

## NOTES TOWARD A PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURAL STUDIES

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper addresses the question of the relationship between philosophy and culture through the lens of one who finds himself within the cultural studies tradition. It is argued that philosophy that happens and that it is therefore ordinary, that it is historically grounded within a particular cultural formation and therefore does not transcend that situation, and that there is a symbiotic relationship between culture, history, and philosophy such that the doing of philosophy is akin to the thinking through of culture. It is further argued that a familiarity with the history of philosophy is not only beneficial to the contemporary theorist, but perhaps, even necessary for the theory to be alive and therefore able to emerge alongside of the historical formation out of which it develops and informs. Emphasis is placed on the constellation between philosophy, culture and history, and the co-poietic relation between them as they unfold as part of the transcendental present.

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As a student of both philosophy – in my undergraduate and graduate degrees – and cultural studies – in my graduate and doctorate degrees – the question of the intersection between philosophy and culture, as well as society, is one that is important for me. It has partly to do with how I search for ways to explain what it is that I “do”. Not only do I “do” philosophy, but I also “do” a version of cultural history, engage in a critical cultural studies, and search for ways to develop a philosophically-aware popular culture discourse. Although it is of arguable importance to define one’s enterprise, to justify one’s time on earth as one that is either helpful or productive or defined by excess and waste, I would argue that we are compelled – or even condemned – to engage these questions – whether from an overtly philosophical perspective or not. The question of usefulness has been one that scholars in the humanities have had to face for some time, at least since the question of use has transitioned from a moral to an economic one. More importantly, the relevance of philosophy – as an academic enterprise that sees itself as an end in itself – is often a concern raised not only by those

unfamiliar with philosophy, but even within philosophic circles themselves, especially when it comes time to apply for jobs and think about the future.

One argument for the relevance of philosophy is simply its inevitability: the human condition is such that we are left without answers but condemned with questions; that is, we are able to reflect, and with this comes the uncertainty of the future, and the bewilderment at the present. Faced with the acknowledgement of death, and the faltering of transcendent sources of justification – indicated through the various dimensions of the ‘death of god’ – the finitude of existence beckons loudly. These broad considerations, although they are heard coming out of an existentialist framework, are far from responding to the question of the link between philosophy, culture, society and the relevance of the former for the latter – as though philosophy must justify itself to appease the judgment of popular opinion, since citing it as an end in itself does not go far enough in the attempt to appease an explanation within the purview of instrumental rationality.

When asked what the point of philosophy is, one may respond in a number of ways. One response, the simplest but least convincing, is that philosophy teaches one to be a good person. Even though today there is a certain post-modern weariness regarding absolute terms such as good or bad, the mention of the cultivation of a good character elicits a response that moves from the complicit agreement to the estranged. “What is it to be good?” the other responds in an unacknowledged philosophic pedantry. Instantly the obvious relevance of the history of philosophy emerges on the scene, and, instead of quoting *The Republic* directly, we find a way of exiting the situation, philosophy making itself known as something akin to how Heidegger described being: something that is so close that it is so far. In other words, unprofessional, undisciplined philosophy simply happens, it is part of our engagement with the world, and only becomes explicit at times when the taken-for-grantedness of the world breaks down and we are forced to think about things beyond the immediacy of the situation. Although there is a general misuse of the term (e.g., when sports commentators explain that the coach has this or that philosophy), it is also apparent that the happening of philosophy is not quarantined within the boundaries of specially designated philosophy departments, but is something that, as Raymond Williams would say, “ordinary”. The ordinariness of philosophy goes hand in hand with its relevance to the ways in which culture and

society is thought and lived through. That is, although those who have professional training in philosophy may have license to claim to have the ability to self-consciously “do” philosophy, philosophy is not the privilege of the elite – it is something that simply happens.

Acknowledging the “ordinary language” philosophy of Mead, and the American pragmatist tradition of Pierce and James, where insights into the functioning of propositions, language, and mind are manifest in everyday life, I am aware that a philosophical pragmatics has a long history. However, to extend it further, the mundaneness of philosophy extends beyond this sophisticated acknowledgement of the everydayness of philosophy; it is a well-known argument that the drive toward philosophy is a symptom of lack: we lack a full omniscience and therefore the negativity of questioning enters the world. The finitude of human existence goes hand in hand with the vocation of questioning, and questioning itself is a symptom of an ontological affair.

As Heidegger stated in the Technology essay, “questioning is the piety of thought”. Although stated in the poetic language that the later Heidegger became known for, we can interpret this line to mean just that, that the theological, metaphysical, and ontological vocation of man is to ask questions, and the question-asking vocation is intrinsically related to the big questions of existence that were traditionally appeased by God. Regarding the latter, Heidegger was known to have said that while religion provides the answers, philosophy asks the questions.

