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OUT OF ISOLATION: PHILOSOPHY, HERMENEUTICS, MULTICULTURALISM

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One source of "the problem" of multiculturalism lies in neither demographic nor anthropological facts about contrasting cultures. It lies in common, unexamined ways of construing the facts. These ways flow from injurious conceptions, distorting pictures of culture. They aid and abet seemingly endless disagreements raging in the name of "multiculturalism." These misconceptions are sole possession neither of the left nor of the right, neither of multi- nor of uniculturalists, but hold both sides hostage. Today, I do not look to judge the political claims advanced by opposing parties. I do hope to bring into court a philosophical brief, the record of long hermeneutic surveillance on some unfortunate imagery. I bring a critique of images, specifically, a critique by contrast. To expose familiar models as unhelpful, I set them off against less familiar but more helpful alternatives, models free of certain negative implications. My less familiar visions of culture are found in the hermeneutic philosophies of Hegel, Heidegger and Gadamer.

The influences of unhelpful models are easily discerned. Here are three citations where they are plainly at work. All three are exerpts from popular academic writings — in the field of education — on culture.

> [1] *Culture* is generally defined as a complex picture of an existing or previously existing society. This picture contains key elements of the belief structures, arts, rules and laws, customs and practices, values and morals, and productive contributions made and adhered to by the members of a given society.[1]
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> [2] To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world.[2]
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> [3] Indeed, the ferment in academe today reflects the fact that Western culture is undergoing a revision forced by groups that have historically found themselves outside its cultural boundaries, yet buffeted by its imperialistic predilections.[3]

The first comes from Johnson *et al, Introduction to the Foundations of American Education* (1991), a standard text for teacher education. I direct your attention to the abortive definition of "culture" as *picture* and remind you that a picture is a fully delimited object of thought convenient for display and exchange, the manner of item I will shortly be calling "a disposable." On my view, culture is not disposable, hence neither picture nor other finite representation.

The second passage is the first line of the preface from Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1988). Here is no explicit definition of "culture." Instead, a definite image is hard at work behind the scenes. From his advocacy of cultural literacy, it is plain that Hirsch's image of culture is that of a database of background knowledge, a storehouse of items mastered by gaining *information*. Hirsch's book concludes with a list of terms the author takes to characterize "the cultural reality."[4] To get along in culture is, by Hirsch's lights, to assimilate all manner of facts. Now, a storehouse may not be as convenient for display and exchange as a simple picture, but it is a completely circumscribable object nonetheless. To my thinking, the logic of culture demands that culture not be a delimited object at all.

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The exerpts from Johnson *et al*. and from Hirsch do, I believe, commit marked errors concerning the nature of culture. More pernicious than actual errors, however, are the potential inferences these concepts of culture may license. The inferences drive us toward questionable visions of multicultural education. For, if culture is either picture, fact or storehouse of fact, then it is ready-made for an education in which teacher and pupil exchange information without themselves changing — or changing very much.

Even if we ignore the complaints to be lodged against a unitary notion of "Western culture," we must note that quotation [3] demands the assimilation of difference in culture to difference in spatial or geographical region. Divergent cultures are here — as elsewhere — viewed as nonoverlapping planar areas, each set off from the others by exclusive boundaries. The difficulties with such an image lie, once again, in a presumption of the finitude of culture and in a disregard for culture's real vastness. Yet more is at stake here: an image of culture as wholly enclosed stands directly in the way of meaningful cross-cultural exchange.

In the sequel, I dissect two unfortunate images, each of which is reflected in the above quotations, each of which presents obstacles to a clear view. The first I call "culture as finite region" and the second "culture as disposable." After preliminary examination, I propose two models alternative to these. One derives from Heidegger's picture of philosophy — in *What is Philosophy?*[5] — as a *path*. The second arises from Hegel's treatment of "home" and "house" in his pedagogical tracts, the *Nürnberger Schriften*.[6] I close with a proposal for the teaching of alternative cultures inspired by Gadamer's appraisal of *Takt* as educational value in his *Truth and Method*.[7]

CULTURE AS FINITE REGION

There is a strong temptation, when contrasting diverse cultures — say, the culture of the Hopi with that of Manhattanites — to think of cultural difference as total spatial incompatibility. This is to think of cultures as isolated, each standing within its own conceptual enclosure, as if quarantined off. Culture comes to look like a bubble, a separate region in conceptual space set off from the others by linear distances or completely surrounded by barriers of thought and language, which we often imagine on the analogy of geographical boundaries. We dream of the thoughts, plans, signals — the entire noetic lives — of the members of each group as subsisting only within cultural barriers and incapable of extending beyond. While under this illusion, we view the actions and reactions of one group as making sense and working effectively within their own cultural enclosure but as either partially or wholly nonsensical if set within the walls of another. This is the mischief of an image of culture as delimited geographical region, as separate and bounded domain, as if one culture were a state like Rhode Island and another like Connecticut.

