

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE WEST

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This lecture is divided into two main parts: the first is the parochial part, in which I will deal with the unique contributions of the West. The second is the anti-parochial or universalistic part, in which I wish for the rapprochement between East and West as we move toward the unity of mankind and the formation of a single world culture.

Before I name and describe the unique contributions of the West, permit me to make three preliminary remarks—and clarifications.

First, let me call your attention to the most obvious and indisputable basic difference between West and East: there is only *one* cultural tradition in the West as compared with three or four—or more—quite distinct cultural traditions in the East. The easiest way to represent the unity of Western culture is to point to the *Great Books of the Western World*—and the *Syntopicon* which exhibits the unity of that tradition—the one conversation in which all the great books take part. A similar representation of the cultures of

the East would require three or four sets of books and three or four Syntopicons.

The unity of Western culture, as exhibited in the *Syntopicon*, is not a doctrinal unity but a dialectical unity. It is not a unity of agreement about what is true or false. It is a unity of understanding or communication: the unity of a single conversation in which men who disagree nevertheless engage with one another—relevantly.

The whole of Western thought constitutes a single universe of discourse. Not only is this universe of discourse different from anything to be found in the East; but, what is more important here, there is not one but several distinct universes of discourse in the East.

My second preliminary point is that the one cultural tradition of the West has identifiable sources. They are to be found in the cultural products of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. These are the two fountainheads of Western culture.

But what is unique about the West comes more from its Greek than from its Hebrew source. Greece is the intellectual fountainhead of the West. Judaism is the religious fountainhead of the West. I am going to stress those aspects of Western culture that are wholly Greek in origin, for it is these which most sharply distinguish the West from the East.

The one Hebrew contribution which, as fused with Greek thought, tends to be uniquely Western lies in theology; theism and monotheism. But theology is not distinctively or characteristically Hebrew. The Old Testament is not a philosophical or a theological book. It is not a book of ideas. In contrast to the literature of Greece, consider the Book of Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, the writings of the Prophets, and, above all, the Gospels. These have a much closer affinity with the East than anything else in the West. I will try to explain why a little later.

My third and last preliminary remark is of the utmost importance for your understanding of what I am going to try to say. I have used the word “unique” several times in referring to the contributions of the West. “Unique” is a strong word. It calls for explanation.

During these last months, we have been discovering again, perhaps painfully, that there are things in the East for which there are no Western equivalents—no genuine parallels, no translation. We

have learned that this must be recognized in order to understand the outstanding contributions of the several Eastern cultures. To attempt to translate them into or reduce them to Western terms is to fail to grasp them. In other words, there are certain aspects of the Eastern cultures that are unique. What I am saying is simply the complementary converse of that: there are certain aspects of Western culture that have no Eastern equivalents—no genuine parallels, no translation.

This much may seem clear to you at once—and even acceptable, as it should be; for it would certainly be odd, indeed, if there were unique aspects of Eastern culture that Westerners had to understand in their own terms, but no unique aspects of Western culture that required the same acknowledgement of their uniqueness.

But the moment I go further and specifically name the things that are uniquely Western, you will probably begin to misunderstand me; and, in addition, to disagree with me even though you do not understand. Why? Because the words I will have to use to name the uniquely Western contributions are the very same words that Easterners use when they speak to us in English about their cultures. Hence, if you suppose that these same words are being used in exactly the same senses, you will be led to the conclusion that what I am trying to say is false.

I must, therefore, beg you not only to listen to my words carefully, but, more important, to pay close attention to the precise meaning I assign to them; for only in the precise sense in which I use them will these words name aspects of culture that are *uniquely* Western.

I must implore your patience a moment longer to state for you a basic—and typically Western—rule for handling of words in discourse. Based on such reading as I have done in the literatures of the East, the statement that this rule is uniquely Western is one of my surest guesses about Eastern writing and thought. My guess is that this basic rule about the handling of words is not observed in Eastern discourse. On the contrary, it is intentionally violated; for the Eastern writers could not say what they are trying to say if they allowed themselves to be governed by this rule.

The rule is simply this: always to observe whether a word that is used to name two or more things is being used *univocally*, *analogically*, or *equivocally*. Let me explain.

Univocal usage occurs when the same word is used with exactly the same meaning; as, for example, “animal” of a cat and a dog.

