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*Western Culture at the American Crossroads*

Good afternoon. Let me begin by thanking Mr. Campbell for inviting me to speak today at this meeting of the Philadelphia Society. When informed by Mr. Campbell that it would be my task to be the luncheon speaker, I commented: I hope the food at the luncheon is good. A good meal can result in an affable audience; a bad meal can result in an audience not inclined to suffer fools – or scholars.

Fortunately, the question of whether lunch was good provides a convenient introduction to the topic to be presented. The theme of this conference is America the Beautiful and the topic of this talk is: Western Culture at the American Crossroads. What crossroads are we referring to? The crossroads which requires that we choose between two distinct cultural paths.

One path is aesthetic, in which knowledge is factual but how we put those facts together is subjective. For example, we can find facts to prove that Cincinnati is a wonderful place to live, or we can find facts to prove that Cincinnati is horrible. That aesthetic way of understanding life is intrinsically arbitrary and characteristic of violent and pessimistic traditions throughout history. It is currently manifested by the Modernist-postmodernist tradition.

The other path is the pursuit of the beautiful, in which we freely aspire to know and do what is true and good in reality. The issue is not how we choose to put facts together to suit our feelings. Rather, the issue is the realization of wisdom. That path is characteristic of optimistic traditions that can rightly be called cultured. It is particularly characteristic of traditional American culture, of America the beautiful.

It was Plato who early explained the differences between aesthetics and beauty. In his book, *Theaetetus*, he states that aesthetics is limited to the realm of facts and feelings. It is materialistic and emotional. By definition, it is anti-rational, anti-intellectual, and anti-freedom. It reduces public life to the realm of subjective preference, to competing special interests; it reduces culture to being trivialized or brutalized.

In contrast, traditional American culture centers on social equals freely seeking wisdom. Wisdom is knowledge and action that realizes the true and good, and beauty is the splendor of wisdom. But the association of beauty with the free and responsible pursuit of wisdom is currently under attack. Indeed, the very notion of culture, of civilization as such, is at risk. This is evidenced by the abysmal tone of current intellectual and political discourse. But it is not just a matter of tone. It is a matter of substance. It is an open question as to whether culture or barbarism will prevail.

It is now common to assume that aesthetics and beauty are the same, and that truth consists of fact, and a subjective combining of facts. Therefore, to associate aesthetics with violence, and beauty with civilization, sounds peculiar. Nonetheless, the choice between aesthetics and beauty is a choice between the pursuit of power, or the pursuit of truth. It is a choice that informs not only how we judge the quality of today's

lunch; it informs the quality of our science, ethics, and art. It determines the very foundation for our individual and social existence.

So, let us begin by asking the question: was today's lunch good, or bad, and how do we make such judgments? How do we judge the quality of particular things and events, and how do we judge their comparative importance? How do we judge not merely the quality of today's lunch; how do we decide which path is best as we pursue life?

A now common response to the question of what constitutes a good meal is aesthetic. It is a matter of taste. Some like spicy food, others not; some like meat, others not; some like dessert – well maybe most like dessert. But the question of what constitutes a good dessert varies widely according to personal or social preference. So we are often told that good food is a matter of taste, and remember: *gustibus non disputandum* – there is no disputing taste.

But does the notion of good taste really make any sense? Is the quality of food really a matter of subjective opinion? Indeed are all judgments of quality a matter of taste? Let me assure you that this presentation is not by a scholar who believes that his taste is better than anyone else's. To the contrary, let me offer this tidbit: the reduction of judgments of quality to a matter of taste is dangerous nonsense. To pretend to have good – much less superior taste - is an arrogant manipulative farce.

When that farce is restricted to what individuals want to eat, that's just fine. But when that farce is applied to judgments of quality about our ethics, our politics, our science, our religion, then that comedy becomes tragedy. It becomes tragedy because when significant public judgments of quality are reduced to a matter of fact and taste,

then two dreadful political consequences result: politics descends into anarchy or totalitarianism.

However, the suggestion that judgments of quality are not a matter of subjective taste or feelings, but rather, a matter of knowledge, now enrages some people – particularly those who teach in colleges. It interferes with their narcissism, and ours, to consider that what is personally felt to be right or good may not be true.

