

## A Speculative Analysis of Matthew Arnold's "Doing as One Likes"

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### Abstract

Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* is a collection of a few separate essays. These essays were published in various literary journals. They were written by the author during the four years previous to the first publication of the book in 1869. A carefully revised second edition of *Culture and Anarchy* appeared in 1875. In the second chapter of the book, Arnold has been trying to reply the accusation made against his cult of sweetness and light as described in the first chapter of the book entitled "Sweetness and Light". Arnold's contention is that to act properly one must think rightly. One must be able to see things as they are. Culture which is a pursuit of perfection endows a man with a clear perspective to see things as they are. Without sufficient light to guide, the lovers of action plunge themselves in ill-calculated action, which instead of doing good to society causes incalculable harm to society. This action is liable to bring chaos in society.

**Keywords:** Culture, Perfection, Sweetness, Light, Anarchy, Best Self

### Introduction

Matthew Arnold, a literary figure of the Victorian Age, comes next to Browning and Tennyson. He is a poet, critic, religious thinker and educationist. He has the experience of twenty-four years as the inspector of schools. It provided him so much time to meet the different classes and examine their behaviour and habits. This experience pursued him to write 'Culture & Anarchy'.

Arnold defines Culture as: "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our own stock notions and habits".

Arnold's Culture is not something merely bookish or pedantic. Merely book-knowledge or reading of newspapers has very little to do with real Culture. The study of books must bring about in the mind of the reader an inward operation and this inwardness is essential and is the very life and essence of Culture. According to him Culture is a study of perfection enriching our inner content of the mind and spirit. It is free from all sorts of fanaticism. It stands against all the mischief men do themselves by their faith in machinery and industrialization.

### Context

Culture for Matthew Arnold is inextricably connected with the idea Of Sweetness and Light. The ideal man of culture is what Greeks called — Euphues; that is a man who tends towards sweetness and light.

Culture brings the inward peace and satisfaction by suppressing and subduing our animality and draws us nearer to complete spiritual perfection. Religion at times fails to lead us to this perfection and all efforts are wasted on incomplete perfection.

Religious organizations in England seem to have failed in this moral ministration to man. Puritanism is based on the impulse of man towards moral development and self-conquest. Yet the Puritan ideal of perfection remains narrow and inadequate. And Arnold is judging the religious organizations in terms of sweetness and light and finding them wanting. Arnold accuses all religious organizations of the actual inadequacy of the idea of perfection.

Arnold has been accused that his cult of sweetness and light or his religion of culture springs from a spirit cultivated in action. Contemporary critics on the cult of Arnold's Culture think that Arnold's insistence on beauty, sweetness and the pursuit of perfection is all moonshine. According to them this culture is blind to the existing evils of society and enemy to all reforms and reformers. They point out that "Death, sin, cruelty stalk among us, filling their maws with innocence and youth" but Arnold is a silent watcher without caring to lift a finger to bring about a better economic or social condition of the people around him. His critics believe in action, and not in aesthetic detachment.

Now to act properly, one must think rightly: one must be able to see things as they are. Politicians, statesmen, reformers, who are believers in action, actively busy in uprooting evils of society act against the best interest of the contemporary society because they lack inner discipline of culture, they lack that sweetness and light which Arnold's culture in pursuit of perfection endows a man with a clear perspective to see things as they are.

With insufficient light to guide, these lovers of action plunge themselves in ill-calculated action which instead of doing good to society, is harmful. Their actions are bound to be rough and coarse because they are guided by insufficient light and -- in truth, when they act, they do not take the trouble to think and thus they do as they like and so doing they are likely to bring about anarchy and chaos in society. And in correcting this state of affairs Arnold has found a practical use for light of culture against this practical mischief, so dangerous to society.

The age of Arnold is becoming a bond slave to machinery, willing to value machinery as an end in itself without looking beyond it to the end for which alone, in truth, it is valuable. Similarly freedom is worshipped in itself, without regarding the ends for which freedom is to be desired. Therefore, it is a most happy and important thing for a man merely to do as he likes. This is interpreted by the age as personal liberty, as guaranteed by the British constitution itself. And thus would Mr. Bright interpret the idea of the assertion of personal liberty in the political existence of the English people.

This is a dangerous idea and it may lead to anarchy. British constitution fosters this idea of personal liberty of an Englishman to do as far as possible what he likes. Therefore, the danger of drifting towards anarchy is inherent in the very constitution which asserts personal liberty. The conception of the state, in its collective and corporate character, controlling individual wills does not appeal to the English mind. Englishman believes that a state is in reality made up of the individuals who compose it and that every individual is the best judge of his own interest. Otherwise the state authority may turn into an instrument of tyranny.

So, the privileges of aristocracy are preserved by this assertion of personal liberty. The middle class representing trade and commerce, representing religious Dissent is free of all

administration and state interference in their maxims of every man for himself in business and everyman for himself in religion.

