Scrutopia

Class of 2026

Civilisation: *What does it mean to be civilised?*

> Thank you for the inspiring conversations, the friendship and the unforgettable time at Scrutopia.

Lecture Summary - Day 1

Ralph Weir — Why Civilisation Matters: philosophical perspectives
Civilisation's three mysteries:

1. Why did civilisation emerge?
2. What makes civilisation valuable?
3. Where is civilisation headed?

Civilisation as it is commonly understood seems to involve a change in social structure and division of labour, as a result of settling and living in close-knit larger communities. In terms of human history and pre-history, a "sudden phase shift" occurred around 10,000 years ago, where civilised communities emerge in different places roughly synchronously and presumably independently. Agriculture is often given as an explanation, as it creates a surplus in resources and increases efficiency of society, allowing people to do other things than just subsist. Agriculture also normally generates a requirement to settle, if crops are being grown. However, Ralph points out that the commencement of agricultural practices could just as easily be an effect of civilisation's emergence as a cause. Later in the talk, language was proposed as an alternative underlying cause of this phase shift.

Some philosophical perspectives on civilisation that Ralph introduced included Hegel's, which posits that civilisation is required for the emergence of persons able to act freely. Edmund Burke suggests that civilisation is a covenant that is inclusive of the dead and not yet living, and we are each responsible for upholding that contract. Rousseau's critique of civilisation was introduced, whereby the very wealth and excess that civilisation is able to produce leads to the degradation of certain virtues which are required to uphold that civilisation. This was likened to the theory of Ibn Khaldūn. Rousseau also had a second argument against civilisation in his critique, which was that an unequal distribution of wealth/property leads to jealousy, and this makes 'being civilised' a matter of disingenuity, as outward manners belie inner competitiveness. Ralph started to explore in his lecture how culture and civilisation may be different, and this was a source of questions, as we started to realise how complicated that distinction can be. He also gave his own critiques of civilisation, such as the fact that civilisation doesn't clearly lead to good societies, nor also that it ensures everyone's goodness within a society, even if that society can itself be considered good. Although he pointed out some flaws in Rousseau's argument, he does think that widespread criticism of civilisation, across civilisations, creates a strong case for civilisation being only a limited and contingent source of value.

Discussing the value of civilisation: Aristotle and Rousseau were contrasted in terms of how they understand human nature. For Aristotle, all things have a 'telos', or 'end', and the human 'telos' is to be political and live in organised society. Therefore civilisation is valuable as it helps us to achieve our telos. However Rousseau thinks of nature as something underneath all of the social and cultural layers of a person, and thus civilisation as contrary to nature, squashing it.

Matthew Arnold gives us some consolation if we worry, like Rousseau, that civilisation can eventually lead to a decline in virtue, because the real value of civilisation lies in the intellectual and aesthetic parts of culture it allows to flourish.

Ultimately there are probably trade-offs involved with a civilisation, where in some respects it helps us to achieve more fully our nature, but in others it involves suppressing our nature. Freud was referenced here, as explaining why this leads to peoples' ambivalence about the idea of civilisation.

Samuel Hughes — The Civic Conception of Architecture

Samuel spoke about the role architecture plays in civilisation, and how architecture has some important differences to other art forms because of this role.

Firstly, architecture is a public art. This means it is not experienced by choice, and so there are specific moral concerns that may be had when considering architecture. For one, Samuel–and Roger–argued that it should not be built to be 'challenging' for the viewer/passer-by, as this is an undemocratic thing to do and makes peoples' surroundings less pleasant. It also brings architecture artificially to the foreground of peoples' day-to-day. On the other hand, private art may well be challenging, and is often all the better for it.

Secondly, architecture should not be a genius art. This means that styles should be adopted which not only look nice but also are easy enough for the ordinary, non-exceptional architect to execute in most cases. This will help to achieve an aesthetically good result for more buildings, and therefore is better for citizens.

Modernist architecture, although it can be executed well, would most accurately be described as a 'genius' style in architecture, since it is very hard to so execute it. This is one reason why it is not a very good style to widely adopt. Other reasons include the fact that not having "corridor" streets—streets lined by buildings looking down upon them from opposite sides—creates a feeling of insecurity.

Changing architectural practices is more of a cultural, than political, effort. As Mikołaij discussed later in the week, disillusionment with the cultures that gave rise to the devastation of 20th century wars is what caused a shift towards the modern/post-modern forms of architecture.

