SORTING OUT CULTURE BY TYPE OR OTHERWISE - TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS

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Contents

Summary

It is argued that contrary to the concept of civilisation, the concept of culture cannot be broken down into types, but rather into levels, if at all. The holism of culture is examined under its most salient aspects across time and now, distinguishing between the *real* world phenomenon "culture" giving rise to a *description* of *features* and the *virtual* concept of culture requiring a *definition* listing distinctive *characteristics*.

Culture deserves assessment as it is petering out. We should care to find out early enough what is the time of the day.

1. Introduction

In a time of permanent stress of the individual and strain in a multifarious society with massive conflict potentials, arising not least from cultural elements, it may be worthwhile to have a closer look into those cultural aspects, in order to explore their nature and impact on human relations, to see how typical or differentiated they are, and whether culture affords a typology or a praeter-typology. A better understanding of typical aspects might hopefully help relax intercultural tensions.

The first question to ask is always whether something exists or not, and, when it does exist, how it works out in respect of the observer and of its circumstances, and, in particular, as a point of order, where is its place in the world of entities known to exist, and how is it related to other entities. We cannot deny that culture exists, that it can be perceived as extant in society, and that the observer is necessarily conditioned by his own surroundings, but it is much less sure that there is something like *types of culture*, which precisely is the point to consider. But even if an important part of above checklist affirms the reality of culture, the circumstances of its existence will still have to be elaborated on, since they make all the difference. The circumstantial evidence is bound to bring more fuel to the moot.

Culture/culture/Kultur is a particularly slippery word even within the same language, gliding into *totem* and *taboo*. It is a verbal container, *mot-valise*, crammed with significant signs representing elements of, and links to and across things found in an ontological set and taken as distinctive features thereof. The ontological set has a name, which is a word, behind which is a concept, which has its place in a system of concepts. Thing, concept and name are three aspects of a "sameness": the world (*reality*) aspect, the *thought* aspect and the *language* aspect, while the language aspect, the word, covers both concept and thing.

Things are *described* by their features, while concepts are *defined*, by selecting pertinent *features* which become in the defining process *distinctive characteristics*. Definitions, as the name indicates, purport delimitation and sorting. Dictionaries mix descriptions and definitions and make no difference between *word* and *concept*; they always start from the word, and rarely care about concept relations. Classification is not needed. The logical and topical disorder prevailing in dictionaries is hidden under the alphabetical access, which is convenient because conventional. Pragmatism and respect of habit make good sales.

So what is a "type" ? Webster defines *type* as *"a number of things or persons sharing a particular set of characteristics that causes them to be regarded as a group"* and adds *class, category* as synonyms, to which one could add *sort, kind, species*. The "sharing of characteristics" corresponds to "common attributes" in the English Oxford Dictionary (1998 ed.). So a *type* is a *set of shareholders of a common stock of attributes*; it is a *collective* showing identifiable common features.

Now the concept of *feature, characteristic or attribute* is of a different order from the concept of *type*, which is the *definiendum*, whereas *feature* belongs to the *definiens*; this indicates a difference in category and level. Indeed, a type is **not a constituent** like *feature*, it rather is an **autonomous *part of*** a **higher** concept. It is a subset of a set. It seems that the important distinction between *feature* and *type* is one of level. *Type* implies hierarchy, showing the lower with respect to the higher level, and implying also the "otherness" with respect to concepts on the same level ; e.g. a chair is a type of furniture, as against footstool or table. There is no *prima facie* evidence that this sort of partitive relationship would apply to the concept of culture, that *culture* could be broken down into **different** types. This would amount to descending to a "sub-culture"-level, implying valuation, not categorisation. In a way, the concept of culture is like that of water : even as vapour or ice, it fundamentally remains water. Nobody would call ice a

type of water. A state is not a type. Of course there can be, ontologically, differences in culture.

Even though, the general phenomenon shows a deplorably simple pattern. If culture is ascertainable at all, it may vary in degree and quality, but never in type. It generally will show certain *features* constant across time, "*the more it changes the more it is alike*". Indeed, culture has always been an efficient cause of a privileged few, preying on the insensible multitude kept quiet on the strength of *panem et circenses.* This still prevails to-day, where, apart from shows, games and football, a homogenized swill is effactually pumped over people day-in-day-out from their TV screens (=*circenses*) to complacently complement social redistribution benefits (=*panem*), with the remarkable difference that at Roman times, the privileged few, apart from keeping the crowd happy, produced things still to be seen, whereas to-day, what is produced is no longer meant to last, except for the waste.

Nevertheless, a more circumstantial appraisal of culture might permit a more clearer picture of what is at stake, in particular regarding the "typical" issue.

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