



DISCUSSION



Eagleton, Terry. 'Versions of Culture.'
Chap. 1 In *The Idea of Culture*, 1-31.
Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.



CONTEXT:

Aims, Audience, Structure

- Who is Terry Eagleton?
- When was the chapter written/published?
What does this tell you?
- Who is the paper aimed at? How do you know?
- Where is it set?
- What is the purpose of the chapter?
- How has Eagleton structured the chapter?
- What evidence is he using to support the argument he is making?
- Having read the chapter, what do you now know about culture that you did not know before?

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Published in **2000** (when he was 57 years old)
when he was the Thomas Warton Professor of
English Literature at the University of Oxford
(1992-2001).

The Idea of Culture

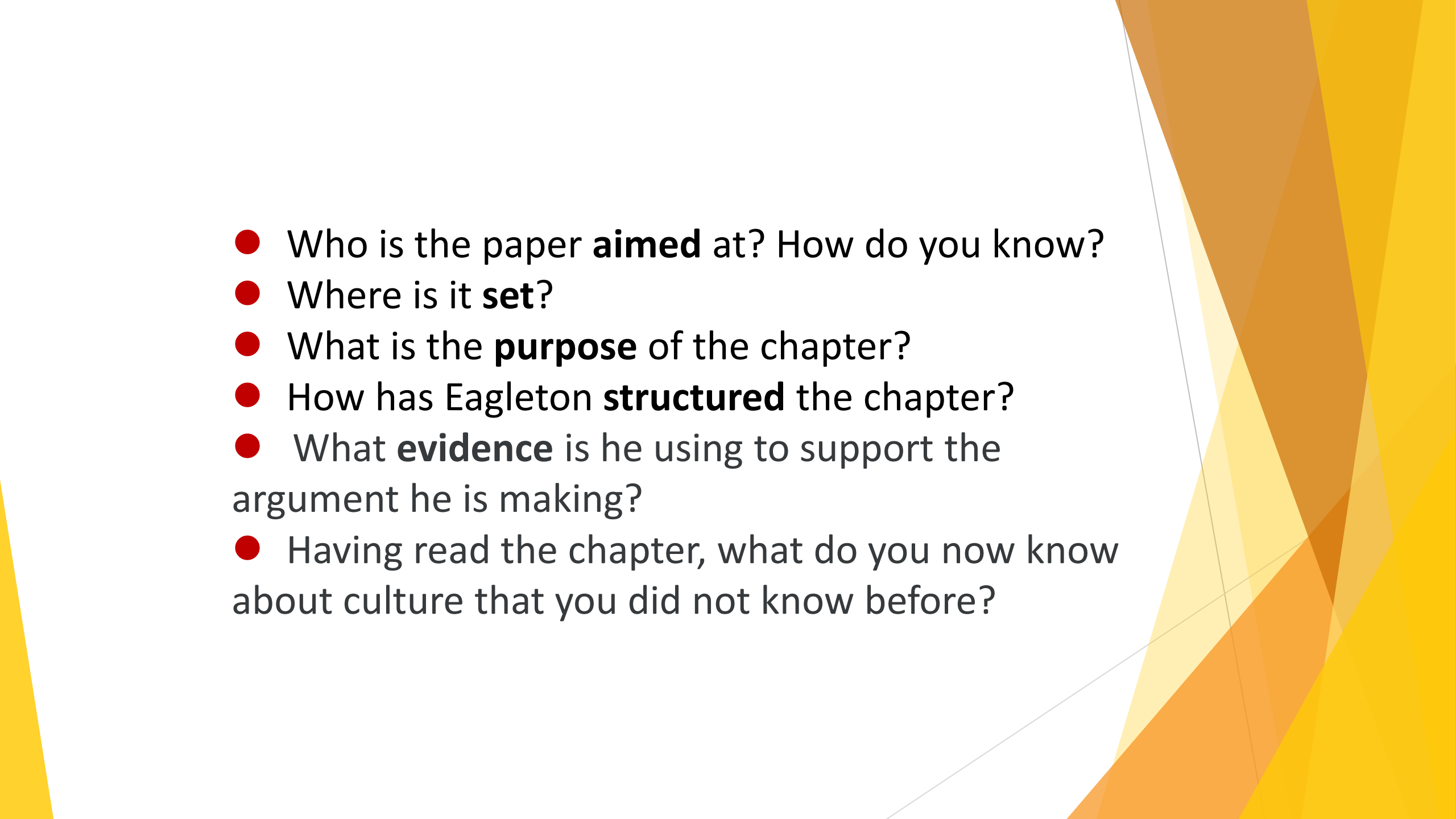
Terry Eagleton

Born 22 February, 1943. This makes him 78 years old in 2021. He grew up in a working class Irish Catholic family in Salford, in the north-west of Lancashire.