Analogical usage occurs when the same word is used with different but related (partly overlapping) meanings, i.e., with some thread of meaning in common; as, for example, “father” when we use it of a progenitor, a priest, and God.

Equivocal usage occurs when the same word is used with different and totally unrelated meanings—with no meaning at all in common; as, for example, “pen” used for a writing instrument and for an enclosure for animals.

Now, the rule that governs Western discourse calls upon us to avoid equivocation, and to recognize whether a word is being used univocally or analogically; and, if the latter, always to distinguish the several distinct though related senses of analogically used words.

Hence, please try to understand that when I come to name the unique aspects or contributions of Western culture, I will be using the same words that Easterners use when they speak English; but they and I will not be using these words univocally—in *exactly the same sense*.

In some cases—very important ones—we (the Easterners and I) will be using these same words *equivocally*—*with no common meaning at all*. In other cases, we will be using these same words analogically—and in these cases it is of the utmost importance to observe the difference in the senses as well as to discover the common thread of meaning—often very, very thin—that makes the usage analogical. Finally, in the case of those words which I use to name the unique aspects of Western culture, we—they and I—will never be using these words univocally, never in exactly the same sense; except in those instances in which they—the Easterners—use these words to name the things in Eastern culture that have been consciously and deliberately imported from the West.

With this preparation, we are now ready to consider the unique contributions of the West, and to begin by considering the legacy of Greece to the West, for most of what is unique about Western culture was created or invented by the Greeks.

The first great invention of the Greeks was the *polis* or the *republic*: the state—city-state or nation-state. This involves two related inventions: (1) the invention of the constitution—and constitutional government; and (2) the invention of the primary constitutional office—that of citizenship. To understand the *polis* or *re-*

public, it must be contrasted with the village communities (such as existed for centuries in India or China) in which paternal government prevails—the government of the elders; and also with the larger social agglomerations that are not states in the strictly political sense because royal government prevails—the government of kings that is an extension to these larger communities of the government by the elders in the tribal or village communities. Royal government—the rule of kings and emperors, the rule of maharajahs, overlords, and shoguns—is not political.

This Western invention has only very recently been imported by Japan and India; and it is highly questionable whether it now exists in China, though for a brief period—that of the so-called “Chinese republic” —it existed there, however feebly, as an import from the West. The West is political; the East is not.

The second great invention of the Greeks is difficult to name without being misunderstood. To name it, I am going to use the word “science” and explain the precise sense in which I regard science as a unique contribution of the West to the civilization of mankind.

In the first place, I am using the word “science” to name all the diverse modes of inquiry by which distinct bodies of knowledge are methodically and systematically built up. Please observe that I am using the word “science” generically, as we sometimes use the adjective, when we speak of “a scientific attitude” or “the scientific method.” Used in this way, we can speak, for example, of scientific historians, though history is a distinct body of knowledge and a distinct mode of inquiry as contrasted with empirical science—which is not science in the generic sense, but only one of the modes of science.

The Greeks not only invented science generically but they also distinguished four modes of science—of which mathematics is one, philosophy is another, history is a third, and what we call “empirical science” is a fourth.

Let me now offer you four explanatory comments that may make this clearer to you.

(1) Negatively, the Greeks sharply distinguished science from religion, and that distinction has been preserved and accentuated throughout the rest of Western culture. Since philosophy is a scientific enterprise, it is sharply distinguished from religion in the West, just as mathematics is, or empirical science.

(2) History as a scientific enterprise begins with Herodotus in the sixth century, B.C. The Greek word—*historia*—means investigation or researches. The historian develops methods of finding things out about the past and of testing differing accounts of what happened. This is uniquely Western, as everything else that is scientific is uniquely Western.

(3) The essence of the scientific enterprise in the West—whether the form it takes is mathematics or history or philosophy or empirical science—is *objectivity*. *Objectivity*, in the sense that I attach to the word, is another way of stating a unique aspect of Western culture. The objectivity of the West lies in the Western conception of truth as applied to every phase or part of the scientific enterprise. Truth is the conformity of the mind to *that which is*—a reality absolutely independent of the mind, which measures it and separates the true from the false.

The *objectivity* of the Greeks that is so essential to their invention of the scientific enterprise reveals them to have had a predominant interest in the outer world rather than in man's inner life. They approached man himself from the outside, as just one of the many *objects* to be found in nature, rather than explored man from the inside.

