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Cultural Philosophy

translated by Alan Duncan

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Publications (selection)

Das Leben der Lebendigen. Hegels politisch-religiöse Begründung der Philosophie freier Verbundenheit in seinen frühen Manuskripten, Bonn 1987.

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Georg Simmels ‚Tragödie der Kultur‘ – 90 Jahre danach, in: JABLIS. Jahrbuch für europäische Prozesse 3 (2004).

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Humantechnologische Expansion jenseits von Metaphysik und Anthropologie – Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Heidegger, in: Humantechnologie und Menschenbild. Mit einem Blick auf Heidegger, ed. by Günther Seubold, Bonn 2006, 47-65.

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Introduction

This course is dedicated to a discipline that appears as problematic as it is young. As terminus for a new region yet to be cleared and rendered arable, “cultural philosophy” appears for the very first time in 1899 in Ludwig Stein.¹ Since its swift establishment after 1900, it has been a topic of such debate that it is doubted even today whether it even has a clearly definable object. Even Ernst Cassirer comes in 1939 to a decidedly sceptical conclusion:

Questionability of the Concept and Object of “Cultural Philosophy”

“Of all the individual regions that we are wont to distinguish from one another within the systematic whole of philosophy cultural philosophy constitutes perhaps the most questionable and debated region. Even the very concept thereof is still by no means sharply delineated nor unambiguously established. It lacks not only solid, recognised solutions to its basic problems; rather, it even lacks an agreement on what can be asked within its boundaries sensibly and rightly. This peculiar uncertainty has to do with the fact that cultural philosophy is the youngest among the philosophical disciplines, and that, unlike the rest of them, it cannot look back onto centuries of development.”²

The variety of what has been subsumed under “cultural philosophy” from 1900 to the present, and the difficulty of being able to understand these heterogeneous designs at all in answer to reasonably comparable questions, could almost awaken suspicions that cultural philosophy exists only in proclamation, but not in fact, much like the Loch Ness monster. The internal problems of the discipline may well be the reason for the paradoxical situation that on one hand “culture” and “cultural philosophy” have become quite fashionable again in recent years, but that there are, on the other hand, hardly any systematic investigations into why this discipline ever arose or what its past and present objects and goals are. And so there are indeed many and increasingly valuable collections and anthologies of classic texts on cultural philosophy³ and presentations

The Difficulty of a Systematic Portrayal

¹ Stein, Ludwig: *An der Wende des Jahrhunderts. Versuch einer Kulturphilosophie*, Freiburg i. Br. 1899. – The assertion announced by Diemer, Alwin: *Grundriss der Philosophie*, vol. 2, *Die philosophischen Sonderdisziplinen*, 4th part: *Kulturphilosophie*, Meisenheim a.G. 1964, 14, that the term was coined by the Romantic Adam Müller, is not properly cited and cannot be confirmed. The fact of which Konersmann, Ralf: *Kulturphilosophie zur Einführung*, Hamburg 2003, 20, reminds us that the architect Gottfried Semper already wrote in 1851 of “questions of cultural philosophy”, ought not to be overestimated, as Semper was not thinking of a new philosophical discipline here, whereas Ludwig Stein certainly was.

² *Naturalismus und humanistische Begründung der Kulturphilosophie* (1939), in: Cassirer, Ernst: *Erkenntnis, Begriff, Kultur*, ed. by Bast, Rainer A., Hamburg 1993, 231.

³ Konersmann, Ralf (ed.): *Kulturphilosophie*, Leipzig 1998 (2nd ed.); Burkhard, Franz-Peter (ed.): *Kulturphilosophie*, Freiburg, München 2000. The authors mentioned here also include, for example, Alain, Valéry, Lévi-Strauss, Bourdieu, Tylor, Malinowski or Parsons, so that one could also have subsumed them unspecifically under “cultural theory”; cf. then also the collection by Müller-Funk, Wolfgang: *Kulturtheorie*.

of exemplary positions⁴, but hardly an attempt to assess, portray and order the diversity of historical conceptions systematically.