He is a British literary theorist, critic, and public intellectual. His thinking is influenced by Marxism and by Christian faith.

He is currently Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University.

 **BLACKWELL**
Publishers

- 
- Who is the paper **aimed** at? How do you know?
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Structure of the article

1

- **Introduces** the topic with a definition of the word 'Culture' and its etymology.

Why does he do this?

Versions of Culture

'Culture' is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite – nature – is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all. Yet though it is fashionable these days to see nature as a derivative of culture, culture, etymologically speaking, is a concept derived from nature. One of its original meanings is 'husbandry', or the tending of natural growth. The same is true of our words for law and justice, as well as of terms like 'capital', 'stock', 'pecuniary' and 'sterling'. The word 'coulter', which is a cognate of 'culture', means the blade of a ploughshare. We derive our word for the finest of human activities from labour and agriculture, crops and cultivation. Francis Bacon writes of 'the culture and manurance of minds', in a suggestive hesitancy between dung and mental distinction. 'Culture' here means an activity, and it was a long time before the word came to denote an entity. Even then, it was probably not until Matthew Arnold that the word dropped such adjectives as 'moral' and 'intellectual' and came to be just 'culture', an abstraction in itself.

Etymologically speaking, then, the now-popular phrase 'cultural materialism' is something of a tautology. 'Culture' at first denoted a thoroughly material process, which was then metaphorically transposed to affairs of the spirit. The word thus charts within its semantic unfolding humanity's own historic shift from rural to urban existence, pig-farming to Picasso, tilling the soil to splitting the atom. In Marxist parlance, it brings together both base and superstructure in a single

● Discusses key philosophical issues:

How does he build on his initial definition of the word 'culture'?

notion. Perhaps behind the pleasure we are supposed to take in 'cultivated' people lurks a race-memory of drought and famine. But the semantic shift is also paradoxical: it is the urban dwellers who are 'cultivated', and those who actually live by tilling the soil who are not. Those who cultivate the land are less able to cultivate themselves. Agriculture leaves no leisure for culture.

The Latin root of the word 'culture' is *colere*, which can mean anything from cultivating and inhabiting to worshipping and protecting. Its meaning as 'inhabit' has evolved from the Latin *colonus* to the contemporary 'colonialism', so that titles like *Culture and Colonialism* are, once again, mildly tautological. But *colere* also ends up via the Latin *cultus* as the religious term 'cult', just as the idea of culture itself in the modern age comes to substitute itself for a fading sense of divinity and transcendence. Cultural truths – whether high art or the traditions of a people – are sometimes sacred ones, to be protected and revered. Culture, then, inherits the imposing mantle of religious authority, but also has uneasy affinities with occupation and invasion; and it is between these two poles, positive and negative, that the concept is currently pitched. It is one of those rare ideas which have been as integral to the political left as they are vital to the political right, and its social history is thus exceptionally tangled and ambivalent.

If the word 'culture' traces a momentous historical transition, it also encodes a number of key philosophical issues. Within this single term, questions of freedom and determinism, agency and endurance, change and identity, the given and the created, come dimly into focus. If culture means the active tending of natural growth, then it suggests a dialectic between the artificial and the natural, what we do to the world and what the world does to us. It is an epistemologically 'realist' notion, since it implies that there is a nature or raw material beyond ourselves; but it also has a 'constructivist' dimension, since this raw material must be worked up into humanly significant shape. So it is less a matter of deconstructing the opposition between culture and nature than of recognizing that the term 'culture' is already such a deconstruction.

In a further dialectical turn, the cultural means we use to transform

nature are themselves derived from it. The point is made rather more poetically by Polixenes in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*:

Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean; so over that art,
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes . . . This is an art
Which does mend nature – change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.

