

# Matthew Arnold's Culture and Anarchy : A Review

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Culture and Anarchy (1869) is Matthew Arnold's chief work in the field of social criticism. As J.D.Jump puts it in his article on Arnold (contributed to The Pelican Guide to English Literature – from Dickens to Hardy<sup>1</sup>), "Culture and Anarchy, in particular, is the wisest and wittiest of his longer prose works. His lively comic sense, wide acquaintance with English life, quick perception, alert intelligence, and fundamental seriousness are all evident in it; and there is no better instance of his cool, elegant, sinuous and mischievously ironical prose."

Cultural and Anarchy is basically a collection of various essays, the main thought of which had already been published in his early articles. It was more of a bringing together and expansion of what he had already thought and written, with a Preface and a Conclusion added to give a book-like structure to the scattered whole.

Culture and Anarchy is divided into six chapters —

Arnold's treatment of Culture as something endowed with 'Sweetness and Light', a phrase, which he frequently uses throughout the book (also the title of a chapter), forms the content of the first chapter.

The second chapter, *Doing As One Likes*, deals with 'an Englishman's heaven-born privilege of doing as he likes' or his firm belief 'that it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to be able to do as he likes'.

Arnold, further, classifies the English society into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace (in the third chapter of the same name) who stood for the aristocrats, middle-class, and the working class respectively.

In the fourth chapter Arnold deals with 'Hebraism and Hellenism' (also the name of the chapter), the former being more favoured among the Englishmen than the latter. The fifth and the sixth chapters are entitled *Unum est Necessarium* ('The One Thing Needful') and *Our Liberal Practitioners* respectively.

Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* emphasizes on the importance of culture which 'is then properly described . . . As having its origin in the love of perfection: it is a study of perfection.' Culture brings us to conceive "a harmonious perfection, a perfection in which the characters of beauty and intelligence, are both present, which unites 'the two noblest things'. . . Sweetness and light." Arnold adopts this phrase Sweetness and light from the quarrel, in Swift's *The Battle of Books*, between the Spider and the Bee, the former representing the moderns and the latter the ancients. Aesop favours the Bee: 'The difference is that, instead of dirt and

poison, we have rather chosen to fill our lives with honey and wax, thus refurbishing mankind with the two noblest of things, sweetness and light.' Arnold advocates the importance of culture without which human perfection is impossible and which is not satisfied until and unless it has perfected all humanity:

"The pursuit of perfection, then, is the pursuit of sweetness and light. He who works for sweetness and light, works to make reason and will of God prevail. He, who works for the machinery, he who works for hatred, works only for confusion. Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred; culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater!—the passion for making them prevail. It is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light." <sup>2</sup>

All arts including Literature can lead to happy moments of humanity only when the people are endowed with a true sense of beauty and intelligence, when there is a true 'national glow'. Many writers tend to supply masses with what they refer to as 'intellectual food prepared and adapted in the way they think proper for the actual condition of the masses'. Religious and political organizations on the other hand, 'indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgements constituting the creed of their own profession or party.'

Culture, however, works in a different manner by not imparting knowledge for its own sake; 'it seeks to do away with the classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light' and thus 'the men of culture are the true apostles of equality.'

Arnold objects to the prevalent notion cherished by the English 'that it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to be able to do as he likes' as it is primarily this strong individualism that inhibits the perfection of humanity. In this context, he refers ironically to the anti-catholic lectures of William Murphy, at Birmingham, which provoked riots but Murphy insisted on his right to speech:—

"Mr. Murphy lectures at Birmingham, and showers on the Catholic population of that town 'words,' says the Home Secretary, 'only fit to be addressed to thieves and murderers.' What then? Mr. Murphy has his own reasons of several kinds. He suspects the Roman Catholic Church of designs upon Mrs. Murphy and he says, if mayors and magistrates do not care for their wives and daughters, he does. But, above all, he is doing as he likes; or, in worthier language, asserting his personal liberty. 'I will carry out my lectures if they walk over my body as a dead corpse; and I say to the Mayor of Birmingham that he is my servant while I am in Birmingham, and as my servant he must do his duty and protect me.' Touching and beautiful

words, which find a sympathetic chord in every British bosom! The moment it is plainly put before us that a man is asserting his personal liberty, we are half-disarmed; because we are believers in freedom, and not in some dream of a right reason to which the assertion of our freedom is to be subordinated. Accordingly, the Secretary of State had to say that although the lecturer's language was 'only fit to be addressed to thieves and murderers,' yet, 'I do not think he is to be deprived, I do not think that anything I have said could justify the inference that he is to be deprived, of the right to protection in a place built by him for the purpose of these lectures; because the language was not language which afforded grounds for a criminal prosecution.' No, not to be silenced by the Mayor, or Home Secretary, or any other administrative authority on earth, simply on their notion of what is discreet and reasonable! This is in perfect consonance with our public opinion, and with our national love for the assertion of personal liberty." <sup>3</sup>

"Perfection, as culture conceives it, is possible while the individual remains isolated." Exercising such extreme laissez-faire would only sweep the nation to a mere anarchy. The English need to modify their attitude towards the State. They must acquire a 'notion, so familiar on the Continent and to antiquity, of the State – the nation in its collective and

corporate character, entrusted with stringent powers for the general advantage, and controlling individual wills in the name of an interest wider than that of individuals.’ Culture alone can teach them that there is nothing so important in doing as one likes but ‘the really blessed thing is to like what the right reason ordains’. It is only then that the Englishmen would get a much-wanted ‘principle of authority, to counteract the tendency to anarchy which seems to be threatening them.’