I often ask my students: which is better, vanilla or chocolate ice cream? Some like vanilla, some chocolate, and of course some like strawberry. So the question of which flavor of ice cream is best, is a matter of taste, of aesthetics, a matter of personal subjective preference. But then I ask them: which is better: vanilla or cyanide ice cream? To the point, it is not a matter of subjective opinion which is better; it is a matter of knowledge. Cyanide ice cream is bad, ugly, it is even evil. Civilized people know this.

I also ask my students if they check the date of the milk they buy at the grocery store. They typically acknowledge that they do, because they want fresh food. But when I ask if they are concerned with the quality of the culture in which they live, they commonly stumble. Judging the bacteriological quality of food is one thing, and judging what foods suit our tastes is another, but beyond the pale is the notion of judging the actual quality of our beliefs and actions.

We are willing to accept qualitative judgments on the accuracy of facts, and the efficiency of actions; what we commonly are not willing to consider is the actual profundity of what we know and do. Beyond scientific fact, and utilitarian effectiveness, the quality of the things we know and do is deemed aesthetic - and empty of qualitative

meaning. We live in a world of facts, feelings, and subjective lifestyles. We live in an aesthetic and meaningless world.

So workers should do their jobs, and professionals in business, education, law, medicine, or science should know their facts and procedures. They should perform their tasks with knowledge and skill. But the idea that uncultured workers and professionals wreck havoc on themselves and others, doesn't come to mind. The importance of being cultured is no longer of concern.

As mentioned earlier, *gustibus non disputandum* – there is no disputing taste. It cannot be disputed either because it personally does not matter to us, or because it matters so much it's beyond discussion. In either case, the importance of things is grounded in feeling, not knowing. Both Modernism and Postmodernism center on taste, and therefore deny the importance of civil rational discourse.

To the question of which flavor of ice cream is best, the Modernist response is: whatever. Modernism correspondingly reduces culture to a matter of taste via its advocacy of tolerance, equality, and multiculturalism. In contrast, Postmodernists declare that their taste is indeed their cultural identity. To criticize their taste is to assault their very existence. To criticize their cultural preferences is then to attack them personally as an act of insensitive bigotry.

This results in an incoherent situation. For example, to the Modernist, race, gender, and economic class are unimportant; we should not notice such aesthetic traits. But to the Postmodernist they are essential to understanding life. To not notice race, gender, or economic class is to deny the authenticity of the other.

So none of us can genuinely be polite. If I open a door for people when leaving a building, I might please them, insult them, or both, depending on the whim of the moment and of those involved. So relativistic or contingent etiquette does not, indeed cannot work. One result is to avoid that situation by embracing a coarse efficiency. Just get through the door, without concern or disdain for others. Conduct life via a pragmatic or utilitarian efficiency. What is lost in that efficiency is not just a commitment to unselfish decorum; our freedom to do what is right and good is denied. We can no longer infuse life with a bit of goodness, or indeed (G)grace. What is lost is beauty and kindness, in our personal, social, and professional lives.

When cultural traditions around the world are viewed via a Modernist-Postmodernist perspective, then all cultures are equal, and are both trivial and beyond criticism – unless they believe in beauty. There is then no way to discern much less qualitatively choose between different cultural paths. This results in a paralysis of civilized knowledge and action.

But act we must, in science, ethics, and art. So the following questions are acutely practical: are all traditions around the world really qualitatively equal? Can all traditions around the world flourish without interfering with other traditions? Are all traditions beautiful? On all counts the answer is: certainly not. Many traditions do horrible things, things which, as John Locke stated, even tolerant traditions cannot tolerate or condone.

However, this position is denied by the so-called social sciences. Social science views culture aesthetically, as a matter of fact and feeling. Social science is intrinsically aesthetic in its understanding of reality and life. When culture is viewed aesthetically it is understood as mere sociological fact or subjective preference. It is nature or nurture or

arbitrary choice. The liberal and fine arts are deemed quaint, or trivial. But when the social sciences replace the liberal arts, then the liberal arts – the arts of the free minds of free people – are replaced by chance and statistics.

Whereas sociology statistically studies what we do, culture presents a vision of what we uniquely ought to do. To the point, *statistical probability has nothing to do with cultural desirability*. Culture is the realm of responsible freedom. Statistics deny our responsibility to contemplate and to some degree do what is true, good, and beautiful.