This point can be made in still another way. The Greeks were concerned primarily with Nature, not with Man; and with Man only as a part of Nature—a natural object. *Negatively*, this means that the Greeks were “humanists” only in a very qualified or restricted sense.

In contrast to the *objectivity* and the restricted humanism of the West which is never anthropocentric, or man-centered, the East, I am suggesting, tends in the opposite direction toward subjectivity, toward the exploration of the inner life rather than the outer world, and toward a humanism that is definitely anthropocentric or man-centered.

(4) There is one other thing about the scientific enterprise that, beginning with the Greeks, characterizes the whole of Western culture and sharply differentiates it from the cultures of the East. The scientific enterprise, as a whole and in all its parts, is *purely intellectual* and basically *cooperative*. I can make this point most clearly with respect to Western philosophy (which is one part of the scientific enterprise) as contrasted with what is called “philosophy” in the East. (The difference is so great that it would al-

most appear to be an equivocal use of the word in the two cases.)

Philosophy in the West is *not* a way of life, or even a way of thought: it is a scientific, that is, a *purely intellectual*, enterprise, methodically conducted, aimed at the building up of a body of knowledge. The *few exceptions* in the West make this clear: (a) in Greece, the Pythagorean cult represented a momentary confusion of mathematics and philosophy with religion—or a way of life with a code and a ritual to follow; (b) the writings of the Stoics contain some intimations of a Stoic way of life, but this is, for the most part, subordinated to what the Stoic philosophers expounded as their doctrines in physics, logic, and ethics; (c) the Christian mystics represent another special way of life—and a definitely non-rational, even anti-rational, way of thought; but they stand far apart from, as well as against, philosophy in the Western sense, which is wholly scientific in its spirit and offers no one a way of life any more than mathematics, historical research, and empirical science do.

The third legacy from the Greeks that constitutes a unique achievement of the West centers on, what for the want of a better name, I call “dialogue.” Robert M. Hutchins has said, quite properly I think, that the West is the “civilization of the dialogue.” And the Greeks invented the dialogue.

Two words—the Greek word “*logos*” and the Latin “*ratio*”—help us to grasp this. The civilization of the dialogue centers on what is expressed by the Greek word “*logos*.” This means more than logic, though it does mean that. It means the concentration on *word* and *idea*, for the “*logos*” is both *word* and *idea*, and both in intimate relation to one another. The other word is the Latin word “*ratio*” from which we get “rational.”

The civilization of the dialogue is a civilization that trusts reason, regards reason as the best tool in man’s possession, and finds in the state and in the scientific enterprise the best expressions of man’s use of reason. It is a civilization in which the highest ideal of human achievement calls for the best use that men can make of reason in dealing with one another, through logically clear words and ideas, either in the political enterprise of the state or in the various scientific enterprises of mathematics, historical research, philosophy, and empirical science.

I turn now to what the West in succeeding centuries has added to the Greek legacy. In the field of the great ideas, only two are of modern origin or development. The idea of Progress is a wholly

modern idea that is uniquely Western. The idea of Evolution is mainly, but not wholly, developed in modern times, and it, too, is uniquely Western.

In the field of politics, there have been two modern developments of the *polis* or *republic*: (a) the *written* constitution; and (b) the principle of political and economic equality—the ideal of the classless society. These are both uniquely Western.

In the field of knowledge—or, more specifically, in that part of the scientific enterprise which is empirical science—there are again two modern developments: (a) the systematic development of the experimental method; this underlies (b) the systematic development of technology—the derivation of know-how from know-that. This in turn underlies the Industrial Revolution in all its successive phases, which is universally admitted to be an exclusively Western phenomenon.

The fact that the Industrial Revolution is wholly Western plainly indicates not only that advanced technology is exclusively Western in origin and development, but also that its source—experimental science and the cooperative conduct of the scientific enterprise—is a unique achievement of the West.

