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The Roots of Cultural Logic

The term culture acquired its value as a way of conceptualizing individual and collective identity only subsequent to the Enlightenment. Not an especially charged term in previous centuries, it was used to designate any program for nurturing and regulating growth, most typically agricultural, but also occasionally with respect to child rearing or even intellectual and moral self-improvement. The disparate values it now carries – as a way of denoting the general progress of humanity, the collective identity of particular communities within that field, the aesthetic forms and institutions deployed by the community to express and maintain that identity, and the programs of personal self-improvement individuals pursue within those frameworks – coalesced gradually around the term from the end of the eighteenth century on.

These new concepts and the choice of “culture” as an overarching category to convey them reflect fundamental changes in the structure and exercise of authority, and in the way people thought about knowledge, truth, identity, and the purpose and shape of their lives. Many of these changes are consequences of the fragmentation of authority during the Reformation and early modern period, when the unified structure of ecclesiastical and secular power which had regulated the world since the Middle Ages was displaced by a heterogeneous economy of competing domains and discourses of authority. While the facts surrounding this crisis are well known, it is worth rehearsing the pertinence of certain key shifts to the emergence of the conceptual frameworks we associate with the word “culture.”

Collective Practice and the Authority of Systems

First, during the early modern period there is a growing persuasion that what passes for true and natural in the world is as much the result of custom as of divine design. Contact with new peoples during the age of exploration had revealed that civilizations of equivalent levels of technological and economic development could have radically different belief systems and values. The presence of such differences brought into question the very notion of a universal standard of morality, a single Providential scheme, and “natural” behavior. As Bartolomé de las Casas noted in the middle of the sixteenth century à propos of the Amerindians, “there is no man or nation which is not considered barbarian by some other . . . Just as we consider these peoples of the Indies barbarians, so they, since they do not understand us, also consider us barbarians and strangers.”¹ A few years later in his famous essay on cannibals, Montaigne generalizes the point: “we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live.”² Prefiguring our own conflicted notions of culture, this statement is both a lamentation and a concession. To grant the primacy of custom is to acknowledge that one is subject to it; however, that gesture of self-awareness also inaugurates a movement of self-distancing calculated to provide us with some conceptual leverage over custom. This double movement of acknowledgment and resistance, embeddedness and awareness, forms the nucleus of all subsequent paradigms of the cultivated person.

That custom influenced collective beliefs was hardly a new idea. Still, the idea that it could naturalize practices as repugnant to the European mentality as cannibalism suggested that its authority was both more complex and less anodyne than classical treatments had suggested. Unable to reconcile the civilizations they encountered with the Scriptures, and incapable of acknowledging the validity of the “barbarians’” foundational myths, the Europeans attributed the behavior of the latter to the tacit rules of social life that had evolved over time to govern their community. The lesson of the travel narratives that proliferated during the age of exploration was that practice formed a kind of law in its own right that needed to be confronted.

There was both a negative and a positive dimension to this insight. On the one hand, the power of practice seemed to foreclose on any notion of self-determination. Its ability to shape one's perception of what was true and natural put into question the possibility of free will and hence of human finality. If other people's sense of the true and the natural was determined by their habits, what assurance could one have of the justness and viability of one's own beliefs – particularly when the traditional authority of the church had been undermined by the overwhelming evidence of practice itself? Clearly even the most fundamental human attributes, such as shame or the fear of death, were not universally ordained, but simply the deposit of shared tradition.

On the other hand, once the power of systematic practice to engender belief came under scrutiny, the notion of systematicity itself could be consciously developed as a means of regaining some measure of social and individual self-determination. Abstracting the idea of a governing system from its embodiment in troubling particulars, the early modern European mind found a solution to its own enclosure in system by making systematicity the ground of its knowledge: by rationalizing the mechanism of social habit into a theory of historically accrued systematic rule, one could bring its production under control.

One can see this in the meaning and use of the word “society” as it evolves between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century. Originally denoting companionable association or intercourse with other people, it comes to designate a structure of common interest defined by shared practice and laws, as well as the ordered community which that structure governs. Arising in tandem with the steady urbanization and industrialization of Europe, this new idea of society identifies collective life with the rules, standards, laws, and values that are deposited over time by communal practice. To conceptualize life in this way is not just to move away from a concept of divine ordination, but to take a first step towards criticizing and regulating those rules.³

Another way of understanding this process – which we will see repeated throughout the early modern and modern eras right up to the present – would be to say that the *identification* of an economy of authority (in this case social practice, in later eras religious belief, public opinion, forms of discourse, capitalism, or culture) as both inescapable and foundational, inaugurates the

denaturalization of its workings and opens them to understanding and elision. This quite logically entails turning the mechanisms of authority back against itself. Having perceived the systematicity of social practice to constitute a formidable reservoir of authority, the early modern period sets about *systematizing* its cognitive efforts. And it deploys the knowledge such efforts produce as a countervailing body of authority to that of unconscious habit.