To confuse culture with sociology is also to assume the equality of all traditions. To view all traditions as qualitatively equal is to deny culture as it is historically understood around the world. Culture centers on conscious qualitative choice. This brings us to a question that is far more important than whether we can rightly prefer one dessert over another. That question is: are qualitative comparisons of different cultural traditions possible to make? Can we, as Americans, rightly prefer American culture over others, or is confidence in American culture a disorder known derisively by some as *Americanism*. Is confidence in preferring American culture an ungrounded, subjective, aesthetic, preference?

So we are told by the academy. To judge the quality of different cultural traditions around the world, is now to be subject to charges of intolerance, if not bigotry. Indeed, according to postmodern French philosophy, particular and comparative claims of wisdom and beauty are oppressive lies. They are expressions of male logo centrism. One postmodern French philosopher – a term that is oxymoronic, by the way – declares that there have been no great women philosophers - and that is to their credit. Derrida says it is to their credit because philosophy, the love of wisdom, is an oppressive masculine

mask for power. So if philosophy is a mask for oppressive power, then the destruction of philosophy, of religion, of culture, is liberating. Sociopathy takes the place of responsible freedom. When postmodernist sociopaths, be they women or men, become the bearers – and thus destroyers of culture, when they become our pastors or priests, our professors, artists, politicians, lawyers, and business leaders, then barbarism results. Sociopathy is an equal opportunity employer – and destroyer.

It is critical to affirm that we can and should deny this barbaric reduction of culture to a matter of indifferent *and* absolute aesthetic taste. One significant advance in this attempt to understand and qualitatively compare cultural traditions is found in a book titled *Culture Matters* (2000). Edited by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P.

Huntington, the book is a collection of essays analyzing and comparing various cultural traditions around the world. It notes that a culturally relativistic social science is an obstacle to a qualitative comparison of cultural traditions. It makes the point that cultural relativists wrongly conclude that we cannot object to cannibalism, to slavery, and to other horrible practices that occur worldwide. The book interestingly concludes that the two most successful cultural traditions in the world have been, and are, Puritan and Confucian.

Following the analysis of Max Weber, it is noted that some cultural traditions inculcate freedom, personal responsibility, and the need to be alert to opportunities resulting from fate, hard work, predestination, or Grace. This results in societies that evidence human progress. So far, so good. However, for Huntington, human progress is recognized as movement toward economic development and material well-being, social economic equity, and political democracy. What is culture to Huntington? He states (p.



xv): "...we define culture in purely subjective terms as the values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society."

So Huntington argues that culture is subjective, but that qualitative differences between cultural traditions can still be a matter of knowledge. But for him that knowledge is determined by how efficiently a society realizes material well-being, social economic equity, and political democracy. Therein lies an irony: Huntington identifies Puritan and Confucian cultural traditions as best, but does so in a way that is contradictory to Puritan and Confucian traditions.

For today's purposes, let's focus on the Puritan or Christian position. Contrary to Huntington, Puritans are not interested in seeking material well-being, social economic equity, or political democracy. They recognized that materialism is commonly anti-spiritual, economic equity is a mask for envy and greed, and political democracy is mob rule. What they sought is evidence of being blessed by God. To be blessed by God is to see material and spiritual evidence of God's Grace in one's life. Material prosperity is viewed as evidence of being right with God, of virtue and hard work being rewarded not just in heaven, but on earth. Puritans believe in the priesthood of all believers, but not that Truth is a matter of opinion, of subjective taste, of common popularity. They believe in social equals seeking to realize a difficult to discern objective wisdom.

So cannibalism is not an alternative lifestyle worthy of respect. It is not a matter of taste. This is critical, since once we establish the capacity to qualitatively evaluate competing cultural traditions, then life centers on the free and responsible pursuit of the true, good, and beautiful. That pursuit of wisdom – and beauty - is central to considering the comparative quality of culture and works of art.

As a matter of knowledge, which cultural traditions and works of art are better? We can readily hold that American and French cultures are better than traditions that practice, for example, cannibalism. However, the French may not return the compliment. Paul Gauguin's beatific ruminations on the practice of cannibalism would require another presentation – preferably not at a luncheon. But what about a more nuanced comparison? Let us consider which is better: Modernist-postmodernist French or traditional American ideals and art?

