The Ethics of Culture

I am to speak to you on the ethics of culture. Because I teach the one and try to practice the other, it may perhaps be pardonable for me to think of them together, but I hope at least not to leave you without the conviction that the two are in a very vital and immediate way connected. In my judgment, the highest intellectual duty is the duty to be cultured. Ethics and culture are usually thought out of connection with each other—-as, in fact, at the very opposite poles. Particularly for our country, and the type of education which generally prevails, is this so. Quite unfortunately, it seems, duty toward the beautiful and the cultural is very generally ignored, and certainly, beauty as a motive has been taken out of morality, so that we confront beautiful duty and dutless beauty. In an issue like this, it behooves education to try to restore the lapsing ideals of humanism, and to center more vitally in education the duty to be cultured.

It follows if there is any duty with respect to culture, that it is one of those that can only be self-imposed. No one can make you cultured, few will care whether you are or are not, for I admit that the world of today primarily demands efficiency—and further the only reward my experience can offer you for it is the heightened self-satisfaction which being or becoming cultured brings. There is, or ought to be, a story of a lad to whom some rather abstract duty was being interpreted who is said to have said, "If I only owe it to myself, why then I really don't owe it at all." Not only do I admit that culture is a duty of this sort, but I claim that this is its chief appeal and justification. The greatest challenge to the moral will is in the absence of external compulsion. This implies, young ladies and gentlemen, that I recognize your perfect right not to be cultured, if you do not really want to be, as one of those inalienable natural-born privileges which so-called "practical minded," "ordinary" Americans delight to claim and exercise. As a touch-stone for the real desire and a sincere motive, the advocates of culture would not have it otherwise.

The way in which duty comes to be involved in culture is this: culture begins in education where compulsion leaves off, whether it is the practical spur of necessity or the artificial rod of the schoolmaster. I speak to a group that has already chosen to be educated. I congratulate you upon that choice. Though you have so chosen for many motives and with very diverse reasons and purposes, I fear that education for most of you means, in last practical analysis, the necessary hardship that is involved in preparing to earn a better living, perhaps an easier living. It is just such narrowing and truncating of the conception of education that the ideals and motives of culture are effective to remove or prevent. Education should not be so narrowly construed, for in the best sense, and indeed in the most practical sense, it means not only the fitting of the man to earn his living, but to live and to live well. It is just this latter and higher function of education, the art of living well, or, if I may so express it, of living up to the best, that the word culture connotes and represents. Let me offer you, if I may, a touch-stone for this idea, a sure test of its presence. Whenever and wherever there is carried into education the purpose and motive of knowing better than the practical necessities of the situation demand, whenever the pursuit of knowledge is engaged in for its own sake and for the inner satisfaction it can give, culture and the motives of culture are present. I sense immediately that you may have quite other and perhaps more authoritative notions of culture in mind. Culture has been variously and beautifully defined. But I cannot accept for the purpose I have in view even that famous definition of Matthew Arnold’s, “Culture is the best that has been thought and known in the world,” since it emphasizes the external rather than the internal factors of culture. Rather is it the capacity for understanding the best and most representative forms of human expression, and of expressing oneself, if not in similar creativeness, at least in appreciative reactions and in progressively responsive refinement of tastes and interests. Culture proceeds from personality to personality. To paraphrase Bacon, it is that, and only that, which can be inwardly assimilated. It follows, then, that, like wisdom, it is that which cannot be taught, but can only be learned. But here is the appeal of it, it is the self-administered part of your education, that which represents your personal index of absorption and your personal coefficient of effort.

As faulty as is the tendency to externalize culture, there is still greater error in over-intellectualizing it. Defining this aspect of education, we focus it, I think, too much merely in the mind, and project it too far into the abstract and formal. We must constantly realize that without experience, and without a medium for the absorption and transfer of experience, the mind could not develop or be developed. Culture safeguards the educative process at these two
points, and stands for the training of the sensibilities and the expres- 
sional activities. Mentioning the former as the neglected aspect of 
American education, former President Eliot contends that, since it is 
the business of the senses to serve the mind, it is reciprocally the 
duty of the mind to serve the senses. He means that properly to train 
the mind involves the proper training of the sensibilities, and that, 
without a refinement of the channels through which our experience 
reaches us, the mind cannot reach its highest development. We too 
often expect our senses to serve us and render nothing back to them 
in exchange. As a result they do not serve us half so well as they might: 
coarse channels make for sluggish response, hampered impetus, wastage of effort. The man of culture is the man of trained 
sensibilities, whose mind expresses itself in keenness of discrimina-
tion and, therefore, in cultivated interests and tastes. The level of 
mentality may be crowded higher for a special effort or a special pur-
suit, but in the long run it cannot rise much higher than the level of 
tastes. It is for this reason that we warrantably judge culture by man-
ers, tastes, and the fineness of discrimination of a person’s interests. 
The stamp of culture is, therefore, no conventional pattern, and has 
no stock value: it is the mold and die of a refined and completely 
developed personality. It is the art medallion, not the common coin. 