So when asked to defend philosophy, that is, to explain the usefulness of philosophy, it becomes a matter of pointing to the irony of the question itself, since the question itself partakes in a form of philosophizing that goes beyond the simple calculation of means and ends, and has already entered into the realm of philosophizing proper. But there is more: not only is the question an example of philosophy, and therefore an example of unacknowledged self-reflexivity – or even question-begging circularity – the performative asking of the question reflects something else: that the presupposition about philosophy’s place – that philosophy may not have a place in the (academic) world – is unacknowledged but completely informs the question itself. The very asking of this question demonstrates that philosophy as the unpacking of unacknowledged presuppositions – of making the implicit explicit in the form of asking for and providing

answers as Robert Brandom argues – functions ordinarily, and therefore has a place even in the very gesture of asking whether it has a place. Whether or not we agree on what that place is, it is performatively demonstrated that philosophy has a place in and through the terms of the debate itself, and the presuppositions that the very asking of the question in the first place entails. Although Wittgenstein would suggest that philosophy is a particular type of language game, I argue here that, although it may be the case that it fits into the category of ‘language game’ as he defines it (and that it therefore has a ‘family resemblance’ to what he calls a game), it is a constitutive type of game that may extend into what he calls “form of life”. Falling short of saying that it is a universal aspect of the human condition, I claim that philosophy is an activity that rears its head without necessarily having the conscious awareness of its practitioner. The practice of philosophy, as well as its professionalization in departments of philosophy, have to do with the cultivation of the practice such that the ability to think through abstraction is attained, but this does not account for all philosophy – there is philosophy outside of its professionalization such that it leads us to say that “there is philosophy”, or “philosophy is”. The being of philosophy is one with the incompleteness – and therefore freedom – of being.

From one perspective, the history of philosophy is a product of history, and as a product, it can be labeled and archived, kept under wraps as a possession of culture to be treated as a curio. Along with art, and its cultivation in the gallery, the history of philosophy is often seen as a product that may be taught alongside the history of civilization. From the history of ideas perspective, there are great books that have something to offer, and a familiarization with them – and the canon that they are a part of – is indispensable to a refined sensibility. In line with this perspective, philosophy is another way of preserving the archive of the past: that there is a history to ideas is enough justification to treat philosophy as a museum treats artifacts. In this way there is an external relationship with philosophy; philosophy becomes something that is learned, studied, and rehearsed. This external relationship leads to the type of scholarship that we may expect from the cultural historian who itemizes objects by applying dates, geographical trajectories, and attaching them to proper names. This perspective on the history of philosophy misses the point that philosophy happens and that the happening of philosophy is the living presence that unfolds only through its

activation. That is, like a book that remains unread and collecting dust, the book is an object alongside other objects and in this sense can be used to start a fire or weigh down a backpack. It is only when the book is being read that it becomes what it is: it is read, and as it is read, it is alive, intermingling with the mind that ponders it and introduced to the context of the terms of its being read, and the person who is reading it. Philosophy happens, and as it happens it unfolds and blossoms into the living presence of its activation. Although I acknowledge the risk of falling into a vulgar metaphysics of presence, it is important to keep in mind that philosophy is not a thing that one gains possession of – either through education or otherwise – but is something that is only insofar as it is happening. It happens unexpectedly, and unnoticed, but it happens nonetheless. The art of philosophy is its cultivation, in spending time following its lead, by being taken by its spirit – not possessing it but by being possessed by it, but this is unnecessary for philosophy to exist – the cultivation of thought does not make thought exist, but the existence of thought is required for its cultivation.

To ask the question of what the relationship between philosophy and culture is is already to have entered philosophy. Retroactively one may ask what the doing of philosophy is, but this already presupposes the doing of philosophy as the condition of possibility for generating this question. In the attempt to answer the question, it becomes readily apparent that it is first necessary to define culture; and this is nothing if not a task of philosophy. Culture, acknowledged by Nietzsche as a synonym for the metaphysical battleground of forces – of which he thought himself a physician of – is the stuff of thought. As in a crude Marxist understanding of the base and superstructure, the cultural aspect of thought is what Michel Foucault refers to as the historical a priori: the condition of possibility for the (material and discursive) present, the underpinnings of the sayable, and the principle of ordering. Philosophy does not happen in a vacuum but arises out of, and is a constitutive part of, its historical situation. It therefore makes sense that philosophy has a privileged position in the coming to terms with the cultural underpinnings of thought, and therefore the examination of what is happening, and what could – or even should – happen. Philosophy emerges in a co-poiesis with the historical happening, occurring as part of the unfolding of the present's relationship with the past and the anticipation of the future, while remaining grounded in the historical and material conditions of the

situation. Philosophy does not transcend its situation but is transcendental in the sense that Kant intended for this term: it conditions and is conditioned by the historical-cultural formation, while preserving its vocation for the ideal.

