnold Toynbee: culture is the successful response offered by a creative minority or elite to a challenging natural or social situation.

The course makes a strict distinction between different types of definitions: from nominal (verbal) and real (substantive) definitions to descriptive (neutral) and axiological (value-based) approaches. Whereas positivist science has reduced culture to a merely descriptive "life-supporting apparatus", the classical and philosophical tradition emphasizes its axiological dimension: culture as an integrated system of ideals, norms and behavioral expectations

that ennoble human beings and educate them towards a higher moral and intellectual level.

2: Identity, Tropology and the Structure of the Sign System

Any discussion of culture requires the identity of a cultural phenomenon to be delineated. Identity is that which distinguishes a given entity from the rest of reality. This identification rests on the axiom of identity, which forms the basis of logic and ontology. Through identity and distinction, human beings can construct an ordered worldview and prevent their consciousness from sinking into a chaotic ocean of disorder.

To organize reality and communicate, human beings make use of language and tropological turns of phrase. Two principal tropes guide our cultural thinking: metaphor (based on similarity and distributive sets) and metonymy (based on association and collective systems). Social symbols, such as money or flags, thus function as metonymic or metaphoric bearers of cultural values. Following structuralism and thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, the course demonstrates that culture functions as an all-encompassing system of signs and a framework of thought, analogous to the structure of language, without which ordered human coexistence would be inconceivable.

3: Hermeneutics, the ABC Theory and the Hierarchy of Values

Every culture is essentially a system of interpretation, or hermeneutics. Human beings are by nature creators of meaning who interpret reality. Meaning-making constantly oscillates between grasping meaning (objectively understanding reality as it is in itself) and establishing meaning (assigning subjective significance on the basis of one's own prejudices). To clarify this interpretive structure, the course uses the ABC theory of Ellis and Sagarin. In this theory, A represents the objective fact or stimulus arising from reality, B represents the subject's inner presuppositions, values and axioms, and C represents the resulting judgement or emotional response. Differences in cultural interpretation and psychological reactions can be explained by the fact that different subjects, with different B factors, respond to the same A datum.

As a value-bearing system, culture rests on a moral hierarchy. Building on the ideas of the Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov, the course distinguishes three fundamental basic feelings that lie at the root of all human civilization:

- *The feeling of shame*: the awareness that arises when human beings risk lapsing into behavior beneath their human dignity and governed by lower impulses.

- *Compassion* or tenderness: spontaneous solidarity and fellow-feeling towards other human beings as equals.

- *Awe* or reverence: the sense of respectful restraint and veneration towards what is higher, the sacred and divine reality.

4: Cultural-Historical Perspectives: Herodotus, Myths and Demythologization

In its extensive series of selected topics, the course examines how cultural patterns have manifested themselves throughout history. The ancient historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus is regarded as a pioneer of multicultural thought. By examining the customs and beliefs of different peoples in a neutral manner, Herodotus showed that every community regards its own unwritten presuppositions and laws as absolute. Through his Ionian, democratic and dialogical method, he sought to foster understanding between the Greek world and the world of the barbarians.

The course also analyses the archaic and Platonic framework of thought in which human actions, rituals and social institutions acquire value only when they faithfully reproduce or repeat a divine primordial image or archetype. With ancient proto-sophistry, as represented by Protagoras, however, a profound crisis of foundations emerges: age-old myths and divine traditions are demythologized and redefined as mere human conventions. With the rise of this secularism and relativism, the justification of law and morality shifts from a transcendent foundation to human consensus and the persuasive force of rhetoric.

5: Nominalism, Modern Reason and Postmodern Cultural Criticism

A turning point in Western cultural history is the rise of nominalism associated with William of Ockham. Nominalism rejects the existence of objective forms of essence and universal values (ideas) outside the human mind, reducing general concepts to mere names or linguistic conventions. This laid the foundations for modern Enlightenment rationalism, the Industrial Revolution and the idea of progress, in which human beings, as autonomous agents, seek to control and reshape nature.

When modern reason, however, detaches itself from moral conscience and transcendence, it turns into its opposite. As illustrated by Goya's artwork ("The sleep of reason produces monsters") and the literary works of Franz

Kafka, an excessively formalized reason can lead to absurd alienation, bureaucratic terror and guilt that cannot be understood.

Thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre expressed this in the slogan “God is dead, therefore everything is permitted”, which paved the way for libertinism, social indoctrination and ideological manipulation.

In contemporary postmodernity, represented by thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, the “grand narratives” and belief in progress characteristic of modernity are thoroughly deconstructed and dismantled.

The course warns, however, that radical deconstructionism and cynicism risk descending into a bottomless nihilism (katagogy).

In opposition to this decline, the course defends the Platonic and Christian path of anagogy: the upward formation and re-establishment of the human spirit through a renewed grounding in truth, conscience and the idea of the Good.