Certainly, it is natural to address cultural diversity by speaking of "distances between cultures" and "cultural barriers." But these turns of speech and styles of image are not products merely of untutored imagination. Even if born in casual speech, talk of fixed cultural distances finds a home in the writings of cultural experts. Well-known anthropologist Edward T. Hall[8] writes as follows of his time on the Atoll of Truk.

> In addition, I felt it my duty to do what I could to bridge the gap between my own culture and that of the Trukese.[9]

Granted, an image of culture as delimited region would underwrite cultural uniqueness and integrity. But it does so at considerable expense, fees to be paid in the coin of communication and monolithic uniculturalism. If all meaning is tightly enclosed within cultural boundaries, then everything I do gets its meaning only within the strict confines of my own culture, and the prospect for true communication, which — on these nonhermeneutic views — requires shared meanings, is grim. If you think select and attenuated messages, devoid of rich meaning, can be passed between cultures, you must ask, "In which language are we to send those messages?" Or perhaps we can construct *ex nihilo* new means of communication — new interfaces between cultures. E.T. Hall does aver that

cultural "interfaces" can be assembled at the "boundaries"[10] separating cultures. But new contrivances seem poor replacements for regular channels of interchange which are broad, deep and regular.

Worse, the image of culture as finite, geographical region can also be an image of crosscultural fear. As is apparent from quotation [3] above, it lies uncomfortably close to such images as invasion, imperialism, assimilation and colonization. If our meanings are thoroughly hemmed in by culture, we must ask, "How are we to break out of the bubble so as to meet, to form a common understanding, with the other?" At that same moment — in those very words of "breaking out" — we hear echoes of "breaking in" and "breaking down" and, more simply, "breaking." The image of geographical region naturally prompts the frightened questions as well: "How can we break out without damaging our culture?" "If we do break out, haven't we left our own culture behind?" "Do we not, in breaking down, have to break the barriers which guarantee for our own culture its identity and integrity?" And "Do other cultures, perhaps those 'stronger' than our own, now have the opportunity to break in?" Images of geographical isolation, then, abet uniculturalism. The kind of uniculturalism I have in mind demands that there be, for each group, only a single culture and that any accommodation of "alien culture" can only effect the dissipation of home culture, the creation of a "featureless melting pot." But if alternative cultures are modeled as regions isolated in conceptual space, then the move to such a uniculturalism becomes a virtual entailment. Given the finite region picture, one might infer that, just as a person can occupy only one of two disjoint regions at one time, so each person can have only one culture. Also, that picture leads one to think of an appreciation for another culture as a cultural move, requiring departure from the "place" of an original culture, possibly for good. Thankfully, no such picture — of cultures as geographically isolated regions — is accurate.

HEIDEGGER: CULTURE AS PATH

I am not so naive as to think that spatial metaphors, deeply etched into the ground of our thought, can be left wholly behind in conceiving cultural difference. It is natural, even inevitable, to plot differences as distances on a quasispatial map. But there is no need to think always of everyday distance, of inflexible linear displacement. There is no need to think of cultures as regions limited by distance on every side. On some sides, cultures are endless and lead over the horizon. Culture is something around which I cannot draw an intellectual ring. Cultures do have ideate bounds, but they need not be bounded by and away from others. Rather, one culture must lead naturally into others.

An alternative image of culture as unlimited is realized in the thought of Heidegger, who preferred to view the culture of philosophy as an set of unbounded pathways. And, in this way, I suggest, we should try to view a culture as a whole.[11] We might imagine cultures as collections of pathways running this way and that, with variable distances — or, sometimes, with no distances — in between. As I move along one path, other paths and sets of paths draw closer. Others diverge. I can move toward rapprochement with another culture, another path, without leaving the confines of my own. Think of paths in the woods: they intersect. They may seem to go on forever; often I cannot see their ends.