From the outset, then, the legislative power of systematic practice carries two contrary values. In the form of the habits, assumptions, and prejudices absorbed unconsciously, it is an adversary to be overcome before we can realize our full humanity. Increasingly deprecated under the aegis of “custom,” “usage,” “prejudice,” or “superstition,” this social residue is antithetical to the self-consciousness and free will that differentiate humanity from the beasts. One acknowledges the power of custom, but deplores it as well. As Pascal will lament in the mid-seventeenth century, regarding the lack of a firm ground for justice: “merely according to reason, nothing is just in itself, everything shifts with time. Custom is the whole of equity for the sole reason that it is accepted.”⁴ One hundred and fifty years later, by the time of the French Revolution, custom, prejudice and superstition will have become blanket terms for designating any form of social practice – such as respect for the clergy or the nobility – that seems to have no basis of authority other than that of tradition.

However, to the extent that the systems at work within the social body can be brought to light and analyzed, their power can be harnessed to rational projects of social improvement. This is the positive value of systematicity: it can be turned into a tool of knowledge and power. Society can liberate itself from the tyranny of custom and prejudice by conceptualizing them as mechanisms and making them the object of self-conscious rational inquiry. Montaigne’s *Essays* are already an incipient gesture in this direction, with their deliberate inward turn, their dissection of habit, and their juxtaposition of personal tendency to social norm. In a roundabout way they show how the power and authority of social practice which enveloped the early modern period also furnished it with the principle of its liberation. If the systematicity of practice could be analyzed and regulated, self-determination would become a real possibility: by studying one’s own habits, as Montaigne does in essays such as “On the custom of wearing

clothes” or “On Experience,” one could learn how to change them and shape one’s future.

This is already in a sense the lesson of a very different, earlier work, Castiglione’s 1528 *Book of the Courtier*. Although concerned only with a tiny subset of society, Castiglione’s work makes clear by its form as well as its content that the systematization of practice and the conceptualization of one’s embeddedness in it were seen as natural prerequisites to the rational exercise of authority and power. Correlatively, in a move we shall come back to in a moment, the *Book of the Courtier* makes personal identity and distinction within the community contingent on the self-conscious performance of collectively elaborated and constantly renegotiated conventions.

The aristocratic setting of *The Courtier* reminds us that within court society the authority of collective ritual and its importance to personal identity had long been recognized and systematically exploited. However to assume that this means nothing had changed is to miss the point. All of the structural mutations that lead to the gradual emergence of “culture” as a logic involve changes in orders of magnitude. In the early modern period, a strategy for securing authority and identity for oneself and one’s community that had long been the prerogative of the elite began to spread to society at large. To fill the vacuum of authority left by the fragmentation of church authority, the mandate of social self-consciousness that was a tradition for the clergy and upper classes was steadily extended to all classes of the population across local, national, and even continental boundaries. Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) is the clearest dramatization of this project: it envisions custom and social practice as rationally planned mechanisms for disseminating and enforcing enlightened doctrine throughout an *entire population*. What *Utopia* shows is that not just the elite ruling class, but all members of society could become self-conscious authors of their community’s rules and values.

Of course ideas like this would not have made sense, much less taken hold, were it not for the printing press and the reconfiguration of authority it occasioned. Printing operated a quantum shift in the structure of authority, dispersing it in the circuits of shared discourse. Print discourse diffused the power that had been located in a single sacred text and a sacerdotal body of exegetes throughout a systematic economy of exchange, negotiation, inter-

pretation, and representation. In this sense it did not just disseminate narratives of strange collective practices, it made a particular kind of shared practice – its own – the basis of truth and identity.

Discursive Authority and the Print Revolution

In the simplest terms, the print revolution spawned a generalized discursive economy that carried an authority of its own, and it made this authority available to a substantial portion of the population. That words could shape social reality was nothing new; nor was the knowledge that this power was contingent on their dissemination and persistence by means of inscription in some durable medium. The authority of the church was based on these evidences. However it was also based on the assumption that not all words – or readers – were equal and that the power of textual authority could be managed. Historically, this had been the case, since access to the inscribed word had been restricted by the cost and methods of production of manuscripts, and interpretation of the Scriptures had been controlled. Printing and the Reformation changed this by involving a broader spectrum of the population in the production and consumption of the written word and hence in the construction of the assumptions, beliefs and accounts that bound their communities together.

