In *Culture and Anarchy*, Matthew Arnold (1822-88) articulated a theory of culture that continues to influence thinking about the value of the humanities in higher education. He defined *culture* in idealist terms, as something to strive for, and in this respect his theory differs from its anthropological counterpart. Anthropology views culture not as something to be acquired but rather as “a whole way of life,” something we already have. This second usage was also a Victorian invention, spelled out around the same time in Edward B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871). (See [Peter Melville Logan, “On Culture: Edward B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, 1871.″](http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=peter-logan-on-culture-edward-b-tylors-primitive-culture-1871)) The simultaneous appearance of the two new theories of culture suggests an overlapping interest in responding to one and the same problem. Each redefines *culture* from a term limited to individuals to one that encompasses society as a whole. In doing so, each has difficulty actually defining *culture*, while being considerably better at explaining what is not culture. For Arnold, the opposite of culture was “doing as one likes,” his term for individuals who act out of self-interest, without regard for the greater good. He did not see this as a choice so much as the consequence of an inability to imagine a world beyond one’s limited, subjective perspective. In this sense, “doing as one likes” closely resembles the problem Tylor identified among “primitives,” who displayed the same incapacity. Notwithstanding the evident difference between Arnold’s treatise on Victorian Britain and Tylor’s on human prehistory, both works focus on the problem of overcoming a narrow subjectivism and learning to comprehend the social body as a whole. The two are thus more alike than not, representing different approaches to the same problem, rather than two unrelated uses of the terms *culture* (see Stocking).

Later uses of Arnold’s ideas by educators, scholars, and even politicians tend to obscure the deeper connection between the two theories. Arnold’s culture is idealist; it represents something to be strived for, and this makes it prone to claims of elitism. His concept is sometimes used to equate culture with the mastery of a body of exemplary materials, such as a set of “Great Books.” In this view, Arnoldian culture is ultimately something available primarily to the educated fortunate few while inaccessible to many.

It did not start out that way. *Culture and Anarchy* was original in contesting precisely this elitist view of culture as connoisseurship, or an appreciation of the fine arts. This was the current sense of the word when Arnold began writing. The word *culture* originated in the world of farming, as a term for tending crops or animals, which is where we get the word *agriculture* (Williams 87-93). From this, it developed a metaphorical meaning in the eighteenth century for culturing the mind, rather than crops. And in this latter sense it became associated by the early nineteenth century with a knowledge of Greek, Latin, and the fine arts. Because these were standard elements of a gentleman’s education, the acquisition of culture was a sign of one’s elite status.

Arnold objects to this narrow definition of *culture*, calling it a combination of “vanity and ignorance,” and attacking its acolytes as people who value culture solely as a form of “class distinction,” a “badge” that separates them “from other people who have not got it” (*Culture* 90). Instead, he argues, culture is a combination of broad intellectual interests with the goal of social improvement. “There is a view in which all the love of our neighbor, the impulses towards action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it,—motives eminently such as are called social,—come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part” (91). Culture combines this commitment to “the moral and social passion for doing good” with the ideal of scientific objectivity, “the sheer desire to see things as they are” (91). Rather than a means to differentiate the elite from the mass, Arnoldian culture assumes the elite and the mass have a shared humanity. This was a novel use of the term at the time and was seen then as the most striking aspect of his new idea, as his well known critic, Frederic Harrison, recognized in his satire on Arnold’s ideas, “Culture: A Dialogue” (1867).

Both personal and social factors contributed to Arnold’s redefinition. He was the son of a famous educator, Thomas Arnold (1795-1842), who insisted that, whatever goals one pursued in life, they had to be socially useful. It was not enough, in other words, to pursue one’s interests for selfish reasons alone. As a dedicated poet in his early adulthood, Arnold grappled with the problem of reconciling his love of fine art with the need for social utility, a topic that formed the mainstay of his written correspondence with his closest friend, the poet Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-61). In this regard, Arnold was representative of an era in which many artists questioned the relevance of art to society, even as Victorian Britain underwent a radical social transformation, leaving behind its agricultural past in the wake of the new industrial economy. In the middle decades of the century, Britain was particularly turbulent, famously unsettled by the inhumanity of early industrialism and the demands of a vocal working-class for political representation. In one of the most well known incidents, on 23 July 1866, a large crowd gathered at Hyde Park in London to hear speakers on voting rights. They were confronted by police when the government declared the meeting an illegal assembly. Soldiers were called out when 200,000 people entered the park anyway, knocking down fences meant to keep them out. The incident precipitated Arnold’s thinking, and its violence represents the “Anarchy” in *Culture and Anarchy*. While staunchly opposing violence, he nevertheless understood the need for social change. As one of his biographers notes, Arnold’s job as a School’s Inspector exposed him “to more working-class children than any other poet who has ever lived” (Honan 218-19). The injection of social change into his new theory was the formula he sought to combine his own love of fine art with social utility.