If nothing else, Heidegger's image reminds us of cultural features too often put aside and ignored when we look too long on the finite region image. There is the feature of commonality: the natural state of a culture is not of isolation but of interchange. The second is vastness: no culture can be exhausted, finally and ultimately circumscribed by knowledge. The third is identification: we can only see and know ourselves, as a culture, by looking onto other cultures. It is easy to see these features in Heidegger's idea. To start with, it is of the nature of paths to intersect, to share segments relatively often with others. It can be difficult, at times, to locate an intersection or common segment in a set of paths. (One is occasionally lost in the woods.) The intersections may be a long way off. In fact, more is true: every point in a path, every turning, is a place for a potential intersection, somewhere to find a crossing. Next, it is of the nature of paths to lead us where we cannot see. When

we do not know, precisely, where to go, we simply "follow the path." The path always leads from a present and familiar locale and onto a future — and possibly unfamiliar — one. Lastly, paths are often located in relation to other paths. One is told, "Turn left from the main path and onto the smaller one." It may be that, when the woods are dark, I cannot pick out my path without fixing it within a grid of alternative paths. Perhaps I only learn to study my path's course by watching others moving along their paths, toward me and away.

But do cultures really have these features? What plays the role of Heidegger's paths in a real culture? And from what forest are these paths hewn? In *What is Philosophy?*, Heidegger offers a possible answer: words, conceived as semantic histories, are paths blazed through time and space. For this answer to satisfy, words — thought of as histories — cannot be pieces of syntax. As Bachelard has emphasized, each scientific concept-word names a quiltlike patchwork of conceptual artifacts from earlier eras. He wrote, "Science is like a half-renovated city, wherein the new…stands side-by-side with the old."[12] And what he said of scientific words is true generally; this is something Heidegger realized. Just think of the profusion of lexical borrowings that make up the "English" language, of the words "algorithm," "okra" and "pundit." These are obvious histories, for words do not easily travel from one speech to another unaccompanied by a conceptual, technical and administrative entourage. Needless to say, if "my" words and their concepts are a crosscultural heritage, then so are "my" thoughts. I cannot think without thinking through other times, other cultures.

Heidegger's words — viewed diachronically as histories — do possess the features of commonality, vastness and identification. Look into a dictionary. Each entry is a multiple intersection of wordpaths wherein words, of my own language and of others, come together. The lexical path of "culture" joins, for example, that of the Latin "cultus." The path of "tact" runs right into that of "Takt" and, further, of "tangere." Second, when it comes to the ken of a word, there is no circumferential line to be drawn in our knowledge. Nothing is to be walled off, *a priori*, as irrelevant to word mastery. (This is, indeed, the very idea of the all-encompassing hermeneutic circle.) Moreover, a word-history often extends over an horizon; for most words are unlike "radar" and "hello." We cannot see all the way to their beginnings. Lastly, if I identify a word through its definition, explication or mastery, this identification comes in the form of other words, other symbols. Only by relation to the latter words do I locate myself with the former. Indeed, without these other words — these other paths — there is no mastery of any. Just try distinguishing "divan" from "chaise lounge" without using other words.

But do not take a wrong turn on Heidegger's path. Do not think that this mastery of words — as of paths — is a psychological matter or a simple one. To travel a true wordpath is tremendously hard. Think how hard it would be to find true ways beginning from our word "virtue" and ending with Meno's word "*arete*"?

DISPOSING OF DISPOSABLE CULTURE: A PARADOX

I return to one of untoward images of culture with which I began, the image of culture as information. Perhaps to encourage multicultural education, some are tempted to think that crucial for culture is "cultural information" and that this information is aptly represented in textbooks, museum displays and video tapes. The temptation is natural. It is often through information-bearing media that we first acquaint children with culture. The same temptation is visible in the quotation from E.D. Hirsch. I would gloss "information" so as to include words, sentences, theories, pictures: anything fully transmittable from source to receiver. These items — words and such — are here construed as pieces of syntax rather than as histories; no real history is fully transmittable.

To catch the dangers inherent in the informational picture of culture and to fashion a frame in which to display them, I offer a term of art: "culture as disposable." By "disposable" in this sentence, I do not necessarily mean "treatable as refuse." Rather, when culture appears disposable, it appears as vassal to our casual dispositions — with emphasis on the "casual." Disposables are subject to

manipulation, reshaping and displacement under the direction of individual or intersubjective controls. The word "disposable" bears this sense in the phrase "disposable income." Its Latin root, "disponere," already points in the right direction. "Disponere" meant "to arrange or to alter in place." It speaks of those things which maintain limited permanence and stand fully open to transmission, which bear no intrinsic relation to particular location. High on the list of disposables are such artifacts as pencils or automobiles. Also on the list are books, their contents, stories, bits of information. So, if culture is completely representable as information — as messages to be sent or stored — it is obvious that culture is a disposable, is subject to group or to individual whim and is prey to the ready enhancements, reinterpretations and corruptions to which information is prone. (By the way, this history of "disponere" is a fine example of the useful intersection among cultural paths.)