If collective practice in general deposited customary truth in its wake, print discourse constructed it deliberately, demonstrating that the belief systems of communities could be shaped by – indeed, grounded in – little more than shared accounts, the authority of which derived primarily from the extent of their diffusion, the persistence of their reiteration, the level of acceptance of their message.

Enabling a vast international system of exchange and discussion, the print economy reinvented power and agency in terms of the play between individual initiative and systematic practice. The propositions that individuals expressed in their writing were sanctioned or censored, lived or died, by the constantly evolving collective judgment of the community of readers and authors. The truths that emerged from such negotiations enjoyed leverage over the pronouncements of officials in sacred or judicial ceremonies precisely because they could not be pinned down to a particular

moment or place. They were difficult to denigrate or neutralize, because while at one level they could be attributed to a specific author, they derived their force from the collective reception that underwrote and legitimated them. The writings of Luther are exemplary in this regard. Over 400 editions of his biblical translations were published between 1522–46, constituting nearly a third of all books published in German for that period.

Because this new form of truth got its validity from the very fact of its circulation and could no longer be considered the exclusive property of any one person, writers like Montaigne or Galileo who drew conclusions from their personal observations always hedged their gestures in appeals to shared knowledge and common sense. They knew their acts of autonomous cogitation short-circuited the traditional institutions of authority; however, they also knew their words were sanctioned by the shared criteria, procedures, and codes that were conveyed by and embodied in the text itself. Hence their repeated appeals to universal standards and procedures such as human nature, reason, common sense, and mathematical measurement.

The print revolution also reconfigured the parameters of identity, and this at the level of the collectivity as well as the individual. When the attention and concerns of thousands of people are aligned by multiple copies of an identical text, whether it be a religious tract or a newspaper story, an implicit consensus is formed, a shared version of events. A new kind of community and community identity emerge.

A useful term for understanding this (and one that is, incidentally, profoundly “cultural” in its logic) is Benedict Anderson’s notion of the “imagined community,” which grounds the identity of the community not in the lived proximity or familiarity of its members, but in the way they imagine their communality.⁵ The material dissemination of identical texts engenders such a phenomenon necessarily: people who imagine their world through the same shared texts, narratives, vocabulary, phrases, and categories inevitably come to constitute a community. The consensus they form is achieved not through geographical or social proximity but rather through reading, discussion, and correspondence around a common locus of attention (the standardized text) and according to collectively negotiated rules of interpretation and expression. In the 1620s, a century after Luther nailed his theses

to the door at Wittenberg, Bacon could justly observe “by the Art of Printing, a thing unknown to antiquity, the discoveries and thoughts of individuals are now spread abroad like a flash of lightning.”⁶

It is important to stress that print community formation does not require that everyone evaluate accounts, propositions, or thoughts similarly. It is enough that they agree on what they are talking about. Even in the case of controversy, a tacit accord as to the terms of disagreement emerges. This is the discursive community. It cannot be located in any place; rather, it originates like customary law in normative practices: those disseminated by and embodied in standardized texts, languages, and interpretive protocols.

The early modern period is characterized by such discursive communities, ranging from the Protestant sects that coalesced around the writings of people like Luther and Calvin, or the proponents of the new science, who found their common ground in the commitment to a disciplined methodology, to the Humanists who sought to revive the traditions of inquiry and eloquence of antiquity. Beyond their emphasis on self-consciously articulated collective practice, what all these movements have in common is their belief that *truth, virtue, and identity are contingent on the mastery of an impersonal system.*

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Humanist programs of education. These explicitly aligned self-realization, wisdom, and virtue with the mastery of codified usage. If scholars like Erasmus, More, and Colet devoted their lives to retrieving, standardizing, and publishing the texts of antiquity, it was because they felt the assimilation of those systems of thought to be prerequisite to an authentic life. The immediate objective was to provide people desirous of refining themselves – mostly members of the aristocracy and the wealthy merchant class – with a consistent set of models and system of rules according to which they might fashion their own written and verbal expression. But by insisting on a universal language (Latin) and a single field of reference (antiquity), the Humanists also sought to construct a new transnational community around shared modes of thought and expression and a consciously bounded field of reference.