This ideal – *eidos* – is not of an unchanging atemporal stasis, but rather, is a contingent becoming, actuality being temporality at the same time that it may be said to be ‘in’ time. Philosophy’s vocation for thought is the same as cultural studies’ for practice – neither are without the other. The activity of doing philosophy is akin to the thought that thinks through cultural activity.

The Frankfurt school knew the necessary link between philosophy and culture well. Adorno’s analysis of what he called the “cultural industry” is a philosophical essay in both form and content. Although unconventional in style, its goal is to outline the force of capitalist interest and its impact on what may be called the integrity of thought. Notoriously pessimistic in attitude, he claims that this industry takes over the individual’s volition, rendering him or her a mere product of a larger system that demands nothing less than absolute subsumptive conformity under its concept. As he puts it, “Kant’s formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do his schematizing for him.” In other words, we are left at the mercy of the reality provided for us by the industry, offering a pre-set scripting for our life-narrative, providing the lens through which we filter reality and construct experience. Not only does the industry dictate taste, it dictates the ways in which we experience our own inner world such that even the most private thoughts are a product of the grip of the industry. Commodification of experience results, and all that is left is to consume. The link to philosophy here is as to the messiah: the only hope is to think through the dilemma, to preserve those texts that are able to break us from our commodified slumber, and, through a negative dialectic and immanent critique, to emancipate thought from the interest of the industry. Implied here is the role of philosophy as something that exceeds the epoch, by being able to break the historical situation up through the power of critique, philosophy is in excess of the reductive capacity of the cultural industry. Further, culture itself is more than that which it is reduced to by the industry, culture’s link to philosophy is one as intimate as that of potentiality and

actuality: philosophy is culture's potentiality, but it does not transcend culture, it actually grows out of it and is therefore immanent to it. The phrase "cultural philosophy" is redundant since philosophy is always already cultural, and culture's potentiality resides in its philosophicality.

I have argued that philosophy is ordinary; that philosophy is intimately related to, and is grounded in, its historical situation, and that philosophy happens. Regarding this latter, I must clarify by stating that, in order to philosophize, philosophy would already have to be under way. It is not as though one chose to invent philosophy, nor did they believe to have discovered it. It chooses. The activity of philosophy is the actuality of action. Said differently, when Zizek exclaims that people should "stop acting, and start thinking" he is in no way asking people to enter a life of solitude by joining a think tank detached from the world, to simply meditate on life instead of actually living life. What he means is that thinking is acting. In a similar way to Kant's dictum that "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind", acting without thought is just as blind. Although all proper acting is inherently dangerous, and involves the risk of the leap of faith, the activist who prides him or herself in the actuality of doing something misses the point that thought is action. As the Stoics were well aware, a disciplined soul makes for a disciplined body, and therefore a life of well-being and doing.

Contemporary theory – the stuff being done in literature departments under the various titles of post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, queer theory – is only loosely – and superficially – aware of its philosophical heritage, operating often at a fever pitch brandishing of the sharp edge of critique. I believe that it is necessary to delve into the philosophical heritage of contemporary theory, e.g., Derrida's relationship with the early Husserl, and Husserl's emergence from transcendental philosophy and the German Idealist tradition; an awareness of what the Cartesian subject is, why it is customary to attack it, how it relates to the larger project of modernity and enlightenment thought; the role of Socratic irony, Plato's notion of dialectic. This is not only with the hopes of gaining an understanding of the history of philosophy for education's sake, but to actually mobilize the history of thought in a way that complements current issues, and help us to think theory instead of just applying it.

A philosophical cultural studies would therefore remain aware of its heritage of thought, develop a relationship with the tradition in a way that does not treat it as an object, but that activates it by engaging it with the present. This is not a relationship of a business transaction, but of an intimate friendship. The love of wisdom has always been dictated by the wisdom of love. Culture, the demos, and the verve of thought are linked through Eros and history, becoming alongside each other, in time and as time. Temporality, the horizon for the unfolding of thought, is also the stuff of history, and culture is history's content. A familiarity with culture is therefore, simultaneously, the cultivation of thought, and both are indebted to the historical formation of as it is indebted to life. I leave you with the words of Nietzsche from *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*: "The culture of a people...[is]...a unity of the of the artistic style in all expressions of the life of the people. The people to whom we ascribe a culture should be only in a really vital unity and not so miserably split apart into inner and outer, into content and form. Anyone who wants to strive after and foster the culture of a people strives after and fosters this higher unity and, for the sake of a true education, works to destroy the modern notion of being educated. He dares to consider how the health of a people which has been disturbed by history could be restored, how the people could find their instinct once again and with that their integrity".

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