

Matthew Arnold: Culture and Anarchy (1869)

Culture is properly described as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a study of perfection. The idea of perfection as an inward condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilization. The idea of perfection as a general expansion of the human family is at variance with our strong individualism, our hatred of all limits to the individual's personality, our maxim of 'every man for himself.' The idea of perfection as an harmonious expansion of human nature is at variance with our lack of flexibility, with our inaptitude for seeing more than one side of a thing.

The idea which culture sets before us of perfection—an increased spiritual activity, having for its characters increased sweetness, increased light, increased life, increased sympathy—is an idea which the new democracy needs far more than the idea of the franchise, or the wonderfulness of industrial performances.

We have got three distinct terms, Barbarians, Philistines, Populace, to denote roughly the three great classes into which our society is divided [the aristocrats, the middle class and the working class, respectively]. All of us, so far as we are Barbarians, Philistines, or Populace, imagine happiness to consist in doing what one's ordinary self likes. What one's ordinary self likes differs according to the class to which one belongs, and has its more serious and its lighter side. The graver self of the Barbarian likes honours and consideration; his more relaxed self, field-sports and pleasure. The graver self of one kind of Philistine likes business and money-making; his more relaxed self, comfort and tea-meetings. The sterner self of the Populace likes bawling, hustling, and smashing; the lighter self, beer. But in each class there are born a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self, with a bent for seeing things as they are, for disentangling themselves from machinery; for the pursuit, in a word, of perfection. To certain manifestations of this love for perfection people have accustomed themselves to give the name of genius; implying, by this name, something original and heaven-bestowed in the passion. But the passion is to be

found in many manifestations; culture being the true nurse of the pursuing love, and sweetness and light the true character of the pursued perfection. Natures with this bent emerge in all classes—among the Barbarians, among the Philistines, among the Populace. And this bent always tends, as I have said, to take them out of their class, and to make their distinguishing characteristic not their Barbarianism or their Philistinism, but their humanity.

The modern spirit has now almost entirely dissolved feudal habits of deference, and the anarchical tendency of our worship of freedom in and for itself, of our superstitious faith in machinery, is becoming very manifest. More and more, because of this our blind faith in machinery, because of our inability to look beyond machinery to the end for which machinery is valuable, this and that man, and this and that body of men, all over the country, are beginning to assert and put in practice an Englishman's right to do what he likes; his right to march where he likes, meet where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes. All this, I say, tends to anarchy.

Now, if culture, which simply means trying to perfect oneself, and one's mind as part of oneself, brings us light, and if light shows us that there is nothing so very blessed in merely doing as one likes, that the worship of the mere freedom to do as one likes is worship of machinery, that the really blessed thing is to like what right reason ordains, and to follow her authority, then we have got a practical benefit out of culture. We have got a much wanted principle, a principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening us.