What is involved goes far beyond a roughly delineated set of practices. In his *De copia (On the Foundations of the Abundant*

Style) – widely adopted as a textbook of rhetoric and continually expanded throughout his life – Erasmus not only identifies the best models of writing in antiquity, but exhaustively lists the figures of speech to be used, as well as the acceptable styles, lexical fields, techniques for achieving variety, ways of linking different topics, forms of transition, means of expanding or condensing a subject – in all several hundred different topics, covering nearly seven hundred pages in the modern edition, and including thousands of citations by means of illustration. And this is just one part of his program. In *On the method of study*, he carefully delineates the structure of an education, and the exact steps to be taken by both student and teacher. In his wildly successful 1508 *Adages*, he provided volumes of sentential adages which one might incorporate into one’s writing, while his 1518 *Colloquies* furnished short, pithy moral vignettes designed both to edify the reader and to provide a model for composition. *On the Writing of Letters*, *On the education of children*, *On Manners and Civility in small boys*, *On the Education of a Christian Prince* provide further rules for a humanistic education. These and the hundreds of other texts Erasmus published testify to the link in the consciousness of the age between individual distinction and the mastery of an impersonal grammar of practice. This assumption will lay the groundwork for the ideology of self-cultivation and universal education that will be exhaustively debated at the end of the eighteenth century.

Discursive Identity and Distinction

We take the Humanist notion of education for granted today, but its fundamental assumption – that one acquired one’s status and authority by mastering a bounded canon of material and the traditions it embodied – went against the natural association of authority and power with rank. What Humanism showed was that individual distinction and influence could be detached from birth and reconfigured in terms of one’s mastery of a conventionally designated body of practice. Erasmus himself demonstrates the viability of this logic: in spite of modest (probably illegitimate) origins he was – indeed, remains – the most celebrated intellectual figure of the age, endowed with a distinctive identity and an

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undeniable authority. His works may celebrate antiquity and argue for universal norms, but they also proclaim his domination of European thought.

It is traditional to understand Erasmus's promotion of antiquity as a recovery of what Matthew Arnold might call "the best that has been known and thought in the world," but his focus on traditions and languages specifically designated as lost underscores the fact that the pertinence of the canon derives less from its treatment of contemporary problems than from the fact that it is a closed system. The languages, figures, adages, and colloquies he demands his pupils assimilate are not selected on the basis of their relevance to contemporary situations; they draw their authority rather from the fact that they are part of a bounded corpus of works pertaining to a single category (antiquity). Because Erasmus is the compiler of this system and the self-designated guide to its value, all of its merit accrues to him. His observations on the use of synecdoche are *his* observations, elevated to the level of law by his familiarity with, and unconditional allegiance to, a corpus of classical expression that he himself has defined and appraised. Individual distinction, Erasmus shows us, comes with the *appropriation* of systematic authority.

The case of Erasmus is a dramatic and extreme example of the extent to which authority, social distinction and power could all be won by identifying oneself with a system of thought. However, in the broadest sense every instance of print discourse – in fact every piece of writing that was read by someone else – did this, by simultaneously deploying and reconfiguring, however minimally, the collective norms that enabled it. It is a self-evidence that ideas expressed in print can function only to the extent they are read, understood, accepted and recirculated by other people. In this sense engaging in collective discourse carried obligations that were imposed by the discursive economy itself, with its evolving rules of expression and presentation. These naturally governed spelling and grammar, but also format, vocabulary, rhetorical forms, and the choice of subject matter. The discursive fashioning of identity was thus structurally inseparable from conformity to an impersonal set of evolving practices and rules.

Consigning one's identity to the economy of the written word is a strategy for minimizing one's indenture to unconscious habit

and custom. By consciously inhabiting a different set of codified, purely conventional strictures (the rules of good writing), one momentarily neutralizes the socially embedded determinations of habit. What is significant is that in this move one espouses a mediated subjectivity that finds identity and individuation in the *conscious adoption of norms*. Prior to the printing press, truth flowed from Scripture, the perfect wisdom of which was adjudicated and delivered by an elect group of exiges, the clergy, who alone were qualified to translate the divine word into terms the average person could grasp. Truth was arbitrated by figures of authority and transmitted to the lowest levels of society by human agents: the local priests. Print discourse substitutes for this personal mediation the impersonal mediation of systematic practice, embodied in the standards and procedures for writing and reading, and the material mechanisms of print distribution. These self-consciously adopted norms link individual and community in a dialectic of particular initiative and collective law, which implicitly grounds the truthfulness or value of the secular printed text in the collective – and shifting – judgment of the (print) community.