(Act IV, sc. iv)

Nature produces culture which changes nature: it is a familiar motif of the so-called Last Comedies, which see culture as the medium of nature's constant self-refashioning. If Ariel in *The Tempest* is all airy agency and Caliban all earthy inertia, a more dialectical interplay of culture and nature can be found in Gonzalo's description of Ferdinand swimming from the wrecked ship:

Sir, he may live;
I saw him beat the surges under him,
And ride upon their backs; he trod the water,
Whose enmity he flung aside, and breasted
The surge most swoln that met him; his bold head
'Bove the contentious waves he kept, and oared
Himself with his good arms in lusty stroke
To th' shore . . .

(Act II, sc. i)

Swimming is an apt image of the interplay in question, since the swimmer actively creates the current which sustains him, plying the waves so they may return to buoy him up. Thus Ferdinand 'beats the surges' only to 'ride upon their backs', treads, flings, breasts and oars an ocean which is by no means just pliable material but 'contentious', antagonistic, recalcitrant to human shaping. But it is just this resistance which allows him to act upon it. Nature itself produces the means of its own

● Draws a **conclusion** to the chapter.

Eagleton's definition

most exquisitely conscious products of human history, its more general meaning signalled exactly the opposite. With its resonance of organic process and stealthy evolution, culture was a quasi-determinist concept, meaning those features of social life – custom, kinship, language, ritual, mythology – which choose us far more than we choose them. Ironically, then, the idea of culture cut both above and below ordinary social life, at once incomparably more conscious and considerably less calculable. 'Civilization', by contrast, has a ring of agency and awareness about it, an aura of rational projection and urban planning, as a collective project by which cities are wrested from swamps and cathedrals raised to the skies. Part of the scandal of Marxism had been to treat civilization as though it were culture – to write, in short, the history of humanity's political unconscious, of those social processes which, as Marx put it, go on 'behind the backs' of the agents concerned. As with Freud a little later, a finely civilized consciousness is dislodged to reveal the hidden forces which put it in place. As one reviewer of *Capital* commented to its author's approval: 'If in the history of civilisation, the conscious elements play a part so subordinate, then it is self-evident that a critical enquiry whose subject-matter is civilisation, can, less than anything else, have for its basis any form of, or any result of, consciousness'.²⁶

Culture, then, is the unconscious *verso* of the *recto* of civilized life, the taken-for-granted beliefs and predilections which must be dimly present for us to be able to act at all. It is what comes naturally, bred in the bone rather than conceived by the brain. It is not surprising, then, that the concept should have found such a hospitable place in the study of 'primitive' societies, which in the eyes of the anthropologist allowed their myths, rituals, kinship systems and ancestral traditions to do their thinking for them. They were a kind of South Sea island version of English common law and the House of Lords, living in a Burkeian utopia in which instinct, custom, piety and ancestral law worked all by themselves, without the meddling intervention of analytical reason. The 'savage mind' thus had a particular importance for cultural modernism, which from T.S. Eliot's fertility cults to Stravinsky's rites of spring could find in it a shadowy critique of Enlightenment rationality.

One could even have one's theoretical cake and eat it, finding in these 'primitive' cultures both a critique of such rationality and a confirmation of it. If their supposedly concrete, sensuous habits of thought offered a rebuke to the desiccated reason of the West, the unconscious codes which governed that thought had all the exacting rigour of algebra or linguistics. So it was that the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss could present such 'primitives' as both consolingly similar to and exotically different from ourselves. If they thought in terms of earth and moon, they did so with all the elegant complexity of nuclear physics.²⁷ Tradition and modernity could thus be agreeably harmonized, a project which structuralism had inherited, unfinished, from high modernism. The most avant-garde mentality thus turned full circle to meet up with the most archaic; indeed for some Romantic thinkers it was only in this way that a dissolute Western culture could be regenerated. Having reached a point of complex decadence, civilization could refresh itself only at the fountain of culture, looking backward in order to move forward. Modernism accordingly put time into reverse gear, finding in the past an image of the future.

Structuralism was not the only branch of literary theory which could trace some of its origins back to imperialism. Hermeneutics, behind which lurks an anxious query as to whether the other is intelligible at all, is hardly irrelevant to the project, and neither is psychoanalysis, which unearths an atavistic subtext at the very roots of human consciousness. Mythological or archetypal criticism does something of the same, while post-structuralism, one of whose leading exponents hails from a former French colony, calls into question what it sees as a profoundly Eurocentric metaphysics. As for postmodern theory, nothing could be less to its taste than the idea of a stable, pre-modern, tightly unified culture, at the very thought of which it reaches for its hybridity and open-endedness. But the post- and pre-modern are more akin than this would suggest. What they share in common is the high, sometimes extravagant respect they accord to culture as such. In fact one might claim that culture is a pre-modern and postmodern rather than modern idea; if it flourishes in the era of modernity, it is largely as a trace of the past or an anticipation of the future.