The French Revolution historically provides the political foundation for an aesthetic Modernism. It is dedicated to liberty, equality, and fraternity. The problem with French modernism is not that the sororities were left out. It is that liberty and equality are contradictions. We cannot be free if we must be the same. The assumption that equality is good is also the assumption that inequality is bad. Therefore, (following Marx and Rousseau) economic or political success indicates not only a lack of equality, but the occurrence of evil.

In contrast, traditional American culture is dedicated to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Happiness is understood as knowing and having what is genuinely true and good. The pursuit of happiness cherishes success as the material and spiritual realization of wisdom via responsible freedom.

When people suffer, religious Modernists and Postmodernists blame God; those who deny the existence of God just resort to blaming other people. In contrast, traditional American culture sees suffering as part of a moral drama between good and evil, a drama that transcends race, gender, or economic class.

We can quickly extend this type of evaluation to fine art. Which is better, French Impressionism or the American Hudson River School? To my experience, such questions drive many people crazy. It is safe to suggest that quality is a matter of taste; it is not safe to ask which work of art best explains reality? The very idea that culture and fine art are rightly grounded in knowledge of reality, that fine art and culture ought to provide knowledge of reality, is utterly foreign to the typical contemporary conscience. It is also threatening because it exposes a deeper more telling question: as a matter of knowledge is it more realistic to be an optimist or a pessimist?

If we accept that only scientific facts are true and all else is fiction, emotion, or the will to power, then we affirm the belief that we live in a brutal world of facts without any meaning. We are postmodern existentialists with nothing to really think about but how meaningless are life, culture, and human existence. To be pessimistic is then to be realistic. In contrast, if we live in a world that is substantively true and good, then our lives are filled with the discovery of beauty. To seekers of wisdom and beauty, to be optimistic is to be realistic.

In this context we can consider the landscape paintings of Monet. Monet famously painted haystacks at various time of the day. He painted hay stacks in the morning, haystacks in the evening, and haystacks at supper time. How do those paintings explain reality? As a matter of facts and feelings, a matter of aesthetics. We are to understand reality as a materialistic succession of meaningless events. In response to that dynamic materialism we can emotionally respond. I recommend to students that when they view paintings by Monet in the Art Institute of Chicago, they should slightly swoon. It indicates a depth of sophisticated emotion. Should anyone nearby also swoon, then

they should rise to the occasion: those who swoon the most are obviously the most sensitive aesthetes.

How in contrast does Martin Heade, an American Luminist painter, explain the nature of reality and life? He paints the salt marshes of Rhode Island in which the frugal Yankee farmers would harvest hay. However, Heade is disinterested in how facts and emotions operate in the context of landscape. What he is interested in is a Christian Platonism in which the physical world evidences a material realization of truth and love. By making some degree of truth materially incarnate, Heade presents a glimpse of ontological beauty. For Heade, optimism is realistic.

Intentionally or not, art historians follow the biblical principle that seeing and understanding are substantively one. What we can see in a work of art is contingent upon our ability to know. Monet could look at but not really see the meaning of Heade's art. In contrast, when the American painters of the Hudson River School and the Luminists look at Monet's paintings they would see an inadequate, indeed superficial and violent understanding of reality and life. To reduce a rightly beautiful world to material fact and emotion is to deny that the world and life have significant meaning. It is to assume an ontological pessimism in the name of a pseudo-scientific aestheticism. In contrast, to see the world as properly beautiful, we maintain an ontological optimism. The American tradition maintains that optimism is realistic because there is truth, goodness, and beauty- there is happiness - to be found.

So we come to the conclusion of this presentation. Are not conclusions to presentations, as desserts are to meals? And who doesn't like dessert? The theme of this conference is America the Beautiful. America is bound by more than constitutionalism;

it is also bound by culture. Traditional American culture is to be cherished for its commitment to social equals seeking wisdom and beauty. American culture is grounded in an optimistic realism. As mentioned earlier, Huntington concludes that the most successful cultural traditions have been Puritan and Confucian. It is appropriate to note that the Chinese name for America is Mei Gwo, which translates as the Beautiful Country. Confucianism is not Puritanism, and Puritanism is not Confucianism. But they share a commitment to the free and responsible pursuit of wisdom and beauty. Let us once again publicly advocate the cosmopolitan pursuit of wisdom and beauty. After all, it is the American, and the beautiful thing to do.