The lesson which the practice of print discourse gradually inculcates – but which receives explicit formulation only once the notion of culture makes sense of it – is that personal expression and the identity it secures can succeed only if one self-consciously acknowledges the radically impersonal codes and protocols of acceptable expression – from grammar, vocabulary and rhetoric, or the sets of topics considered fit for discussion, to the format and marketing of the book. Under various guises – “standards,” “good taste,” “*bienséance*,” “correct expression” – these broadly accepted procedures and norms are increasingly invoked as the foundation of successful communication and of the ideals of “individual” identity which such communication secures. They persist today undiminished in the categories of evaluation we use in letters of reference: “ability to express oneself in writing,” “effectiveness of oral communication,” “independence of thought,” “ability to conduct independent research,” and so forth.

If self-determination and individual identity could be wrested from the grip of practice by a conscious engagement with system, so too could truth, and the virtue that comes with truth. Beyond

emancipating one from the chains of social habit, systematicity also furnished an instrument for attaining a knowledge and moral sense untarnished by the contingencies of circumstance.

Truth and System

The cognitive technologies spawned by the print revolution exhibit the same recourse to system as the programs of self-emancipation and identity formation, but they are motivated by the search for objective truth and absolute certainty. They similarly seek to escape from the blinders of habit and traditional authority by situating themselves in a consciously elaborated, rigorously monitored system of inquiry, whose principles and past would be continually reassessed in accordance with the larger economy of which they partake. Two very different implementations of this logic can be found in the scientific method and Cartesian rationalism. In both, the legitimacy of truth was derived from adherence to strict methodologies and protocols. Truth came from systematicity and the rationalization of assumptions and procedures, even when it was envisioned as a way of approaching divine intention.

Bacon's call for a new science in his 1620 *Novum Organum* is one clear expression of this principle. His strategy for understanding the laws governing the natural world relied on an experimental practice that was itself resolutely systematic: the inductive method of controlled experiment. Bacon sought to purify his system of both existing traditions and human volition itself, by grounding it entirely in a methodology of incremental induction. He deliberately repositioned authority and truth in quantifiable relationships or systems by proposing "laws" that were not derived from the pronouncements of rulers or the injunctions of the church, but from the observable systematic mechanisms of phenomena in the natural world, such as the expansion of gases when heated. These natural laws operated in a predictable and self-sustaining fashion independently of human agency or intent, and they could accordingly be grasped only through procedures of rigorous observation, measurement, and calculation that purged understanding of customary bias and substituted for it the impersonal laws of mathematics.

The product of such discipline is knowledge – not knowledge of the kind one receives through revelation or faith, but knowledge as accumulating sets of interlocking propositions that are constantly evolving in the wake of experience. Knowledge, in short, that is structured like social practice, with the exception that it is elaborated self-consciously in writing.

For Bacon the greatest form of human service is to contribute to this growing body of knowledge. Our duty to God and our species is to increase our knowledge: “the human race should be steadily enriched with new works and powers,” for “it is this glory of discovery that is the true ornament of mankind.”⁷ There is thus an implicit ethic or program of moral conduct built into his science. The first step in this program involves redefining knowledge itself as the fruit of an initiative that continually interrogates its foundations and procedures of inquiry. This self-conscious disciplinary ethic anticipates the programs of self-realization that dominate subsequent cultural theory – the ideal that finds the highest human purpose and identity in disciplined rational inquiry. Although Bacon is primarily interested in learning about the natural order, the imperative to learn which he articulates will be generalized during the Enlightenment to all members of society, thus fostering both the concept of civilization as an endless process towards knowledge and the ethic of individual self-perfection that goes with that ideal.

Descartes similarly appropriates the authority of systematicity. His celebrated formulation of rational analysis in his 1637 *Discourse on Method* clearly partakes of a similar ethic of self-perfection through inquiry: “I have formed a method by means of which, it seems to me, I have the ways to increase my knowledge by degrees and to raise it gradually to the highest point to which the mediocrity of my mind and the short span of my life can allow it to attain.”⁸ Reflecting the early modern wariness with respect to custom, his search for certainty grows directly out of a skepticism with respect to received truth, gained during his extensive prior studies and travels: “on realizing that many things, although they seemed very extravagant and ridiculous to us, did not cease being commonly accepted and approved by other great peoples, I learned to believe nothing very firmly concerning what I had been persuaded to believe only by example and custom.”⁹

Descartes' desire "once and for all to get all the beliefs I had accepted from birth out of my mind" is, as Ernest Gellner points out, a systematic reaction to what we today would call "culture."¹⁰ However, by purging his thought of personal experience, Descartes obtains a new measure of personal autonomy in the form of absolute certainty. For what emerges as the ground of certainty once all other forms of knowing have been excluded is the *cogito* or thinking mind. Paradoxically, it is the systematic disqualification of individual perceptions, sensations, and memories in favor of pure disembodied logic which allows the individual mind to assume its position of primacy.