Day 2

Anthony O'Hear — National Conservatism: Blessing or Curse?

In the beautiful surroundings of his library, Sherborne House and its grounds, Anthony spoke to us about the risks of nationalistic efforts to 'export' features of a civilisation from one place to another. He referred to British pan-Arabist policy in the 20th century, and also other examples such as the British Empire's establishment of a legal system in countries that didn't have the requisite stability. In terms of the former, his crucial reference was Elie Kedourie's book *The Chatham House Version* (1970). Chatham House was a key institution in developing and supporting pan-Arabist ideas, under the leadership of Arthur Toynbee from the 1930s to 1960s, and one of the foreign policy's main aims was to overturn the Ottoman Empire, by encouraging Arab revolts against the empire which would be rewarded with British supported independence and the creation of Arab states. The sad result of this would be the loss of many Jewish and Christian communities in countries like Iraq, either due to persecution, or in the case of Jews a move to Isreal encouraged further by Zionism.

Anthony's talk encouraged humility when it comes to imposing a value system abroad, and stressed risks of holding some universalist doctrine. The temptation that can arise from a comfortable institution abroad to impose an ideal situation on another country is often misguided and doesn't account for the details of the place.

Day 3

Georgios Varouxakis — What is Civilisation and what is Western Civilisation?

Georgios's jam-packed talk looked at how we define civilisation in general, and then at the history of the idea of western civilisation specifically.

The term civilisation is generally normative, which makes its definition contentious. Lucien Febvre suggests that civilisation is a societal 'telos', and it is worked towards through a "gradual process of social refinement". It is therefore a positive thing. The 'Germano-Coleridgian school' (as described by Mill) would separate culture and civilisation (cf. Matthew Arnold, who understands culture to be a part of civilisation). Thomas Mann for example takes civilisation, with its ideals of moderation and scepticism, to be contrary to culture and passion. World War I was characterised by Giorgios as a war between the defence of German culture versus surrounding civilisations of Europe which sought to destroy it.

'West' has been a term in use since the 19th century, and Giorgios explained how it came out of the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), which was dominated by Alexander I of Russia, in order to define the rest of Europe in opposition to a dominant Russia. The term was consolidated by Auguste Comte 1820-1840. This view put forward by

Giorgios pushes back against the idea that the term came into use in the late 19th century to defend British Imperialism. Giorgios argues that the key distinctive feature of Western Civilisation is its ability to be self-critical, and from this, to change. 'Wokeism' can be thought of as emerging from this. The West may also be thought of as a culmination of christianity, rationalism, and ancient Greek and Roman culture/civilisation.

Ewa Atanassow — Roundtable discussion: Civilisation and its Discontents based on extracts from the short story "Bill" by Roger Scruton in *Souls in the Twilight* (2018)

Ewa guided through a close reading of the short story 'Bill' from Roger's book 'Souls in the Twilight' (2018). Ewa said she felt that it was important to use a 'primary' text to get an understanding of Roger Scruton's thoughts about civilisation and our response. The subject of the story – Bill – may well be a portrait of the author and certainly shows Roger's thoughts on civilisation and modernity. It is also a very late work and shows an ongoing concern for the time we live in.

Some thoughts and questions raised in response to the text:

- Why choose fiction as a genre?
- How do we both fight for civilisation and keep hold of its values?
- The fact of mortality gives the story much of its poignancy.
- The protagonist finds hope, that resists the doom of both Bill and e.g. Spengler. The protagonist at some point moves away from the self-pity he felt earlier on in the story.
- Like in the *Great Gatsby*, the narrator has the benefit of hindsight, which lends a wistful element, and ties in with the 'Four Quartets' reference in the [focal] passage.
- What does twilight refer to? The twilight years of a civilisation perhaps (Hegel's Owl of Minerva), but may it also be a hopeful image, a time of reflection?
- What does it mean to be modern?
- What does it mean to be conservative in the modern context?
- Bill's lack of status.

Day 4

Ján Hreško — The cultivated mind: Ján Sokol and Roger Scruton on culture, civilisation, and religion.

Ján spoke to us about the philosophy of Ján Sokol. He was a dissident during the Soviet years and signatory of Charter 77.