His ideas were predicated as a solution to the problem represented by the Hyde Park Incident, which he believed demonstrated the need for greater social unity to counter the danger of a divided society. He described Britain as suffering from the conflicting interests of three different classes of people, and he gave each a new name meant to describe its predominant trait. The land-owning aristocracy are “Barbarians,” referencing their medieval origin as warriors in ironic contrast to their modern indulgence in a life of privileged ease. The commercial and industrial middle class of manufacturers, artisans, shopkeepers, and bankers are “Philistines,” a term that ever since has described a combination of materialism with a disdain for art and the intellect. Poorly-paid laborers, agricultural tenants, scavengers, and the unemployed are the “Populace.” This last was by far the largest of the three classes. To Arnold, its discontent represented the greatest threat of all to British social stability, and he used the Hyde Park incident to illustrate this. But the central problem was that all three groups viewed the world differently because the perception of each was limited to its own self interest. Barbarians want higher prices for the grain that grows on their land to increase their wealth. But the Populace want lower prices for the loaf of bread made from that grain. And the Philistine factory owners fear having to increase wages to workers who could no longer afford a loaf of bread. This historical conflict was enshrined in the political fight over Britain’s “Corn Laws,” marked by massive demonstrations until their repeal in 1846, and it serves as one example of Arnold’s analysis of Britain’s central problem: none of the three classes understood or acknowledged the needs of the others. Without that mutuality, society was hopelessly locked in civil conflict.

He called this class-bound perspective the “ordinary self,” while its opposite was the “best self,” a transcendent perspective that recognizes the needs of others and puts the greater good ahead of class interest or personal gain. As he explained, “in each class there are born a certain number of natures with a curiosity about their best self, with a bent for seeing things as they are, for disentangling themselves from machinery, for simply concerning themselves with reason and the will of God, and doing their best to make these prevail; —for the pursuit, in a word, of perfection” (144).  The best self exemplified his cultural ideal because it reflects the same “moral and social passion for doing good” that distinguished his theory of culture from others. Furthermore, individuals who are dominated by the best self, he says, belong to no class, since the best self “always tends to take them out of their class,” regardless of their actual social position (146). Neither Barbarian, nor Philistine, nor Populace, such people were “aliens,” as he called them. Where did their detachment come from? The “number of those who will succeed in developing this happy instinct will be greater or smaller, in proportion both to the force of the original instinct within them, and to the hindrance or encouragement which it meets with from without” (146). Many are born with this propensity, but education and other forms of social acceptance are needed to bring it out. Increasing the number of aliens in society was a central concern of *Culture and Anarchy*, which also argued that the State should restructure education with this goal in mind. Arnold’s use of aliens entailed a paradox: while defining them as the essential agents of social reform, he also insisted that they were “out of their class.” Since society is defined by the three classes, aliens are not “in” society so much as outside it, and yet these outsiders were the lynchpin of reforming the society to which they do not belong.

If class conflicts divided society in the present, they were not the only cause of civil fractures. Changes in social values over time divided it as well, and these contributed to the present state of anarchy. Arnold described social history as alternating between two poles, epitomized by the two cultures of Western classical antiquity as Victorians understood them. In Rome, an interest in efficiency, practicality, and orthodoxy dominated, and thus the Romans were brilliant builders and had a disciplined military. In classical Greece, innovation and interests in creativity and beauty predominated, and so Greek sculpture and philosophy were their primary strengths. Calling the former “Hebraism” (he associated Roman discipline with Jewish dietary prescriptions) and the latter “Hellenism,” Arnold insisted that both were needed, and that when society was dominated by one or the other, the job of culture was to advocate for balance. “The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*,” he explained, referencing creativity on the one hand and discipline on the other (165). And he argued, “between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them” (163-64). At present, he argued, Britain is predominantly Hebraic, meaning that it values business and practicality more than art or beauty; similarly, he thought people adhered to social conventions and religious laws rather than valuing spontaneity and novelty. Historically, this pattern began in the period following the Renaissance, he claimed, when Britain was dominated by the Puritans, and their values continued to define British society in the nineteenth century. Culture thus should promote an interest in art and beauty as a response to this imbalance, which he called a “contravention of the natural order” (175). Society needs a strong dose of Hellenism, and so Arnoldian culture favored originality in thought, creativity in art, and experimentation in science, all without regard for practical outcomes.

Arnold particularly attacked conventionality and mindless conformity, whether it stemmed from religion or politics. Instead of thinking for themselves, people accept everything they are told as if it were infallibly good, without considering it further. The belief in Britain’s industrial might, for example, is too often seen as proof of Britain’s greatness, and people stop asking whether or not this industrial might has led to a better life for the British people as a whole. Such beliefs he insisted are “machinery,” tools to accomplish a goal, but too often people confuse the means with the end. “Faith in machinery is, I said, our besetting danger; often in machinery most absurdly disproportioned to the end which this machinery, if it is to do any good at all, is to serve; but always in machinery, as if it has a value in and for itself” (96). Free trade, for example, was thought to be a means to a better economic life, but when it is treated as a sacred cow, people fail to ask the most basic questions: since free trade has not led to a better life for those starving in London’s East End, why should we continue to insist upon free trade as if it were a magical solution to Britain’s problems? And without asking such questions, no one would consider ways to modify free trade to gain the desired end of an improved economic life. The idea of free trade was machinery, but machinery that is fetishized when people think of it as intrinsically valuable, a goal unto itself, rather than a means to an end. Examples of machinery included an uncritical faith in the value of population growth, or industrial production, or railroads, or the accumulation of wealth, or even individual liberty. People idolized the concept of democracy, he claimed, forgetting that it was a means to social justice, and what we care about is social justice, not the idol of democracy itself.