On this very point, so necessary for the correct estimation of cul-
ture, most of the popular mistakes and misconceptions about culture 
enter in. Democracy and utilitarianism suspect tastes because they 
cannot be standardized. And if I should not find you over-interested 
in culture or over-sympathetic toward its ideals, it is because of these 
same prejudices of puritanism and materialism, which, though still 
typically American, are fortunately no longer representatively so. 
Yet it is necessary to examine and refute some of these prevalent mis-
conceptions about culture. You have heard and will still hear culture 
derided as artificial, superficial, useless, selfish, over-refined, and exclu-
sive. Let us make inquiry into the reasons for such attitudes. It is 
not the part of loyal advocacy to shirk the blow and attack of such 
criticism behind the bastions of dilettantism. Culture has its active 
adversaries in present-day life, indeed the normal tendencies of life 
today are not in the direction either of breadth or height of culture. 
The defense of culture is a modern chivalry, though of some hazard 
and proportional glory.

The criticism of culture as artificial first concerns us. In the mis-
taken name of naturalism, culture is charged with producing artifi-
ciality destructive of the fine original naturalness of human nature. 
One might as well indict civilization as a whole on this point; it, 
too, is artificial. But perhaps just a peculiar degree of artificiality 
is weighed against—to which our response must be that it is just 
that very painful intermediate stage between lack of culture and 
wholesomeness of culture which it is the object of further culture to 
remove. All arts have their awkward stages: culture itself is its own 
cure for this. Closely associated, and touched by the same reason-
ing, is the argument that culture is superficial. Here we encounter 
the bad effect of a process undertaken in the wrong order. If the 
polished surface is, so to speak, the last coat of a consistently de-
veloped personality, it lends its final added charm to the total worth 
and effect. If, on the contrary, beginning with the superficial as well 
as ending with the superficial, it should be merely a veneer, then it is 
indeed both culturally false and artistically deceptive. No true advoc-
cacy of an ideal involves the defense or extenuation of its defective 
embodiments. Rather on the contrary, culture must constantly be 
self-critical and discriminating, and deplore its spurious counterfeits 
and shallow imitations.

More pardonable, especially for our age, is the charge of useless-
ness. Here we need not so much the corrective of values as that of 
point of view. For we only need to appreciate the perennial and imper-
ishable qualities of the products of culture to see the fallacy in such 
depreciation. Fortified in ideas and ideals, culture centers about the 
great human constants, which, though not rigidly unchangeable, are 
nevertheless almost as durable as those great physical constants of 
which science makes so much. Indeed, if we count in the progressive 
changes of science through discovery, these are the more constant— 
the most constant then of all the things in human experience. More-
over, there is their superior representativeness by which posterity 
judges each and every phase of human development. Through their 
culture products are men most adequately represented; and by their 
culture-fruits are they known and rated. As we widen our view from 
the standpoint of momentary and partial judgment, this fact becomes 
only too obvious.

I take seriously, and would have you, also, the charge that culture
is selfish. Being unnecessarily so is to be unduly so. Yet there is a necessary internal focusing of culture because true culture must begin with self-culture. Personality, and to a limited extent character also, are integral parts of the equation. In the earlier stages of the development of culture there is pardonable concentration upon self-cultivation. Spiritual capital must be accumulated; indeed, too early spending of the meager resources of culture at an early stage results in that shallow and specious variety which means sham and pretense at the start, bankruptcy and humiliation at the finish. Do not begin to spend your mental substance prematurely. You are justified in serious self-concern and earnest self-consideration at the stage of education. And, moreover, culture, even when it is rich and mature, gives only by sharing, and moves more by magnetic attraction than by transfer of material or energy. Like light, to which it is so often compared, it radiates, and operates effectively only through being self-sufficiently maintained at its central source. Culture polarizes in self-hood.