Such a principle of authority, however, can be achieved when Englishmen ‘are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general humane spirit, by the love of human perfection.’ Out of the three classes in which the English society is divided, the Barbarians are impervious to ideas; they may have ‘sweetness’ but not ‘light’. The class fails in its pursuit of light primarily because ‘it is lured off from following light by those mighty and external seducers of our race which weave for this class their most irresistible charms — by worldly splendour, security, power, and pleasure.’ Philistines, on the other hand, are ‘particularly stiff-necked and perverse in the resistance to light.’ They not only do not pursue sweetness and light but show more inclination towards chapels, tea-meetings, etc. They are materialistic as well as puritanical, too ‘Hebraic’ and too little ‘Hellenist’, self-satisfied about the narrowness of their views and not readily admitting of any change. However, it is in particular the middle-class core of the nation that needs to be taught and saved from further deterioration because it is “that great body which . . . ‘has done all the great things that have been done in all the departments.’” The Populace or the great working class lacks

powers of sympathy and of action, though they are improving. It can be clearly seen that the authority of the State cannot be invested in any one of the three classes as each of them has its own weaknesses; the Englishmen 'have to rise above the idea of whole community, the State, and to find . . . centre of light and authority there.'

This concept of 'best self' or 'humanity' can only be acquired if the Englishmen "go back for a moment to Bishop Wilson, who says: 'First, never go against the best light you have; secondly, take care that your light be not darkness.'" He is required 'to see things as they really are,' instead of surrendering completely to the laws laid down by Christianity or indulging in mere 'self-conquest' or acting without reason. His preference of Hebraism to Hellenism deprives him of complete 'human development' as neither of them are "the law of human development, – august contributions, invaluable contributions; and each showing itself to us more august, more valuable, more preponderant over the other . . . ." The two differ mainly because "the governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of consciousness; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience.' Whereas 'Hebraism speaks of becoming conscious of sin, of awakening to a sense of sin,' as 'a grand and precious feat for men to achieve', Hellenism helps:

"To get rid of one's ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of

Hellenism, is invested with a kind of aerial ease, clearness, and radiancy; they are full of what we call sweetness and light.”<sup>4</sup>

The followers of Hebraism lack the free play of consciousness and thus the laws of Hebraism which they absorb, to get out of them ‘a network of prescriptions to enwrap his whole life, to govern every moment of it, every impulse, every action’, cease to have any active influence on their lives. These laws are frequently combined with their supreme notion of ‘doing as one likes’ in order to satisfy their own individual selves.

‘The One Thing Needful’ is to import Hellenism in our lives ‘encouraging in ourselves spontaneity of consciousness, the letting a free play of thought live and flow around all our activity, the indisposition to allow one side of our activity to stand as so all-important and all-sufficing that it makes other sides indifferent’ which may prevent us from acting according to those rules laid down by Hebraism which lie dormant and fail to exert any active influence on our lives. Should a man be enabled to marry his deceased wife’s sister just because according to Mr. Chambers (who could make a speech to support the man’s bill after introducing it in the House of Commons) the Book of Leviticus, or the God’s law . . . did not really forbid a man to marry his deceased wife’s sister, and ‘man’s prime right and happiness’ permitted him to do as he likes?

The lack of reason, or adapting the laws of Hebraism according to one’s own wishes, by appending to it ‘the Liberal maxim, that a man’s prime right and happiness is to do as he



likes', results in a man's 'giving unchecked range, so far as he can, to his mere personal action, in allowing no limits or government to this except such as a mechanical external law imposes, and in thus really narrowing, for the satisfaction of his ordinary self, his spiritual and intellectual life and liberty.' Such extreme Hebraism can be checked only by becoming open to a free play of thoughts and 'spontaneity of conscience' which would certainly guide our way towards reason and perfection. According to Arnold it is nothing else but some element of Hellenism being imported when, "Bishop Wilson gives an admirable lesson to rigid Hebraisers, like Mr. Chambers, asking themselves: Does God's law (that is, the Book of Leviticus) forbid us to marry our wife's sister? —Does God's law (that is, again, the Book of Leviticus) allow us to marry our wives sister? — when he says: 'Christian duties are founded on reason, not on the sovereign authority of God commanding what He pleases; God cannot command us what is not fit to be believed or done, all his commands being founded in the necessities of our nature.'"

After dealing with the problems inhibiting human perfection, the ways to overcome the problems by rising above a class spirit to that of the 'best self', Arnold concludes by suggesting that only a balance between Hellenism and Hebraism, the two great contributions to human development. Hebraism emphasizes priority of action over thought, whereas Hellenism lays stress on right thinking before acting. He sums up the whole argument with his example from the life of the great philosopher, Socrates who was condemned to death on the charge that he was trying to corrupt the youngsters of his

nation, whereas, the fact was that he was only enabling them to take the first step towards perfection by initiating them into the spirit of Hellenism:

“Socrates has drunk his hemlock and is dead; but in his own breast does not every man carry about with him a possible Socrates, in that power of a disinterested play of consciousness upon his stock notions and habits, of which this wise and admirable man gave all through his lifetime the great example, and which was the secret of his incomparable influence? And he who leads men to call forth and exercises it in himself, is at the present moment, perhaps, as Socrates was in his time, more in concert with the vital working of men’s minds, and more effectively significant, than any House of Common’s orator, or practical operator in politics.”<sup>5</sup>

## Endnotes

1. <https://www.amazon.com/Pelican-Guide-English-Literature-Dickens/dp/B00D50P5YS>
2. *Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy. (Kolkata: Books Way. 2013) p. 27-28.*
3. *ibid. p.35-36*
4. *ibid.p. 86-87*
5. *ibid. p.153*