



A Note on the Beginnings of Cultural History

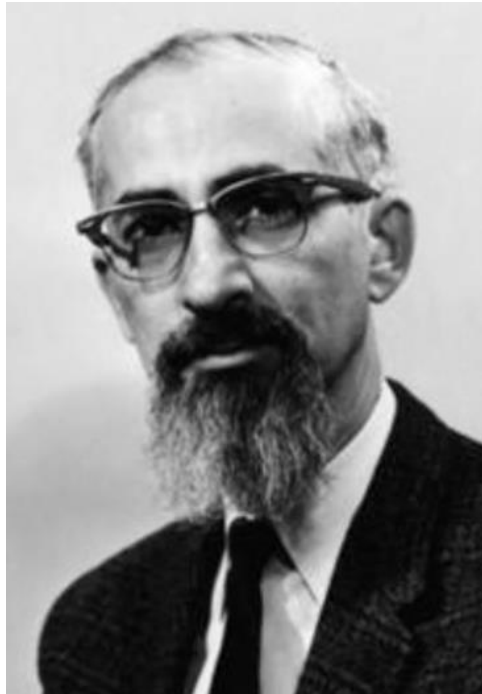
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A Note on the Beginnings of Cultural History

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Abraham Kaplan

I WANT to address myself briefly to one of the points made by Professor Kaplan, not by way of criticism but by way of elucidation; it also partly bears on the discussion this morning by Professor Ricoeur and Professor Taylor.

I wish to tell a story. If history is ever philosophy teaching by examples, this story about the beginnings of cultural history might perhaps be an illustration of this function. It began, as far as I know, some time in the fifteenth century, earlier than is usually supposed. As everyone knows, during the Renaissance there was a tremendous rise of interest in the classical world. So far as we can tell – and, of course, evidence for these impressions is seldom decisive and we do not always know exactly how to interpret it – the interest of the

Renaissance in the classical world was not primarily historical. It was supposed that the Romans or the Greeks knew the answers to some of the perennial questions of men – about how life should be lived, or what made works of art beautiful, or how buildings and cities should be built, or what legal or political systems would ensure order and justice. It was believed that these great truths had been distorted in the Middle Ages by the Church, by monkish superstitions, by clerical interests and the like, with which they were all too familiar, and which they deeply disliked and, indeed, despised. They therefore wished to rescue classical texts, and the truths they contained, from the corrupt versions which they thought came into being partly by accident, partly as a result of deliberate distortion by fanatical or unscrupulous editors.

To this end they began to restore and emend classical texts. They proceeded by the best scientific methods that were open to them, by comparing words and usages and structures, and so working out certain rules of grammar and style in the best Baconian manner. This led to an inductive discipline by which they established the etymology, syntax, use and meaning of certain key words and expressions, a method still in use. The lawyers were particularly concerned with this, since they thought that Justinian's seventy-five editors had turned the entire corpus of Roman law [39] into a vast chronological chaos: jurisprudence of different periods had been confused, jumbled together, and needed sorting out. They set to work to achieve this.

In the course of these labours they appear to have discovered that the classical world, so far from a world which all wise men could recognise as being the repository of timeless values, was a far stranger world than they expected, not at all like their own. This produced a sense of the possibility, indeed, the reality, of alternative cultures, rather the sort of thing that Professor Taylor talked about this morning, namely, that there existed a whole world, with social and personal relationships, moral, intellectual and political values, significantly different from their own, but which, nevertheless, formed a coherent whole: a world which needed interpretation, but could not be interpreted fully within the concepts or ideals of their own civilisation.

This story has been told by others, particularly well by Professor J. G. A. Pocock, who has written an excellent chapter on it. The sense of sharp contrast between their own culture and that of the

classical world emerges in the new tone to be found in the writings of prominent French jurists, especially the reformers among them, in the late sixteenth century, who tend to say that they are not concerned with the rules of Roman law, that it is not authoritative for them; that Rome was Rome, while they were what they were; and what was Rome to them? This was a revolutionary thing to declare, since Rome hitherto had been close to being regarded as an almost ideal civilisation, the best social structure yet established by men. If Rome were simply a different and alien order of being, not relevant to the lives of Frenchmen, Germans, Flemings, the appeals to Roman law, whether they were made by the champions of the papacy or the empire, no longer carried decisive weight.

Yet it all began with the wish merely to reconstruct the meanings of words. I am addressing this to Professor Kaplan because this is the locus at which purely technical research to establish facts about, let us say, Norsemen in Minnesota, which he mentioned, or to restore a particular word in the fourth line of a particular chapter of an ancient text – which began as a pure piece of detective work, quite unconnected with large cultural considerations – can by degrees become part of a general attempt to interpret a complete culture: the line he drew between these enterprises does not always hold.

[40] When Renaissance scholars began to reconstruct legal texts, and came to concepts like manumission, for example, they began to ask themselves what exactly manumission was, and therefore what slavery was, and therefore what ownership and property relations were, and therefore what kind of structure of society it was in which slaves occurred, for what reason and in what circumstances slaves were manumitted, and how and why, and what kind of social structure it was that emerged from the differences of status between various classes in Roman society.

Thus what appeared to be mere textual reconstruction, sheer work of grammatical emendation, ended by revealing vast new horizons. This is how, for example, the Donation of Constantine was shown to be a forgery. The Donation of Constantine was, of course, very important in the great medieval conflict of authority, the struggle for supremacy between the Emperor and the Pope. But its exposure as a forgery by Valla or Dumoulin rests on mainly grammatical considerations, which in their turn rest upon the interpretation of the meanings of words, which in their turn rest

A NOTE ON THE BEGINNINGS OF CULTURAL HISTORY

upon the consideration of the meanings of these words within the specific context of what had begun to be a gradual reconstruction of the social history of Constantine's Rome, not, indeed, by narrative historians, but by Renaissance lawyers and antiquaries in search of something quite different. That is why I do not think the two activities, *pave* Professor Kaplan, can be clearly distinguished from one another.

In a sense, of course, these lawyers were politically motivated. They wished to abolish the relics of the Middle Ages, to reform their own societies, to resist the centralising ambitions of the Pope, or the Emperor, or even, at times, the King of France. But the actual work which they performed was the reconstruction of another civilisation which, by the end of the sixteenth century, was conceived as somewhat alien to their own. The very notion that there was more than one human civilisation, that there could exist cultures equally complete and developed yet different, that human nature was therefore not, in some sense, unchanging: that words did not mean the same at different times in different circumstances; that cultural conditions could be different, and could be understood only in terms of the contrast with, or differences from, one another, began in Renaissance scholarship. This is the true beginning of the revolution promoted by Herder and Hegel, of which Charles Taylor spoke so eloquently in his paper. Odd, but, I think, true.

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