

COMMITTEE II
Synthesis and Relationships in Culture

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CULTURAL SYNTHESSES: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND MORAL

by

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CULTURAL SYNTHESSES: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND MORAL

In this paper I am taking both the subject of our Committee (*Ways to and Patterns of Cultural Synthesis*) and the overall title of the Conference (*Absolute Values and the New Cultural Revolution*) into account in my remarks. A distinction will be drawn between what I shall call epistemological and moral cultural syntheses. It will be argued that although the former (epistemological synthesis) is an unobtainable goal, it is one which is worthy of being striven towards, and that, although the latter (moral synthesis) may appear to be a worthy and desirable goal, its pursuit is fraught with dangers which can only be understood through a recognition of the extremely complicated and often apparently paradoxical nature of social culture.

As the thrust of my argument would appear to be contrary to the sentiment underlying the Conference title, and, in particular, the vision of a synthesis that would create a culture which espouses absolute values, I am fairly certain that much of what I shall be saying will be misunderstood, so let me start by trying to clarify some things that I do not want to say. First, I am not opposed to absolute standards. Nor am I opposed to people's holding to absolute values in our society - indeed I

will fight (have fought) for their right to do so - so long, that is, as they are not in a position in which they threaten to impose their absolute values and the 'new cultural revolution' on the rest of us to the detriment of not merely other values but also, I shall suggest, to the possible detriment of their own values.

Secondly: although I shall be arguing for the existence (at both the descriptive and the prescriptive levels) of what, for want of a better word, I call socio-illogics, I do believe that the laws of logic apply at all times and in all places - a thing cannot be both X and not-X at the same time. I accept, indeed I would insist, that the rules of valid inference are not relative to time and/or society, but are absolute. This does not, however, prevent people from holding inconsistent beliefs; nor does it follow that an individual's or a culture's inconsistencies may not have a positive function for either the individual or society as a whole.

A third point of clarification: I not believe that we can derive an 'ought' (or a value) from an 'is' (or a fact about the world). Not only is it, as Hume pointed out some time ago, a logical impossibility, but if the concept of moral responsibility has any meaning, then the world that is (the descriptive) must include what ought not to be (the proscriptive) as well as what ought to be (the prescriptive).

The criterion that we use for distinguishing what 'is' from what 'is not' cannot be used for distinguishing what 'ought to be' from what 'ought not to be'. Some other, independent criterion is necessary for establishing the truth or falsity and (more complicatedly, but just as importantly) the relative value of our values. Empirical knowledge of the existence or practice of a phenomenon cannot in itself tell us how the phenomenon ought to be morally and/or politically evaluated. I am not suggesting by this that absolute values do not exist, nor am I denying that there could be a sort of Platonic hierarchy of values with each having its own absolutely relative value. It should, however, be recognised that some values can only be promoted at the expense of other values; there is no problem (at least at the conceptual level) of advocating the promotion of love and expulsion of hate, but things can start to get a bit trickier if we want to embrace, at the one time, in the one place, freedom and justice and equality (or even equality of opportunity).

My insistence on the analytical (and I stress the word analytical) distinction between the world of empirical fact and the world of morality and value certainly does not imply that we cannot use scientific knowledge in a discussion about values. I think we should. All science, including, perhaps especially, social science, has (or can have) a vitally important role to play in the realisation of our values, and, indeed, in the living of our lives. It can, after all, provide knowledge of

the social and cultural context within which our lives - our values - are lived. This is not to deny that social science has its limitations (I shall be referring to some of these), nor is it to deny that it is sometimes done very badly. All that is being claimed is that social science, done well, has, or can have, a positive value. Fairly obviously, we want to know what is the situation if we wish to evaluate it. We may want to establish the costs of pursuing a particular value, or the relative costs of pursuing one value rather than another. We can use empirical knowledge to recognise (and, thus, in the future, to anticipate) the often unintended and unrecognised consequences of pursuing any particular value. We can, furthermore, use empirical knowledge to elicit the most effective means of realising our values, although it must, of course, be remembered that efficiency is not the only criterion that should be taken into account when deciding on one method rather than another. Infanticide is an efficient means of controlling population growth, but it is not a method that many would even pause to consider as a serious option. In other words, 'means' ought, themselves, to be evaluated according to the standards that we hold dear, and, before declaring that the end justifies the means, we ought to be sure that we really understand what values could be being violated by the means.

Now let us turn more directly to the question of cultural synthesis. Perhaps it would be helpful if I were to begin by

explaining what I, as a sociologist, mean by culture, and perhaps the best way of doing that is to start from the concept of social reality. By social reality, we are talking about an abstract entity that exists as a result of people's interacting with each other, and which is recognised (either consciously or unconsciously) as something that has properties which are different from the properties of the individuals who are responsible for its existence. These properties may constrain the individual members of a society from doing certain things and/or they may enable them to do things, to think in certain ways or to perform certain actions - thoughts and actions which would be unlikely to have occurred had the individuals concerned not been facing that social reality - were they not in that particular social situation. Although it is an abstraction, society is a reality in that it is independent of any particular individual's volition. One cannot just shut one's eyes and wish it away. We have to take it into account in our daily actions. At the same time, of course, it would not be a reality, it would not exist, if people were not to recognise its existence.