Cases like Bacon and Descartes confirm that while the role of social practice in the production of truth was still in dispute by the seventeenth century, belief in systematicity *per se* as the foundation for knowledge and self-realization had become widespread. The concept of culture that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has its foundation in this primacy of system. Theoreticians of culture saw the entire collective practice of a community as a coherent system, the understanding of which (learning about one's culture) led to the acquisition of virtue and the realization of one's finality (becoming educated or "cultured").

Although fundamentally opposed to this redirection of understanding towards social practice, Descartes nonetheless shares one of its basic assumptions: that autonomous thought and certainty can only occur within the matrix of an impersonal system – in his case logic and mathematics, in others grammar, the natural order, law, the market. Early modern society increasingly saw itself as an array of individual agents who acknowledged the primacy of, and elaborated their individuality in, shared discourse, customs, traditions, usages, forms of dress, speech, commerce – in short, in all of the interlocking systems of practice and meaning we now lump together as culture.

As the examples of Erasmus, Bacon, and Descartes dramatize, within this perspective the individual is not the opposite but the obverse or logical correlate of the systematic: systematic principles govern individual cognitive initiatives, but they also find their articulation in such initiatives. It is the dialectic between personal formulation and impersonal system which produces truth, virtue and, in later formulations, history. This is why Descartes struc-

tures his essay not as universal recipe – although it clearly is one – but merely as the presentation of his life “as if in a picture, so that each person may judge it.” Like all discourse, the *Discourse* is from one point of view “merely a history – or if you prefer a fable” – the account of one individual’s endeavors.¹¹ Yet to the extent that such endeavors underwrite and make manifest for the community a larger impersonal grammar of truth, they establish the identity and the “author-ity” of the individual.

Universalizing Critique

There is an implicit ethic and teleology embedded in the systematic strategies of rationalism and the new science. Their identification of knowledge and truth with method, rather than individual genius or divine revelation, opens intellectual inquiry and the pursuit of truth to any person capable of mastering the method – not just those predestined to the truth by their birth or fortune. And because the truth brings with it a clearer perception of the divine plan and presence, this option is really a moral imperative: if we can become better people by improving our knowledge, we ought all devote some portion of our energies to this task.

This tacit moral imperative aligns self-betterment not with more intense piety, but more disciplined inquiry; it sees virtue in the effort to understand one’s self and the world. This is of course a venerable classical ideal, but one that prior to the early modern period had not been applied universally to people of all classes. In the Enlightenment it will be. What allows this is the universalization of reason.

In the opening lines of the *Discourse on Method* Descartes roundly declares that “the power of judging rightly and of distinguishing the true from the false (which, properly speaking, is what people call good sense or reason) is naturally equal in all men.”¹² Humanity at large is thus invested with the possibilities of rational inquiry, autonomous judgment, self-reflexivity, and self-perfection which in the past had been pursued as an ideal only by a minority.

This is a simple extension of the Humanist ideal of self-cultivation, but it has profound political and ethical consequences.

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As Schiller will note at the close of the eighteenth century, to universalize reason is to broaden the political mandate:

a question which was formerly answered only by the blind right of the stronger is now, it appears, being brought before the tribunal of reason, and anyone who is capable of putting himself in a central position, and raising himself from an individual into a representative of the specie, may regard himself as an assessor at this court of reason . . . judgment is to be given according to laws which he, as a rational spirit, is himself competent and entitled to dictate.¹³

Once it is identified as an intrinsic feature of being human and associated with the production and judgment of law, the exercise of reason ceases being an option. For individuals it becomes an imperative; for the state, a right and an activity that needs to be regulated.

Given its importance, it is not surprising that reason ultimately leads to an ethics of continual education, designed both to exercise and perfect it, and to deploy its power towards its rightful objects. For as Hobbes makes clear, reason is not something one merely possesses; it must also be *cultivated*: “Reason is not as Sense, and Memory, borne with us; nor gotten by Experience onely, as Prudence is; but attained by Industry.”¹⁴ If for Descartes reason is something equal in all of us but requiring a firm method to attain the truth, for Hobbes it is a faculty honed by systematic application; for both, it is inseparable from method, and its ultimate end is the increase of science, or knowledge.