Sokol developed a theory which divides the human experience into three layers: the civilisational layer; the cultural layer; and the religious layer. Each depends on the next; so the civilisational layer depends upon the cultural layer, which in turn depends on a religious layer. Civilisation denotes the norms and customs of relating to each other. It isn't something we particularly think about, but its value is partly derived from this fact, as we are able to interact easily and without conflict within a civilisation. The cultural layer refers to any creative activity. Some exceptional individuals will add to the cultural layer something new, and thus they will change the culture they are in, from within. Most don't do this, but their creativity still belongs in the cultural layer. The religious layer speaks to the mystery of creativity: from whence do new ideas come? Evidence that this question tends to lead to a religious answer is that people describe inspiration as something external to us, for example the Greek muses. Ján clarified that the religious layer does not mean that the person must believe in God, but more it captures a contemplative part of our experience, and the presence of certain emotions such as wonder and gratitude.

There is a delicate balance between the layers of experience, and if we are too much engaged with the civilisational layer, we lose touch with our religious selves. Evidence of this in modern civilisation is the prominence of the idea of self-expression in art, as art ceases to have a religious core.

Ján discussed Sokol's *Ethics of Heritage* in the second part of his talk. He discussed Sokol's ideas around what we are to do with the culture we inherent, which is passed on to us actively from individuals and institutions. We do not own this heritage, but rather receive it and are stewards of it. There is a responsibility in life to preserve this heritage, but also to consider whether there is anything that we think we need to try to reform or perhaps get rid of. Without our cultural heritage, human beings are "unfinished". Therefore we would be neglecting our duty to subsequent generations not to pass it on. Caring for institutions in an example of an obligation we have under Sokol's ethics of heritage.

Day 5

Jonathan Gaisman — "The Stillness Between Two Waves of the Sea": Thoughts on Beauty in the Philosophies of Roger Scruton and Iain McGilchrist.

Jonathan's talk was looking at the idea of beauty, and the question of why there is beauty in the world. He discussed various philosophical views on beauty, such as whether it is objective (e.g. Plato – the form of the good/beautiful), subjective (Hume and empiricism), relational (C.S. Lewis – relation between the object and God; McGilchrist – relation between subject and object). Roger's philosophy of beauty was put forward by Jonathon as ten propositions:

1. Beauty is real and has transcendental value
2. It also has objective value
3. Beauty cannot be faked. It is self-verifying.
4. It's essence is in giving pleasure to the beholder, particularly a contemplative pleasure.
5. The pleasure derived from beauty is non-instrumental.
6. The object of beauty must exist.
7. Experiencing beauty creates a relationship between subject and object. The object is irreplaceable, particularly in a loving/personal relationship.
8. The pursuit of beauty is a moral act. It is a source of hope.
9. Beauty is sacred.
10. Beauty is ineffable – it "instantly deserts expression".

Goethe's couplet in the closing remarks: "Why am I transient, O Zeus? / Because, I made only the transient beautiful."

Day 6

Mikołaj Slawkowski-Rode — Civilisation, Collapse and Continuity: a Lesson From Ruins.

Mikołaj discussed the passing of civilisations and the ruins they may leave in their wake, and what our attitudes to those ruins might mean. From a zenith in aesthetic appreciation during the Romantic period, the acceptance of ruins has since declined, as the catastrophes of the twentieth century wars, as well as, for example in Britain, the legacy of and feelings towards imperialism, have led many countries to disown their pasts and wish not preserve the old styles and create new ones that capture new ideals. Mikołaj's talk dwelled upon just why the romantics developed their attachment to the past, discussing received ideas of the effects of industrialisation on the availability of a rich spiritual life with genuine heritage. However, he argued that actually acceptance of ruins appears frequently throughout history, and indicates not simply a sentimental attachment to the past, but an important acceptance of collapse and willingness to learn from the past.

Discussing where we are today, Mikołaj suggests that technological advance belies an underlying stagnation in our civilisation. He describes it as 'presentist', where both the past and the future are given hardly any import compared to the needs and desires of the present. This has led to various dysfunctions in our society, for example an inability to invest in projects which have a long-term benefit despite being challenging to implement now. Mikołaj also criticises the fraudulence of these ideas, as extremely wealthy people profit from shoddy investment that leaves places far less beautiful and unable to perform their function.

Mikołaj's talk also discussed analogous attitudes in the post-modern world to personal loss as to our civilisational past, as we are encouraged to "let go" and "move on" from loss. In fact we ought to seek to retain what we shared with that person, through memory and valuing certain things, and it is our duty to that person not just something we do for our own wellbeing, and similarly within a civilisation we have a duty to honour its past if we want to retain our place in it.

Many thanks to all those who took part in making 2026 a very special year.

Sophie, Abbi & Lucy
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