But culture is not a ready disposable. As the spatial metaphors for culture do rightly reflect, culture is not open for transmission since culture maintains a definite but abstract tie to particular place. A cross-cultural clue to the nature of this tie is in the history of the word "culture" itself and in its relation to "agriculture" and "horticulture." "Culture," in the Latin "cultura" and "cultus," names that which comes with the care of the soil in a place. And that which comes with the soil is connected intrinsically to it. But here I do not mean, simply, physical or geographic place — lest I lapse back into the finite region model. Culture is akin to linguistic, technological and ideological mastery of place. Culture is the means of getting around in a place, of making it one's very own, of making oneself at home. To be fully at home in a place is to exercise mastery there and this mastery, these techniques for getting around in a place, are not wholly representable in textbook accounts, in travelogues, in museum displays. They are as little information to be disposed as was the *cultus* of the Romans. That which comes with the care of the soil in a place cannot be replaced by information.

This conclusion may not be obvious. You might object that one can always draw maps of new places. One can take pictures. In response, I remind you that maps, drawings, accounts and pictures are not culturally neutral. They are themselves cultural artifacts. We must first know how to read them and to apply them and that, too, is part of getting around in a place. The ability to read a picture is not just an ability to see a picture. One has to see the important things in the picture. Think, in this regard, of medieval maps, wherein — at least to our eyes — decoration and geography get thoroughly mixed. You cannot respond to this by saying, "Well, I just include instructions on reading the pictures or charts by writing them into the margins." This is nothing but more to be read, no more transparent or self-intimating than the original maps and drawings and means for reading these. The full mastery I need to find my way around in a map cannot be fully displayed on that map. There is, therefore, something noninformational, something conceivable only as intrinsic, nondisposable orientation to place within every culture. By the way, this conclusion reinforces a feature of culture-as-paths: paths can extend beyond my present sight; they are not circumscribable by knowledge.

Once you see culture as nondisposable, you also see the paradoxicality in strictly informational approaches to multiculturalism. If we are guided by a vision of culture as wholly disposable, as fully available through textbooks, through schools as institutions of discursive learning, through videos or museums, then the more we succeed in "educating" our students in line with our vision, the more likely it is that we falsify and obscure those cultures. The more we try to encode cultures as information, as arrays of beliefs to be inculcated, the more we prove unfaithful to those very things we hope to convey. This is because of the noninformational aspects of every culture, that aspect which is tied to place, and uncircumscribed by knowledge. Culture in itself is not disposable; to treat it otherwise is to corrupt it. Hence, the paradox is this: the more we try to put cultures across to students through informational media, the more we distort an important aspect of culture, culture as nondisposable.

HOME-AS-OPPOSED-TO-HOUSE: HEGEL ON CULTURE

Geographical metaphors of culture are not wholly misguided. Although cultures are not regions delimited in mind, they do bear intimate abstract relations to special places. They are somehow attached to the geography. This is one among Hegel's thoughts on the pedagogy of culture, a thought happily reinforcing conclusions already drawn. It reechoes two themes prominent in our Heideggerian conception of culture: that culture is a tracing-out, historically, of potential commonalities with others and, second, that the very idea of a single, self-conscious culture requires, for its identity, comparison against alternatives. Here is what Hegel had to say, as paraphrased by Gadamer:

> To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical edification, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of edification that begins much earlier.[13]

Hegel lodges a number of points simultaneously. I treat that of culture-as-home here and postpone that of edification — and cultural education generally — to the next section. First, Hegel insists that culture is not a concrete location, such as a particular house, which I enter readily or leave, less readily build or destroy. My culture is a more abstract spot: a home. Home in Hegel is where spirit eventually rests. An official city map will not direct me to this place; it is false that no map will do so.

Second, Hegel sees that one only comes to recognize and to appreciate a culture — even a home culture — by reflection in and upon others. I must "recognize my own in the alien," he wrote. Nowadays, this may count as an anthropological truism. Yet, it is a truism oft neglected in heated debates over multiculturalism. I emphasize that Hegel is doing more than reiterating the self-identification aspect of the path model: that there are no other landmarks by which to locate the course of our path except by looking to other paths. To recognize my own in the alien is not just a matter of looking or even of physical movement. The meetings of cultures required for the self-consciousness of any one culture are not like moving houses. In Hegel, it is a much harder task: making a home for oneself in the alien. We take on alternative cultures by finding homes there — in that new culture — and by returning to ourselves thereby.