As this line of thought develops over the course of the next few centuries, the purpose of human life is increasingly identified with a process of continual self-conscious rational inquiry and critique, the object of which is not only the natural world, but increasingly society itself, with its political and economic structures. The collaborative disciplinary logic of the new science, the analytic rationality of Descartes, are turned to understanding human institutions and practices, imparting order into the infinite diversity of social life. Just as Bacon had argued that man’s purpose in this world included apprehending God’s perfection through an understanding of the natural order he had created, the Enlightenment would seek higher principles for the laws of

the social order and locate the natural finality of humanity in the critical understanding of its own history, institutions, and prejudices.

This specification of social life as process and object of inquiry could never have occurred without the prior constitution of the social and moral realms as domains of knowledge distinct from the political and theological. Reinhart Koselleck has convincingly argued that this occurred in conjunction with the generalized ethic of critique that emerged in the early modern period. What enabled this in the first instance was the separation of the moral and religious domains from the political, following the wars of religion. Concerned to effect a lasting peace in the face of irreconcilable differences of creed, people devised the notion of a secular sovereign to whom they would pledge allegiance independently of their religious beliefs. Separating the political from the religious and moral realms, they retained for themselves the right to determine matters of conscience and morality, while granting the sovereign absolute power in things political.¹⁵

Thus was born the absolute state, but also a third domain of law from the political and theological – the “philosophical” – within which normal people could exercise a form of social legislation in the judgments they leveled at their peers. Koselleck locates the key moment in this development near the end of the seventeenth century when, under the influence of authors such as Locke, the right of expressing one’s private opinions, one’s praise or blame, becomes a duty for the citizens, on the assumption that “it is only in their independent judgment that the power of society is constituted, and only in the constant exercise of moral censure will this censure prove to be a law.”¹⁶ Ultimately, this imperative to critique will expand its purview to include the morality of the political compact which spawned it, thus calling into question the validity of absolutism and precipitating Europe into a protracted crisis of authority.

The modern legacy of these developments is the pervasive ethic of critique which we associate with cultivated persons, whose familiarity with the traditions of their society entitles them to determine the meaning and value of its practices and expressions. Like the new science, which extracts natural laws from the rigorous observation of the natural world, social critique examines variations in social phenomena. And it similarly grounds its

claim to truth in an analytic protocol that continually reassesses its own procedures and assumptions.

Critique presumes that by grasping and dissecting one's immersion in practice one can somehow gain exemption from its grip. This assumption funds the growing tendency during the period in question to associate the repudiation of custom and tradition with a higher form of subjectivity and virtue. Two centuries later this will have become the hallmark of the cultivated person, finding expression in the privileging of originality, dissent, resistance, the rupture of the modern, the marginal, and so forth. Already in Descartes and Bacon we can detect this move. While each defends his project in terms of its revelation of God or his works, what secures this access for them, and thus implicitly assures them of their moral rectitude, is their vaunted repudiation of the law of custom.

Bacon's aversion to custom is profound and blatant. "Inveterate prejudices [are] like the delusions of the insane," he declares bluntly, counseling that "the safest oracle for the future lies in the rejection of the past. Current theories, opinions, notions, should be brushed aside, so far as a disciplined firmness of mind may be able to achieve it; and the understanding must be brought into contact with facts in a straightforward unprejudiced way."¹⁷ Born merely of time, repetition, and routine, prejudices are not merely by-products of history, but positive obstacles to truth, and hence to the discovery of the good. What people do without thinking, the things they accept without reflection, their unconscious habits and collective customs, the received opinions and reflexes of belief that permeate and regulate their world – these are increasingly thought of as manifestations of an authority all the more pernicious for its omnipresence and concealment in everyday life.

As one approaches the Enlightenment, belief that has not been tested in the crucible of rational analysis is increasingly denigrated as deleterious to the soul and spirit. Kant in fact defines enlightenment as the overcoming of prejudice and superstition, thus confirming the elevation of self-consciousness into the primordial virtue. Only if one acknowledges the extent to which shared practice affects one's beliefs and knowledge, can one gain some measure of exemption from the delusions of custom and habit, and thus some greater prize on the truth.