Sociologists sometimes make a distinction between two aspects of social reality: structure and culture. The structure of a society consists of the patterned interactions between people - the institutions that have been built up over the years (power and communication structures, family networks and so on). Its culture consists not merely of 'culture' in the popular sense of

art or fashion, but of the whole wealth of meanings, norms, mores, morals, values and world-views which are available within the society. Each individual will perceive a culture in a slightly idiosyncratic way and be continually synthesising (and resynthesising) his or her perception of reality. At the same time, all of a culture must be shared by at least some individuals, although not the same individuals will share the same bits of an identical *Gestalt*, and individual interpretations of the reality, although emanating from the one source, may be very different. Almost invariably, the culture consists of numerous inconsistencies. Conflicting values are held, and different (but overlapping) visions of what 'reality' is are held - and, thus, different (but overlapping) realities - cultures - actually exist.

I mentioned earlier that I wanted to distinguish two different meanings or levels of cultural synthesis. First, let us consider epistemological synthesis. By this I mean a 'putting together' of our body of knowledge about culture and all the phenomena that explain why particular cultures (and sub-cultures) exist at particular times and/or places, and what the consequences of such cultures and sub-cultures are. This sort of synthesis is - or should be - part of the endeavour of social science. It should be a goal that we aim for, but I believe that it is an unobtainable goal, and that unless we recognise how the very nature of culture is such that we cannot

provide a definitive synthesis, we shall not get as far towards achieving the synthesis as we might if we were to recognise the inherent obstacles. The fact that there are specialists going about their own interests, ignoring other bits of the culture does not matter so long as there are those who are aware of what is being discovered and who can incorporate the specialists' work into the broader picture. It is necessary to have both breadth and depth of knowledge - reality is at least three dimensional. Epistemological synthesis is a goal that can include cross-disciplinary puttings together. I would argue strongly against reductionism in so far as it risks ignoring the emergent properties that come into play at higher levels of organisation - and, in the case of social realities such as culture, it risks ignoring the importance of human consciousness. It must, none the less, be accepted that although 'lower' levels of analysis are not sufficient, they would be necessary for a complete epistemological synthesis. It is an integral and necessary part of 'doing' social science to discover how, for example, religious beliefs affect the political structure, how family mores affect the economic structure, how psychological dispositions are, in part, formed by the educational system, how conditions of employment affect physical health, how jet-lag affects decision-making, how the natural environment is affected by people's use of natural resources (and their religious and ideological beliefs), how the 'natural' world - the climate, the compositions of DNA - affects

cultural realities, and so on...

But, even if we were to have a complete knowledge of the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, the very nature of culture makes a complete, once and for all, synthesis of our knowledge an impossibility. Culture, as it has just been defined, has a number of characteristics which give it an extremely elusive nature so far as the epistemological synthesiser is concerned. First, it is both a reality and an abstraction, and, secondly, it is both general and specific in that it is utterly dependent on a subjective awareness of individuals for its existence, yet independent of any one individual in that it faces each individual as an objective 'out-there' reality. Put slightly differently, there is a sense in which culture consists of the accumulation of the 'understandings' of the members of a society, and each of these understandings (or recognitions) will be different from each other, but, at the same time, there is a sense in which the culture of a community is the shared perceptions, or the bits that are shared by the members of the community. I do not mean that people share the culture in the sense that they approve or disapprove of it, or even that they accept or reject its truth or desirability, but that it is shared in the sense that each of its 'bits' are available to, and recognised by, at least some of the community.

To say that culture is an abstraction is not to deny the importance of Popper's concept of World III, merely to say that,

unless books are read and artefacts are seen or experienced in some way by individuals, they are not part of a culture at that time. They are only part of a potential culture. The only concrete (physical/chemical/biological) manifestations of the existence of culture in the individuals' minds may be present in the individuals' brains, but we have no access to their brains - and even if we had, and were to use such a reductionist approach, we would have no way of interpreting what was going on in their minds. We (both social scientists and members of a culture) have to rely on other people's behaviour (which includes the use of language) and our own capacity for empathic understanding (*Verstehen*) to recognise the existence of a culture. And, of course, it is through people's behaviour that culture comes into being and is 'upheld', shaped, changed and negotiated. It 'lives' in so far as it is lived. Culture is part of a process. It is not a static structure (even a social structure is a process in this sense). Each individual is synthesising culture as it appears to him or her throughout the whole of his or her life. Individuals are constantly receiving new information and adjusting their views of the world, their visions of reality, their values, their understandings of 'the way things are'. The changes may be forced upon them, negotiated, passively accepted, eagerly sought or unconsciously imbibed. The changes may involve adapting to, reacting against, cementing or reinforcing or what have you, but there is a continuous process of interaction between the individuals and

society, and, consequently, a continual process of changing syntheses at both the individual and the societal levels.