Finally we meet the criticism of exclusiveness, over-selectness, perhaps even the extreme of snobbery. Culture, I fear, will have to plead guilty to a certain degree of this: it cannot fulfill its function otherwise. Excellence and the best can never reside in the average. Culture must develop an elite that must maintain itself upon the basis of standards that can move forward but never backwards. In the pursuit of culture one must detach himself from the crowd. Your chief handicap in this matter as young people of today is the psychology and “pull” of the crowd. Culturally speaking, they and their point of view define vulgarity. As Professor Palmer says, “Is this not what we mean by the vulgar man? His manners are not an expression of himself, but of somebody else. Other men have obliterated him.” There is no individuality in being ordinary: it is the boast of sub-mediocrities. Who in the end wishes to own that composite of everybody’s average qualities, so likely to be below our own par? Culture’s par is always the best: one cannot be somebody with everybody’s traits. If to be cultured is a duty, it is here that that element is most prominent, for it takes courage to stand out from the crowd. One must, therefore, pay a moral as well as an intellectual price for culture. It consists in this: “Dare to be different—stand out!” I know how difficult this advice will be to carry out: America’s chief social crime, in spite

of her boasted freedoms, is the psychology of the herd, the tyranny of the average and mediocrity; in other words, the limitations upon cultural personality. Strive to overcome this for your own sake and, as Cicero would say, “for the welfare of the Republic.”

I am spending too much time, I fear, in pointing out what culture is when I would rather point out the way to its attainment. I must not trespass, however, upon the provinces of my colleagues who are to interpret culture more specifically to you in terms of the art of English speech, the fine arts, and music. I content myself with the defense of culture in general, and with the opportunity it gives of explaining its two most basic aspects—the great amateur arts of personal expression—conversation and manners. These personal arts are as important as the fine arts; in my judgment, they are their foundation. For culture without personal culture is sterile—it is that insincere and hypocritical profession of the love of the beautiful which so often discredits culture in the eyes of the many. But with the products of the fine arts translating themselves back into personal refinement and cultivated sensibilities, culture realizes itself in the fullest sense, performs its true educative function and becomes a part of the vital act of living. We too often estimate culture materialistically by what has been called “the vulgar test of production.” On the contrary, culture depends primarily upon the power of refined consumption and effective assimilation; it consists essentially in being cultured. Whoever would achieve this must recognize that life itself is an art, perhaps the finest of the fine arts—because it is the composite blend of them all.

However, to say this is not to commit the man of culture to hopeless dilettantism, and make him a Jack of the arts. Especially for you, who for the most part work toward very practical professional objectives and who lack as Americans of our time even a modicum of leisure, would this be impossible. But it is not necessary to trouble much about this, for, even were it possible, it would not be desirable. There are, of course, subjects which are primarily “cultural” and subjects which are not, but I am not one of those who bewail altogether the departure from the old-fashioned classical program of education and the waning appeal of the traditional “humanities.” Science, penetratingly studied, can yield as much and more culture than the humanities mechanically studied. It lies, I think, more in the point
and response will drain off, like cream, the richest products of the

subject-matter or tradition of a subject. Nevertheless, to be sure of
culture, the average student should elect some of the cultural studies;
and, more important still, in his outside diversions, should cultivate
a steady and active interest in one of the arts, aiming thereby to bring
his mind under the quickening influence of cultural ideas and values.
Not all of us can attain to creative productiveness and skill in the
arts, though each of us has probably some latent artistic tempera-
tment, if it only expresses itself in love and day-dreaming. But each
of us can, with a different degree of concentration according to his
temperament, cultivate an intelligent appreciation of at least one of
the great human arts, literature, painting, sculpture, music or what
not. And if we achieve a high level of cultivated taste in one art it
will affect our judgment and interest and response with respect to
others.

May I at this point emphasize a peculiarly practical reason? In
any community, in any nation, in any group, the level of cultural
productiveness cannot rise much higher than the level of cultural
consumption, cannot much outdistance the prevalent limits of taste.
This is the reason why our country has not as yet come to the
fore in the production of culture-goods. And as Americans we all
share this handicap of the low average of cultural tastes. As edu-
cated Americans, we share also and particularly the responsibility
for helping raise this average. A brilliant Englishman once character-
ized America as a place where everything had a price, but nothing
a value, referring to the typical preference for practical and utilitari-
ian points of view. There is a special need for a correction of this
on your part. As a race group we are at the critical stage where we
are releasing creative artistic talent in excess of our group ability to
understand and support it. Those of us who have been concerned
about our progress in the things of culture have now begun to fear
as the greatest handicap the discouraging, stuflifying effect upon our
artistic talent of lack of appreciation from the group which it rep-
resents. The cultural par, we repeat, is always the best: and a group
which expects to be judged by its best must live up to its best so
that that may be truly representative. Here is our present dilemma.
If the standard of cultural tastes is not rapidly raised in the gen-
eration which you represent, the natural affinities of appreciation