Structure of the Course

Due to this difficulty, a type of systematic approach to cultural philosophy has been selected for this course that is divided into two main parts. In part 1 a sequence of preliminary explications is pursued in whose course the elementary meaning of the term “cultural philosophy” is delineated and distinguished from different directions. At first, four different fundamental meanings of “culture” are to be analysed whose inadvertent confusion makes the word so unclear and ambiguous today. Without any clarification of this objective level it cannot be seen what problems and objects “cultural philosophy” can have in the first place. Thereupon a delineation follows at the *theory level* as well, that which “cultural philosophy” is and can be being distinguished in its specific characteristics from two other types of theoretical treatment of culture: from the “cultural sciences” on the one hand, and from “cultural criticism” on the other.

In part 2 select classic positions of cultural philosophy are presented that have an exemplary significance for philosophy about culture: Herder, Simmel and Spengler. In this way the problem of the actual object of cultural philosophy is not avoided, but nor is on the other hand the legitimate variety of culture philosophical approaches cut short. With the arrangement of the preliminary explications in the individual chapters the following goals and theses are connected.

Goals and Theses in the Chapter Outline

First of all, in chap. 1.1 the *basic thesis* is supported and developed that the object “culture” is of an elementary polysemy that can be mastered clearly, however, by the ideal-typical reconstruction of four historically evolved basic meanings. Accordingly, it ought to be demonstrable that cultural philosophy also treats several different objects and consequently develops entirely different lines of questioning, depending upon which of the four fundamental meanings is presupposed. Hence the *consequent thesis* of the course arises, that the unity of the object of cultural philosophy can primarily disclosed in each case via the underlying concept of culture. Through the subsequent distinction of “cultural philosophy” from both “cultural sciences” (chap. 1.2) and “cultural criticism” (chap. 1.3) it ought to become clear as well that cultural philosophy in the narrower sense is something exclusively modern. For it arises, as can be seen from the third basic sense of “culture”, in the first place on the basis of the secularisation of Europe, and in the second on that of the

Einführung in Schlüsseltexte der Kulturwissenschaften, Tübingen, Basel 2006. A just as unspecific collection that does not distinguish between “cultural philosophy”, “cultural science”, “cultural sociology” etc. is in Wirth, Uwe (ed.): Kulturwissenschaft. Eine Auswahl grundlegender Texte, Frankfurt a.M. 2008.

⁴ Geyer, Carl-Friedrich: Einführung in die Philosophie der Kultur (1994), Darmstadt 2009; Perpeet, Wilhelm: Kulturphilosophie. Anfänge und Probleme, Bonn 1997.

radical demythologising of the human world, within which all extra-human entities can be interpreted in formal respect as cultural creations of man. With these distinctions and delimitations, historical as they are systematic, a first sketch can follow then in chap. 1.4 that etches out both the common main business and the various types of cultural philosophy. It is in this framework that the conclusion is grounded that a comprehensive system of culture that would underlie the individual theoretical systems of cultural philosophy is at least impossible to find, and probably does not exist. This lack of systematicity on the side of the object, though, implies neither the impossibility of systematic cultural philosophy, nor does it necessarily constrict the productivity and clarifying power of cultural philosophical theories.

In the second part three exemplary approaches to cultural philosophy are presented in conclusion (chaps. 2.1-2.3). The relevant conceptions of Herder, Simmel and Spengler show first of all how broad the range of all possible forms of cultural philosophy is, depending upon what interests and questions are pursued, what cognitive presuppositions are accepted and which of the four fundamental senses of culture is at work. Secondly, the three examples document where the potential for knowledge in a philosophy of culture lies, and, by the same token, especially when one considers the Spenglerian type critically, where the boundaries of its legitimate claims lie.