Importantly, the prospect for self-recognition within the home of another is not something incidental for Hegel, a matter which "it would be nice to have but we can do without." Our very cultural spirit "consists only in returning to itself from what is other." To be truly at home in one place requires us to make ourselves at home in many places.

TAKT: ON TEACHING MULTICULTURALLY

All this prompts a final question, "If I am not to reduce mastery of culture to texts and images to be set before students, then what am I to do in the classroom? How are alternative cultures to be taught?" In answer, I refer to an idea of Helmholtz, also taken up by Gadamer, the idea of *Takt*. In its original form, *Takt* in Helmholtz governed the understanding of historical periods relatively distant in time. However, its extension to contemporary alternative cultures is immediate. Before we go further, I caution you not to conflate *Takt* with its English cognate, tact. Tact, in the latter sense, is that by which you navigate the waters of privileged conversation and matters diplomatic. *Takt* in Gadamer is the development of that nonsubjective potential in us all by which we obey Hegel's command to find homes in the alien and to return to ourselves there. *Takt*, then, is akin to a geographic facility, a way of looking around. To be at fully home, I must have mastered my place. But that is not all. *Takt* is not merely uninformed looking or openmouthed gaping. It draws aid from information, from maps or guides, but cannot be replaced by them. Gadamer writes of *Takt* as

> keeping oneself open to what is other — to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality.[14]

The architectural coloring of Gadamer's remark is no accident. The education of *Takt* includes the process of edification, of creating in oneself aesthetic discernment. And a technical knowledge — say, of art — is surely relevant. But that is not all. To quote Gadamer again,

> For the *Takt* which functions in the human sciences is not simply a feeling and unconscious, but is at the same time a mode of knowing and a mode of being.… What Helmholtz calls *Takt* includes edification and is a function of both aesthetic and historical learning.[15]

With *Takt*, one must be "open to what is other." But this openness is as much a moral virtue as it is a cognitive attainment. To put it in a summary way, *Takt* is nothing less than complete mastery of a home in the alien. It is wholistic; it extends beyond the boundaries set by any one academic subject, for my intellectual home is broader than any one theme. It is not captured in bits of information. In part, this is because of the word "edification"'s history; it leads us into "aedificere," the Latin word for building a sacred place. And a place is not a piece of information. *Takt* is not a single judgment or set of judgments but requires a style of judging, the style I exhibit in learning to build on that place. It is the style I exhibit in my mastery. Needless to say, it is aesthetic.

Lastly, a *caveat*. Just as any proper edification must take up the other, any real edification is, therefore, inherently multicultural. But this is not a conservative conclusion, a facile reassertion of a status quo. To assert that any real edification is multicultural is *not* to assert the same thing of any education. American education does not often possess the aesthetic and moral core of edification. It is unlikely to gain that core if separate courses in aesthetics or morals are appended to existing curricula. It is unlikely to gain it through the addition of further "factual" information. For we can no longer walk the path leading back to that abstract place where Romans once said — and meant — "aedificere."

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[1] J.A. Johnson, et al., *Introduction to the Foundations of American Education*, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 108.

[2] E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988), xiii.

[3] Mary Kalantzis and William Cope, "Multiculturalism May Prove to Be the Key Issue of Our Epoch," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 39 (November 4, 1992): B3-B5.

[4] Hirsch, 147.

[5] Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. W. Kluback and J. Wilde (Albany, New York: New College and University Press, 1956), 29

[6] G.W.F. Hegel, "1809 Address," in *Nurnberger Schriften*, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Leipzig: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1938), 312.

[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and S.G. Marshall (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 9-19.

[8] Edward T. Hall, "Unstated Features of the Cultural Context of Learning," in *Reflections on American Education*, ed. J.A. Johnson, et al. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 37-41.

[9] Hall, 37.

[10] Hall, 41.

[11] Heidegger, 29.

[12] G. Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 7.

[13] Gadamer, 14. Here, I rely heavily upon Gadamer's exegesis of Hegel. I am not pretending to offer a treatment of Hegel's theory of pedagogy, which is the subject of the "1809 Address."

[14] Gadamer, 17.

[15] Gadamer, 16-17.