Let me summarize the argument so far. Positively stated, the unique contributions of the West are three: (1) the political institutions of the state, especially constitutional government, citizenship, and the ideal of the classless society; (2) the scientific enterprise as a whole, distinguished sharply from religion, conducted cooperatively as a set of methodical procedures to construct distinct bodies of knowledge (mathematics, history, philosophy, and empirical science)—with its emphasis on *objectivity* and *objective truth*, with a restricted humanism that is *not man-centered* or *anthropocentric*, and with its systematic conversion of knowledge into know-how, yielding *all the fruits of technological progress*; and (3) the civilization of the dialogue with its ideal of rational discourse—of discussion and debate—both in the sphere of politics and in the pursuit of truth.

There are, as I have already intimated, a few deviations in the West from the Western norm, which represent something comparable to a predominant feature of all the Eastern cultures—namely, the development of personal wisdom, the exploration of man’s inner life, the kind of thing I have called “a way of life and a way of thought” that is so strikingly different from the science and philosophy of the West.

I am thinking here of the personal wisdom and the way of life that is taught by the traditional religions of the West, best exemplified, perhaps, in Western holy books, such as Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*; or of the way of life that is a minor aspect of ancient Stoicism; or of such things as existentialism and psychoanalysis in the contemporary Western world that, for some of their devotees at least, take on the character of "a way of life."

We are now prepared to turn our attention to the problem of the unity of mankind and of a single world culture. Here I have three preliminary remarks that I would like to make.

(1) I hope that you agree with me that the problem of the culture of mankind as a whole, though it is remote as compared with the urgent problems of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, European, or American society today, is much more important.

(2) That problem, as I see it, is how to transcend the parochialism of the West and the various parochialisms of the East, taking what is best from each and combining the unique contributions of each.

For example, the three unique contributions of the West should be a part of world culture—and, I venture to predict, they will be. I venture to predict that the world will be Westernized in its political institutions, in its adoption of Western experimental science and technology, and in its recognition of the ideal that is implicit in the civilization of the dialogue.

I cannot speak for the East in the same way, but I would think that the subjectivity of the East is needed to balance the objectivity of the West; the personal wisdom and the understanding of the inner life is needed to supplement the purely intellectual knowledge and the exploration of the outer world that constitute the scientific enterprise in the West; and the know-how that is a way of life is needed to supplement the know-how that is Western technology.

(3) Predictions aside, I am concerned here, in these concluding moments, to express *merely as a hope* my sense of the shape that the world culture of the future should take. And I hasten to acknowledge at once that the hope I express is probably shot through and through with the Western parochialism that I simply cannot slough off any more than I can get out of my skin.

Let me begin by making a distinction between the lower and the higher elements of human culture.

By *the lower elements of human culture*, I mean those things that are now common to all civilized societies, no matter how they may otherwise differ culturally, because these things are the legacy to civilized man from his prehistoric ancestors who developed them in the 500,000 years that preceded the dawn of civilization: (a) *tool-making*, which is the seed of all later developments in technology; (b) the use of *fire* and the *cooking* of food; (c) *burial rites* and other *ritualistic practices* connected with birth, puberty, and marriage.

In addition to these three, there are four other elements that I would refer to as lower elements of human culture and that are common to all civilized society, but are of more recent origin—going back no farther than, perhaps, the last 20,000 to 30,000 years. They are: (a) *agriculture and the domestication of animals*, as opposed to hunting, as a means of food supply; (b) *settled community life with permanent dwellings*, as opposed to a nomadic existence; (c) *fine art*—that is, art for the sake of enjoyment or for symbolic purposes, as opposed to utilitarian or useful art: decorative designs on clothing and implements, pictorial representations, song and dance, and story-telling; (d) the development of *language* and of the skills or *arts of communication* by means of syntactical speech.

By *the higher elements of human culture*, I mean those things that distinguish the diverse cultures of civilized man—things that are not common to all human cultures, except in some thin analogical sense. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, I will deal only with the main cultures or cultural traditions now in existence: Western culture on the one hand, and the three or four Eastern cultures, on the other. These differ markedly in: (a) *religion*—religious beliefs and practices; (b) *fine art*—painting, poetry, music, dance, etc.; and (c) *communal life or social organization*. They differ in their understanding of and evaluation of (d) *philosophy* as a part of the scientific enterprise *or* as a way of life and a search for personal wisdom; and (e) the employment of reason as the highest instrument available to man *or* the rejection of reason as unreliable for the purpose of individual life, society, or the pursuit of wisdom.