Culture’s solution to these problems is “turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits” (233). Intellectual free play is culture’s central value. Without caring about personal gain or how something might benefit one’s social class, the best self views existing problems in a disinterested fashion, setting aside all self interest to arrive at new ideas for old problems (see Anderson). The alien’s ability to think beyond the ordinary self illustrates this intellectual freedom, and it represents the antidote to the Puritan’s insistence on orthodox conformity. “The Puritan’s great danger,” noted Arnold, is that he thinks he already knows the rule, and so knows all he needs, and “then remains satisfied with a very crude conception of what this rule really is and what it tells him, thinks he has now knowledge and henceforth needs only to act, and, in this dangerous state of assurance and self-satisfaction, proceeds to give full swing to a number of the instincts of his ordinary self” (180). There are no pre-packaged solutions in this theory of culture, no given rules, and indeed such unreflective adherence to conventional ideas is antithetical to the very idea of culture, as Arnold defined it. At the same time, of course, nonconformity by itself was not a cultural value; such a claim would simply repeat the pattern of valuing the machinery while forgetting the goal of intellectual free play.

As we can question the idea that aliens are truly outside their society, so we should question whether free thought as such is ultimately possible. Can thought exist, like aliens, free of all social influence? Arnold’s theory of free play not only raised the issue, it also illustrated exactly why it is so difficult to assert such independence. More than anything else, his theory of free play resembled the laissez faire ideology of free trade (see Logan 54-61). This of course was the same marketplace ideology *Culture and Anarchy* identified as the source of Britain’s social problems. In his classic theory of the marketplace, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Adam Smith argued famously that commodities compete with one another in the open market, and so long as there are no artificial constrains on that market—such as monopolies and tariffs—the market value for a commodity will closely resemble its “natural” value. This logic reappeared in Arnold’s insistence upon the free play of ideas competing with one another, except that Arnold’s was a marketplace of ideas rather than commodities. Conventional wisdom and dogmatism were essentially monopolies in intellectual form that must be eliminated so that ideas can freely circulate to find their natural value in this marketplace of ideas. Paradoxically, Arnold’s concept of intellectual free play replicated the logic of Adam Smith’s political economy. His solution to the social problems created by commercial free trade was the same free trade in another form, that of an intellectual laissez faire promoting the free exchange of ideas. As a result, Arnold’s interest in free play was itself an example of how ideas can be unconsciously shaped by the values of the society in which an author lives. In this sense, Arnold was ultimately a product of his time and his own class, even in asserting the premise of freedom from the contamination of social influence.

In one of Arnold’s most important poems, “Empedocles on Etna” (1852), he raised the question of whether or not intellectual free play was actually possible, given all of the unrecognized social prejudices and emotional responses most people experience. When the philosopher Empedocles asks whether or not he has been a “slave of thought,” rather than free as he imagined, his answer is ambivalent: “Who can say,” he asks, admitting, “I cannot” (1.2.391-95). He then cites as reasons his own emotionalism and conflicts with others. However, he takes consolation in knowing that he has tried: “But I have not grown easy in these bonds— / But I have not denied what bonds these were” (1.2.397-98). The philosopher knows that he is not intellectually free, but he does not confuse the goal of freedom with its absolute realization. This self-awareness lies at the heart of Arnold’s theory of culture. He knows that he does not know. This is a more honest intellectual position than the claim of the Puritan conformist, who thinks that he knows the answer, once and for all, and need think no further about the problem. As Arnold claims in *Culture and Anarchy*, culture is a process, “Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming,” and so one is never completely free nor successful in acquiring culture but rather always unfinished, to one degree or another, and thus still enmeshed in the social, still to some extent a “slave of thought” (94). In such a predicament, one must continue pursuing intellectual freedom while simultaneously realizing that one never actually has it.

This self-awareness matters because it illustrates how far contemporary beliefs about Arnold’s theory of culture have strayed from his original insistence that culture hinges on the willingness to question everything, “to try the very ground on which we appear to stand” (181). Today, Arnold’s complex theory of culture is often reduced to the sound bite of his famous phrase, “the best that is known and thought in the world,” as if culture itself were contained in a set of specific books (“Function” 283). In fact, that phrase comes from his definition of criticism, not of culture, and it described an ongoing process of evaluation. The best was something yet to be determined, not something already known. Otherwise, there would be no reason for the practice of criticism to exist. Nor would there be a need for the complex combination of intellectual pursuit with “the moral and social passion for doing good” that ultimately lay at the heart of his theory of culture.

That broader interest in understanding the social body as a whole links Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* with Tylor’s *Primitive Culture*, and, though both works presented different solutions, they nonetheless identified an inability to grasp that whole as the essential problem any theory of culture has to address.