It follows from this that it is not creditable nor your duty to allow
yourselves to be toned down to the low level of average tastes. Some
of you, many of you, I hope, will be making your life's work in
sections of this country and among groups that are fittingly charac-
terized as "Saharas of culture," that know culture neither by taste
nor sight. You betray your education, however, and forego the in-
fluence which as educated persons you should always exert in any
community if you succumb to these influences and subside to the
mediocre level of the vulgar crowd. Moreover, you will find that,
like knowledge or technical skill, culture to be maintained must be
constantly practiced. Just as we saw that culture was not a question
of one set of subjects, but an attitude which may be carried into all,
so also we must realize that it is not a matter of certain moments
and situations, but the characteristic and constant reaction of a de-
veloped personality. The ideal culture is representative of the entire
personality even in the slightest detail.

I recall an incident of visiting with a friend a celebrated art con-
naisseur for his expert judgment upon a painting. He examined with
a knife and a pocket magnifying glass a corner of the canvas. I per-
haps thought for a moment he was searching for a signature, but it
was not the signature corner. Without further scrutiny, however, he
gave us his judgment: "Gentlemen, it is not a Holbein." The master
painter puts himself into every inch of his canvas, and can be told
by the characteristic details as reliably, more reliably even than by
general outlines. Culture likewise is every inch representative of the
whole personality when it is truly perfected. This summing up of the
whole in every part is the practical test which I want you to hold
before yourselves in matters of culture. Among cultivated people you
will be judged more by your manner of speech and deportment than
by any other credentials. They are meant to bear out your training
and your heritage, and more reliably than your diplomas or your
pedigree will they represent you or betray you. Manners are thus
the key to personal relations, as expression is the key to intellec-
tual intercourse. One meets that element in others which is most responsively tuned to a similar element in ourselves. The best fruits of culture, then, are the responses it elicits from our human environment. And should the environment be limited or unfavorable, then, instead of compromising with it, true culture opens the treasuries of art and literature, and lives on that inheritance.

Finally I must add a word about that aspect of culture which claims that it takes several generations to produce and make the truly cultured gentleman. Exclusive, culture may and must be, but seclusive culture is obsolete. Not all that are well-born are well-bred, and it is better to be well-bred. Indeed, one cannot rest satisfied at any stage of culture: it has to be earned and re-earned, though it returns with greater increment each time. As Goethe says, "What thou hast inherited from the fathers, labor for, in order to possess it." Thus culture is inbred—but we ourselves are its parents. With all of the possible and hoped for spread of democracy, we may say that excellence of this sort will always survive. Indeed, when all the other aristocracies have fallen, the aristocracy of talent and intellect will still stand. In fact, one suspects that eventually the most civilized way of being superior will be to excel in culture.

This much, then, of the ideals of humanism must survive; the goal of education is self-culture, and one must hold it essential even for knowledge's own sake that it be transmuted into character and personality. It must have been the essential meaning of Socrates' favorite dictum—"Know thyself"—that to know, one must be a developed personality. The capacity for deep understanding is proportional to the degree of self-knowledge, and by finding and expressing one's true self, one somehow discovers the common denominator of the universe. Education without culture, therefore, ignores an important half of the final standard, "a scholar and a gentleman," which, lest it seem obsolete, let me cite in those fine modern words which former President Eliot used in conferring the arts degree. "I hereby admit you to the honorable fellowship of educated men." Culture is thus education's passport to converse and association with the best.

Moreover, personal representativeness and group achievement are in this respect identical. Ultimately a people is judged by its capacity to contribute to culture. It is to be hoped that as we progressively acquire in this energetic democracy the common means of modern civilization, we shall justify ourselves more and more, individually and collectively, by the use of them to produce culture-goods and representative types of culture. And this, so peculiarly desirable under the present handicap of social disparagement and disesteem, must be for more than personal reasons the ambition and the achievement of our educated classes. If, as we all know, we must look to education largely to win our way, we must look largely to culture to win our just reward and recognition. It is, therefore, under these circumstances something more than your personal duty to be cultured—it is one of your most direct responsibilities to your fellows, one of your most effective opportunities for group service. In presenting this defense of the ideals and aims of culture, it is my ardent hope that the Howard degree may come increasingly to stand for such things—and especially the vintage of 1926.