● Draws a **conclusion** to the chapter.

What links pre-modern and postmodern orders is that for both, though for quite different reasons, culture is a dominant level of social life. If it bulks so large in traditional societies, it is because it is less a 'level' at all than a pervasive medium within which other kinds of activity go on. Politics, sexuality and economic production are still caught up to some extent in a symbolic order of meaning. As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins observes, in a smack at the Marxist base/superstructure model, 'In the tribal cultures, economy, polity, ritual, and ideology do not appear as distinct "systems"'.²⁸ In the postmodern world, culture and social life are once again closely allied, but now in the shape of the aesthetics of the commodity, the spectacularization of politics, the consumerism of life-style, the centrality of the image, and the final integration of culture into commodity production in general. Aesthetics, which began life as a term for everyday perceptual experience and only later became specialized to art, had now come full circle and rejoined its mundane origin, just as two senses of culture – the arts and the common life – had now been conflated in style, fashion, advertising, media and the like.

What happens in between is modernity, for which culture is not the most vital of concepts. Indeed it is hard for us to think ourselves back to a time when all of our own most fashionable buzz-words – *bodiliness, difference, locality, imagination, cultural identity* – were seen as the obstacles to an emancipatory politics, rather than its terms of reference. Culture for the Enlightenment meant, roughly speaking, those regressive attachments which prevented us from entering upon our citizenship of the world. It signified our sentiment for place, nostalgia for tradition, preference for tribe, reverence for hierarchy. Difference was largely a reactionary doctrine which denied the equality to which all men and women were entitled. An assault on Reason in the name of intuition or the wisdom of the body was a charter for mindless prejudice. Imagination was a sickness of the mind which prevented us from seeing the world as it was, and so of acting to transform it. And to deny Nature in the name of Culture was almost certainly to end up on the wrong side of the barricades.

Culture, to be sure, still had its place; but as the modern age un-

folded, that place was either oppositional or supplementary. Either culture became a rather toothless form of political critique, or it was the protected area into which one could siphon off all of those potentially disruptive energies, spiritual, artistic or erotic, for which modernity could make less and less provision. This area, like most officially sacred spaces, was both venerated and ignored, centred and sidelined. Culture was no longer a description of what one was, but of what one might be or used to be. It was less a name for your own group than for your bohemian dissenters, or, as the nineteenth century drew on, for less sophisticated peoples living a long way off. For culture no longer to describe social existence as it speaks eloquently of a certain kind of society. As Andrew Milner points out, 'it is only in modern industrial democracies that "culture" and "society" become excluded from both politics and economics . . . modern society is understood as distinctively and unusually asocial, its economic and political life characteristically "normless" and "value-free", in short, uncultured'.²⁹ Our very notion of culture thus rests on a peculiarly modern alienation of the social from the economic, meaning from material life. Only in a society whose everyday existence seems drained of value could 'culture' come to exclude material reproduction; yet only in this way could the concept become a critique of that life. As Raymond Williams comments, culture emerges as a notion from 'the recognition of the practical separation of certain moral and intellectual activities from the driven impetus of a new kind of society'. This notion then becomes 'a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgement . . . as a mitigating and rallying alternative'.³⁰ Culture is thus symptomatic of a division which it offers to overcome. As the sceptic remarked of psychoanalysis, it is itself the illness to which it proposes a cure.

