Continental European culture, and French culture is certainly a strong example, tends toward strong aristocratic influences, particularly toward accentuating certain small details of life such as social etiquette and esthetic appreciation. This brings a certain fitness and joy to everyday life, such as through tasty cooking or a sense of beauty in the house such as produced by fresh flowers, but weakens concern in the public sphere and in politics which is left to elites. It produces a kind of pettiness in attitudes, often a kind of self-centered vanity which is reinforced by social gatherings of the like-minded, a concern for the immediate and an unconcern for the governing principles of society which are left to the elites.

British culture in a sense revolted against much of this, though the British upper class is closest to Continental Europeans in attitudes. Perhaps that is why at professional dinners you often find the professional classes eating in effect French cooking, since they know better than to use their native cooking for such special occasions, or perhaps at all if they can afford a chef.

In effect the British middle and working classes have become adapted, perhaps even interested, in maintaining a certain drabness in the aesthetic sphere of everyday life, compensating by certain attitudes that might be described by outsiders as feelings of grandiosity. Ambition to a large extent is what drives everyday life which is therefore not enjoyed, but endured as a stepping stone to great heights of achievement, or if this fails a kind of stoic living for the future becomes a permanent character trait. Work is enhanced in importance because it can lead to great social and personal success, eventually.

As for the consumption side of life, it is here where a sense of excess becomes evident, the reward for the lack of joy in so many small details of life. The British once were known for eating meat three times a day, with the invention of the English breakfast of bacon and eggs, and their love for eating juicy steaks, and many still do, which is a great achievement if you’re not too concerned with subtle flavorings. Sport is also very important, as relaxing is put off to some indefinite future, as well as emotional expressiveness, and in its stead achievement, even of a
symbolic kind, must substitute. No wonder such traditions, once strongly influenced by puritanical traditions as well, influence people to have great temptations toward addictions, alcoholic and otherwise, as well as extreme resistance to such temptations, as if only big emotional satisfactions, paid for and then consumed, are available, not many small, aesthetic, and socially-colored ones. All these achievements are pale imitations and substitutes for ones that really brings pleasure to the British stoic’s soul, pleasure that would fulfill a feeling of self-righteousness and social superiority, that is to say moral crusades. These unify the more commonly found amorphous mass of fellow citizens much better than mere pleasure-seeking does.

Of course such moral crusades are usually in reaction to the actions of villains, and this is what distinguishes British culture from similar cultures such as those of northern Europe and particularly Germany, where a sense of brooding, as opposed to the British expecting little out of life other than work and consumption, leads to metaphysical and theoretical speculation of a rather dramatic sort. This dramatic and histrionic sense often leads to messianic (when it’s not just paranoid) tendencies that start out culturally but often become political also. This is especially true among self-defined intellectuals, and Britain produces relatively few self-defined intellectuals compared to the rest of Europe.

For these people for whom feelings of ineffectuality and theorizing often goes hand in hand, since they often have little faith in market forces and tend to feel either all of society changes or nothing changes, this all or nothing school of politics is why the British so often reject such attitudes. Though the failures of authoritarian culture and society has opened up the rest of Europe to British-style “liberalism” in much of the rest of Europe, and Germany is a classic case, theorizing serves as a way to put their emotional longings into practice, not as practices, but only as longings. As long as the British feel constrained not to act out or even to elaborate intellectually their fantasies, they will be safe from such tendencies.

Instead the British have a tendency to like to go on moralistic, as opposed to metaphysical, crusades, and as a substitute for everyday intimacies and aesthetic pleasures like to bond with their fellow citizens doing good works, politically-oriented, or just charitably-based such as organizations to prevent cruelty to animals or to end slavery. Even when they don't participate, they sympathize with those do-gooders that do. Of course they won't work for or even dream of a society where such acts of kindness are commonplace, because ever