Our economy today is of course very different from the economies of previous ages. We depend, as our ancestors did, on knowledge; but we have far more knowledge than they. We know more science, more mathematics, more history than they did; we know how to cure diseases, manage crops, communicate at lightning speed and convey our goods and services around the globe. And those with a mastery of this new knowledge occupy a dominant place in our society.

However although we know more than our ancestors, we also know less than they. Our ancestors were in constant contact with each other, living in each other’s presence, and with a vivid sense of the relations of mutual dependence which bound them each to each. Their entertainments were not passive, but involved participation and togetherness. They did not eat in silence in front of a television but conversed at table, and gave constant thanks for their good fortune in being able to do so. They placed a premium on honesty and clarity of expression; words had a special weight for them and the person who could speak well and who could present his feelings and judgements directly had an honoured place in their society. The poet, the orator, the musician and the fool were treated with respect, and in all the trials and troubles of their short and precarious lives nothing was more valuable to them than the fitting words and solemn thoughts that enabled them to face up to their disasters.

In short, although they lacked our kind of knowledge – the knowledge that we know as science and technology – they had knowledge of another kind – the knowledge that we know as culture. They knew what to feel, and how to express it. They knew the difference between good taste and bad, between true sentiment and falsehood, between lasting love and its fleeting caricatures. All this we find in their legacy to us – in the poetry of Chaucer and Shakespeare, in the oratory of Bossuet and Swift, in the music of Monteverdi and Handel. It is why we treasure the great works of art and literature that we have inherited from those periods when life was short and when grief was man’s constant companion.

In my book ‘Culture Counts’ I give a theory of culture, and explain why the knowledge that a high culture contains – which was both natural to our ancestors and also essential if they were to live in such close proximity to suffering – is still useful. It is important to us, as it was to them, to know the difference between real and false sentiment, between love and its substitutes, between gestures, words and customs that unite us with our fellows and those that divide us. That kind of knowledge is precious; but it cannot be acquired by some easy formula, or by studying one of the modern ‘sciences’ of man. On the contrary, sciences like sociology, anthropology and psychology may study culture; but they do not impart it. Culture is not a form of ‘knowledge that’ or even ‘knowledge how’. It involves knowing what to feel, and how to put yourself into relation with others. It is a form of familiarity with the human spirit, and involves an imaginative ability to think outside the narrow confines of self-interest.

It has been said that we live in a ‘culture of narcissism’ (Christopher Lasch) – meaning that we are losing the ability to see ourselves from outside, and to pursue those old ideals of virtue and integrity that make us agreeable to others. Our pleasures have been privatised, and our primary relations are not with other people but with a computer screen. Of course, the complaint is exaggerated; but it contains an element of truth. And here is why I think we ought to be a little sceptical of

The current obsession with the ‘knowledge economy’ should not mislead us: knowledge has always been the principal engine of economic life, and those with the relevant knowledge have always done well. In general, just as knowledge produces a certain kind of economy, so does the economy produce a certain kind of knowledge. The person who knew how to breed sheep, to harvest their wool, and to market it through towns occupied a dominant position in medieval Europe. And in medieval Europe the knowledge of sheep and their ways was eagerly pursued and imparted.
the ‘knowledge economy’ as it has been called – the economy which makes the computer and the internet so central to all our goals and satisfactions. For there is a great difference between knowledge and information – especially information construed as it is today, to mean instructions encoded in digital software. We certainly live in an ‘information economy’, but there comes a point where the growth in information goes hand-in-hand with a loss of knowledge. That knowledge of the human heart which our ancestors used to such effect, and which was contained in the solemn words of their scriptures, the imagery of their poems and the learned counterpoint of their music, is much easier to lose than to gain. And we lose it just as soon as we replace long-term understanding with short-term distraction. This loss of moral and cultural knowledge is precisely what the ‘information economy’ threatens to bring about.

It does not need much thought to recognize that the person surfing the web for pornographic images is the victim of a distracting narcissism; nor can we doubt the damage that he is doing to his capacity for love, sympathy and relationship. But the complaint goes deeper. Information is, by its very nature, unsorted and arbitrary. Until subjected to critical analysis, and gathered under the concepts that understand it and the goals that would put it to use, information is no more than intellectual debris. It becomes knowledge only in a mind shaped by knowledge. Only the person with critical understanding, moral sense and the ability to relate to others, can put the mass of information on the web to proper use. And the web will not provide him with those virtues. That is why culture is still necessary; and it is why we who teach in universities are more than ever required to impart it, and to teach our students how to select from the disordered heap of information that tumbles each day into their computers, the few precious fragments that can be shaped as knowledge.

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