Now the question with which I would like to close this lecture—the question that I would like to leave you to ponder on—is this: *in respect to which of the higher elements of human culture is diversity compatible with the ultimate unity of mankind and the cultural fusion out of which a single world culture will eventually emerge?*

Let me suggest the answer as I see it—undoubtedly from my Western point of view.

I think the universalization of Western political institutions—the world-wide adoption of constitutional government and of the classless society—is necessary for the unity of mankind.

I also think that such things as mathematics, historical research, experimental science must be universalized—transcending all cultural divisions. Just as the adjective “Chinese” or “Indian” or “Western” signifies only accidental or historical but no essential differences when applied to mathematics, so these adjectives have no essential significance when they are applied to experimental science, historical research, or technology. Here the objectivity that characterizes all parts of the scientific enterprise as a whole must be universalized, not for the sake of the unity of mankind, but because it is essential to the enterprise itself.

With respect to the fine arts, I think that a diversity of traditions or schools should persist even after mankind is unified and world culture begins; because just as the objectivity and objective truth that are essential to the scientific enterprise require that enterprise to be the same everywhere, so the novelty and variety that is essential to the vitality of the fine arts require that diversity not only to persist but to be actively promoted.

Should the diversity of religions persist and continue to divide men culturally? That is a difficult question. I have only two things to say on this score.

(1) Insofar as a religion involves a way of life and a way of thought that leads to the attainment of wisdom and peace, then, perhaps, diverse religions should persist until the end of time, because basic differences in human temperament may require such diversity.

(2) Let us now consider the diversity of religion in another way: consider a religion as involving a doctrine that includes existential statements, such as: there is no God, there is only one God, there are many Gods; the divine transcends the world; the divine is wholly immanent in the world; whatever gods there may be, they are the same for all men; different groups of men are entitled each to its own set of gods. Considered this way, the diversity of religions is as repugnant to reason as would be the assertion that plainly contrary scientific theories can both be true as stated.

Finally, I come to philosophy, and what I have to say here closely follows what I have just said about religion. The answer to be given turns on how philosophy is viewed.

If, on the one hand, philosophy is viewed as a way of life, as a search for personal peace and wisdom (and in these respects it would appear to be indistinguishable from religion), then my answer is that a persistent diversity of philosophies is compatible with philosophy as thus conceived, and furthermore that diversity is appropriate to deep temperamental differences among men.

But if, on the other hand, philosophy is viewed not at all as a way of life, but exclusively as a part of the scientific enterprise, a specific mode of inquiry directed toward acquiring a specific kind of knowledge, a purely intellectual and cooperative enterprise having nothing to do with personal wisdom or peace, then my answer is that the same principles of objectivity and objective truth that apply to other parts of the scientific enterprise—to mathematics, to historical research, and to empirical science—apply in exactly the same way to philosophical thought.

This means, on the one hand, that diverse philosophies viewed as diverse ways of life, as diverse paths to personal wisdom and peace, do not conflict with one another or disagree—and their differences need not be adjudicated in some objective fashion.


But it also means, on the other hand, that when philosophy is viewed as a part of the scientific enterprise, and as a specific mode of inquiry for gaining a specific type of knowledge, then the disagreements of philosophers not only in the West, but in the world—both East and West—must be subject to adjudication and must be judged by exactly the same criteria of objectivity and objective truth.

I would now like briefly to say what I think all this comes to. There are four main points I would like to leave with you.

(1) Culturalism, like nationalism, is divisive. Both must give way in favor of the unification of the human race and in favor of the formation of a single world culture. (Culturalism is parochialism as nationalism is chauvinism.)

(2) Cultural differences are like differences in nurture. They are all relatively superficial as compared with the sameness of human nature—the common humanity that inheres in all races of men.

(3) Some cultural differences—such as those that pertain to the fine arts and to religion, or to philosophy conceived as a way of life—arise from and are appropriate to temperamental differences among men that divide them into different types; and to the extent that such temperamental differences persist after differences of race or nationality are annulled by the unification of mankind, the appropriate cultural differences should also persist in world culture.

(4) Insofar as the human mind is the same in all men, and insofar as the world in which man finds himself is the same for all men, *objective truth must be the same for all men*, and the scientific enterprise, including philosophy as a mode of inquiry, not as a way of life, must become the common possession of mankind and the core of world culture, for objective truth transcends all divisions and boundaries among men. 

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