And how does this assertion of personal liberty affect the working class? The poor working class. The masses in England are raw and uncultivated with no idea of public duty and of discipline. Strong feudal habits of loyalty and respect still persist in the masses, though they are fast disappearing. The modern spirit of anarchical tendency is seen in the masses in their worship of freedom, or in other words their blind faith in doing what one likes and particularly in their blind faith in machinery. So they 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".

And all this tends certainly as Arnold thinks, to anarchy. Politicians, statesmen, friends of the liberal party as well as the middle-class are callously indifferent to this rising anarchy in the country. These acts of rowdyism of the masses are nothing but the assertion of their personal liberty and as such to be tolerated without a word of protest as every man has a right to do what he likes. This sorry state of affairs exists because we are afraid to establish among us the rule of reason.

Now culture will show that there is nothing so very blessed in merely doing as one likes. The real blessing on the other hand is to be guided by the light of reason. And if we follow reason, we can get some benefit from culture. Right reason, illuminated by the light of culture must become a principle of authority to counteract the tendency to anarchy in the country. And who will organize this authority of reason and implement its authority to the nation? The answer is the State. The State must incorporate within itself the right reason of the community and as such possess the right of exercising its authority when circumstances demand it. This authority of right reason Mr. Carlyle, who was a great philosopher and literary figure of the Victorian era, would like to hand over to the aristocracy. Mr. Lowe, who was a member of the Parliament, would invest the power and authority of the State to the middle class. The Reform League would hand over the right to rule by the light of reason to the working class—the class with 'the brightest powers of sympathy and readiest powers of action'.

Mr. Carlyle recommends the aristocracy as fit to assume this authority and claims that it possesses dignity and politeness; and the sweetness and light of culture are happily united in it. But Arnold concedes only sweetness to the aristocratic class; it decidedly lacks the light of culture. In an age of expansion the very qualities of aristocratic class — their serenity, their high spirit, their dignity and their manners would turn against them. The aristocratic class does not possess the ideals of perfection and they are, according to Arnold, unfit to rub according to the light of right reason. Besides, they do not possess the seriousness of the middle class. In an epoch of expansion there is a great movement of ideas, — sometimes conflicting ideas seeking a unity and harmony and finding none. This is the age of Arnold. Only the rule of right reason, ideas and light can fight against anarchy and chaos. And the aristocratic class is incapable of establishing the authority of reason in the country. Therefore, Arnold emphatically asserts the inadequacy of aristocracy to supply the principle of authority.

Let us now consider the middle class. Mr. Lowe sings the praise of this class, the Liberal middle-class Parliament. Let us try to find the principle of authority in the middle class. The progressive party or the middle class in Parliament, those heroes of middle-class Liberalism want to monopolize the administration and the legislation of the country. The middle-class Liberalism in power had done great work during the last thirty years. And what are their

achievements? They consist of the advocacy of free trade, of parliamentary reform, of abolition of church-rates, of voluntaryism in religion and education, of non-interference of the State between employers and employed, and of marriage with one's deceased wife's sister. These achievements are not inspired by true culture. Culture is an endeavour to come at reason and the will of God by means of reading, observing, and thinking. There is an apparent want of light in the liberal force which prompts these various items of social and political reform. The pursuit of light and perfection, or the perpetual advance in beauty and wisdom is wanting in the middle-class Liberalism.

The action of Alderman Wilson in allowing the Hyde Park rioters to do as they liked is condemned by Arnold as an example of middle-class inefficiency and incapacity to cope with social anarchy. Honesty, however, Arnold concedes to both aristocrats and the middle class but their honesty is in an "inchoate and untrained state". They still do not possess that light of culture which comes by reading, observing and thinking. Therefore the source of authority cannot rightly be placed in the aristocrats, nor in the middle class, nor in the working class; as they all lack culture, its sweetness and light.

Finally, Arnold distinguishes between "ordinary selves" (the "self" circumscribed by class interests, material pursuit, political orthodoxies) and "best selves" (the "self" which seeks intellectual and internal knowledge of "things as they really are"). The collective "best self" will then serve as the center of authority for an ideal state.

Therefore, only by our best self illuminated by culture, by sweetness and light we can be united and be at harmony with one another and acquire an impersonal point of view which will enable us to see things as they are. When anarchy is a danger to us, we must turn to this best self as authority to bring us back to sanity and to safety.

So, the great thing is to find our best self. Two excellent rules of Bishop Wilson may guide us.

"Firstly, never go against the best light you have; secondly take care that your light be not darkness."

Our best self must inspire faith and provide us with a serious principle of authority. Thus, revolution will turn into evolution — 'a revolution by due course of law.'

There must be great changes, social, political and religious if there must be a revolution. But without order a revolution cannot accomplish itself by due course of law. We must set our faces against any anarchy — that brings risk of tumult and disorder. We must have the courage to prohibit them and see that those in authority suppress with strong hands any symptom of anarchy.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we may say with Arnold that if our best self prevails, our state will become an organ of collective best self, an organ of our national right reason. To this end culture must find all kinds of anarchy in our society.

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