This epistemological edge in turn distinguishes one from one's

socially embedded contemporaries, as Descartes shows us. To establish a rational basis for knowledge, his first move is to systematically rid himself of received ideas: “I could not do better than to try once and for all to get all the beliefs I had accepted from birth out of my mind, so that once I have reconciled them with reason I might again set up either other, better ones or even the same ones.”¹⁸ However, almost immediately he adds that “the single resolution to detach oneself from all the beliefs one has once accepted as true is not an example that everyone ought to follow.”¹⁹ As it turns out, most people are better advised following customary truth, either because they do not have the capacities they imagine, or conversely, because they cannot imagine themselves more capable than those from whom they receive instruction. What makes Descartes different is precisely his acute *awareness* of the customary basis of knowledge:

having learned since my school days that one cannot imagine anything so strange or unbelievable that it has not been said by some philosopher, and since then, during my travels, having acknowledged that those who have feelings quite contrary to our own are not for that reason barbarians or savages, but that many of them use their reason as much as or more than we do . . . [and that] it is more custom and example that persuades us than certain knowledge, and for all that, the majority opinion is not a proof worth anything for truths that are a bit difficult to discover, since it is more likely that only one man has found them than a whole people: I could find no one whose opinions, it seemed to me, ought to be preferred over the other, and I found myself constrained to try to lead myself on my own.²⁰

Descartes claims cognitive and moral autonomy on the basis of his theoretical conviction that received opinion undergirds most of what we take as truth, and that conviction is in turn based on his personal experience with other sets of collective practices – what we would call other cultures. In a gesture that will become paradigmatic for generations to come, he founds the right to develop his own procedures of inquiry on a logical sleight of hand: he acknowledges that truth is always hostage to the shared reflexes of custom and opinion, but exempts his own inquiry from that limitation on the grounds of that acknowledgment and

its double appeal to self-awareness and broad experience with other customs.

Both Descartes' rationalism and the new science anticipate our modern ideologies of self-cultivation in that they see the understanding and rejection of unexamined tradition and custom as a prerequisite to cognitive autonomy. In the place of unconsciously acquired habits they deploy consciously observed procedures and standards, securing exemption from systematic habit through the elaboration of systematic knowledge.

When the ideology of self-cultivation matures at the close of the Enlightenment it will attribute a measure of this self-awareness and critical prerogative to everyone who deliberately engages discursive authority. But the roots of this move are visible well before it is formalized. If early modern writers consistently stress the importance of collective practice after the invention of printing, it is at least in part because they see self-conscious systematicity and the disciplined critique of one's assumptions as a means of suspending or defusing the tyranny of custom and acceding to virtue. Like custom, the consensual truth of discourse is produced in an economy of reiteration by an aggregate of individuals, whose authority in turn derives from the system that validates them. Like custom, conclusions that originate in a discursive community owe their power to their diffusion; and like custom, they can grow stronger or weaker over time. Unlike habit or custom, however, the consensual truth that print promulgates is formulated – and in the case of books, consumed – *self-consciously*. Individuals who choose to express themselves through print must acknowledge and consciously assimilate the collective law that regulates the print community and makes individual expression feasible.

In sum, well before the Enlightenment, the idea of the “individual” – of a mode of personal identity founded on self-conscious conformity to a disciplinary system and systematic critique as a means of overcoming the delusions of unconscious habit and customary prejudice – was already developing. Well before the idea of culture gives theoretical coherence to the notion that collective systems subtend and enable the individual acts that articulate them, discursive practice had already insinuated the logic underlying that idea into the structure of consciousness.

Whatever their differences concerning the value of social practice, all of the forms of discourse cited thus far share – and foster – an ethic of self-awareness and self-betterment through knowledge. The emergence of social practice as a mechanism of determination encompassing *all* people, and which all people felt the need to confront and transcend, made self-consciousness and the critique of one’s habits of belief and inquiry a universal imperative.

Of course there is something superficially paradoxical about claiming that because one can conceptualize the system of strictures within which one works, one can somehow overcome their limitations, but that is the paradox that will ultimately grow into the theory of culture. Perhaps the political version of the paradox is the most intuitively accessible: one finds the greatest freedom in the world with the strongest laws or most powerful sovereign – one thinks of Hobbes, naturally, but also Machiavelli, More, or even Castiglione: “it should not be said that true freedom consists in living as one wishes but rather in living under good laws.”²¹ However, looking ahead, one notes that a version of the same paradox structures our modern appetite for culture: “cultured” people are those who seek distinction and individuality by making explicit the normative strictures of taste.