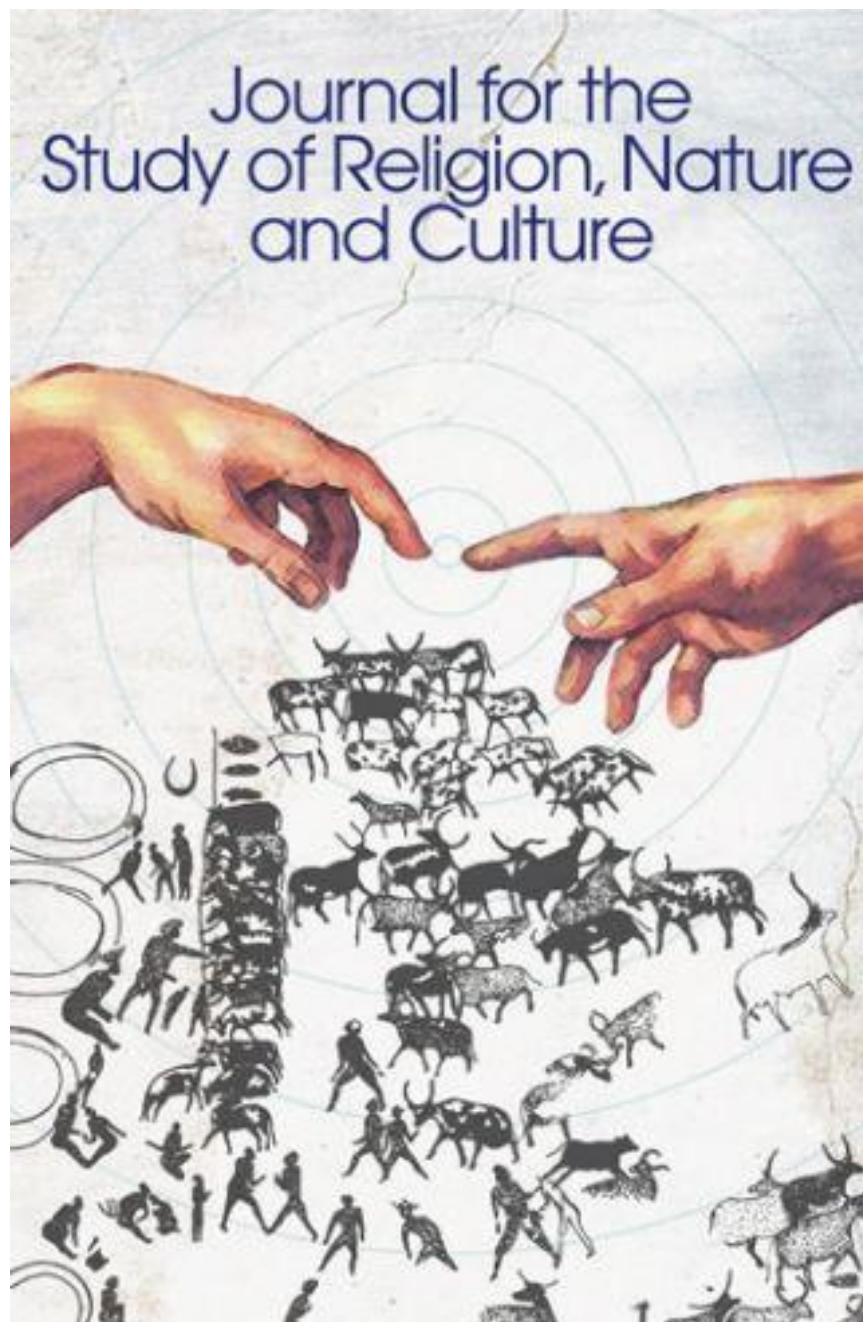
Raymond Williams was Eagleton's supervisor at Cambridge.

Structure of the article

- **Introduces** the topic with a definition of the word 'Culture' and its etymology.
Why does he do this?
- **Discusses** key philosophical issues:
How does he build on his initial definition of the word 'culture'?
- Draws a **conclusion** to the chapter.

ASK QUESTIONS:

- (page 23): **What does he mean by** 'Culture is not some vague fantasy of fulfilment, but a set of potentials bred by history and subversively at work within it'?
- (page 26): **What does he mean by** 'the anthropological meaning of culture'?



Special Issue
Inside the World of Contemporary Astrology

Guest Edited by
Darrelyn Gunzburg

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Next week

PLATO'S TIMAEUS: 27-44

We will be focusing on Timaeus' discussion on how the origin of the cosmos, particularly on how the World Soul was created.

You can access the LOEB edition through the UWTSD online library:

https://www-loebclassics-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/platophilosopher_timaeus/1929/pb_LCL234.17.xml?rskey=8Y1f1b&result=1

OR there are two good versions if you wish to buy this:

- Plato, Timaeus, trans. R.G.Bury, Cambridge Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1931.
- Plato. Complete Works. Edited by John Cooper, M. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 1997.