To provide a synthesis of these syntheses which takes into account variables such as the relative position which different individuals may occupy in power or communication structures, and the different kinds of influences on sub-cultures brought about by being a parent, teacher, boyfriend, politician or milkman is an enormously complex task. Methodologically, one cannot just stand outside and observe the members of a culture as if they were rats running around in a maze. The social scientist has to try to understand what it is that the actions of the members of the culture mean. Meaning cannot be understood without learning the social language - knowing that making the sign of a cross could be of religious significance, that if it is done on a piece of paper it could 'mean' that the individual wanted a particular kind of person to represent him or her in the governing of the state (or the parish council) or that that was the mark which would allow the 'crosser' to get some bits of paper which could be exchanged for a pig, or bread, or a night's lodging. In other words, the social scientist has to be able to put him or herself into the shoes of the people who are facing the culture, and, to at least some extent, recognise what they are recognising and, indeed, recognise the ways in which different recognitions are occurring. Often they (social scientists) need to participate actively in the culture in order

to understand what is happening - how the culture or sub-culture 'works'. In doing this, the investigator risks making a difference to the culture because he or she has become part of it. This can present further methodological problems which we need not go into here, except to admit that it happens. There are social scientists who claim that we do not need to know what is going on in the individuals' minds. They will argue that social science is concerned with social reality, and it is unwarrantable psychological reductionism to be concerned with people. There is a sense in which this is correct - if we were to be concerned with the individuals as individuals only, but there is also a sense in which ignoring meanings for individuals (for whom, but individuals, can there be meaning?) is unwarrantable social reification. If we want to avoid the ignorance which ensues from ignoring either the individual or the context within which individuals find themselves, then both need to be taken into account when we attempt our (epistemological) cultural synthesis. Those who reduce or reify tend to get their pictures of cultural reality very wrong. One cannot observe a culture without observing its inhabitants, nor can one observe a religion or a power structure by looking at individuals in isolation.

Just as a complete epistemological synthesis would need to take both the individual and the whole into account, so must it take into account the culture in its many moments of life and as an

historical whole. Because culture can only exist as a process, any (epistemological) cultural synthesis is always going to be liable to be out of date, and trying to describe any particular moment or 'frame' in isolation will not be sufficient for an epistemological synthesis for, unlike the case of the natural sciences, the historical dimension is of paramount importance in the construction and continuation of a culture. It can, for all practical purposes, be safely assumed that (given the same temperature and pressure) the properties of water have been and will be the same in all centuries and all continents. No such assumptions can be made about culture for it is, by its very nature, relative to both time and place.

There are further problems involved in the pursuit of an epistemological synthesis, but I do not intend to turn this into a methodological essay. The point to be made is that, while I believe that epistemological syntheses are desirable, they are inevitably fraught with difficulties which arise out of the nature of culture. None the less, we can try to produce as accurate as possible a picture of cultures and how they function, acknowledging that it will be incomplete and that it will be liable to contain many messy, disconnected bits, and many inconsistencies.

The second meaning or level of cultural synthesis, which I call

moral synthesis is not concerned with the putting together of our bits of knowledge in an attempt to create a whole picture of what is the case, but with putting together and integrating the bits of culture into the coherent whole which they ought to consist of. It is the creation of a *Gestalt* which, although it may not be thought of in such terms, is considered to be the most correct synthesis according to the synthesiser's moral and/or political values.

Drawing the distinction between epistemological and moral syntheses may seem fraught with difficulties. Nevertheless, I believe that it is a vital distinction, and one which aspiring synthesisers of both types should be aware of. [To confuse matters even further, it might be argued, quite correctly, that values are a part of culture, and, even more fundamentally, that the essence of a culture depends on knowledge - very widely defined to include opinions, beliefs, and even unconscious awarenesses of what is 'right and proper'. But to make such a comment should not blur the distinction between epistemological and moral syntheses so much as force us to introduce a third distinction which could give rise to the term 'ontological synthesis', for we are now talking about what culture is actually like, regardless of whether any individual synthesiser knows about it or approves of it. In other words, although (as was argued earlier) an actual culture must depend for its existence on men and women's practical knowledge of it, its

actuality is distinguishable from attempts (by social scientists, artists, writers or other commentators) to synthesise the various bits of knowledge that we have of the actual reality - that is, the 'ontological synthesis'.]

The appeal of the exercise of moral synthesising in the contemporary world frequently stems from an awareness of the fragmented nature of our society, the manner in which we relate to people in an impersonal, instrumental manner, the way in which we are inconsistent and continually doing or believing things that contradict what we really want to do or might, in other circumstances, declare we believe - and so on. It is necessary, the moral synthesisers might argue, to make men and women whole again, to relate to the whole human beings, rather than using them as a means to one's own ends, exploiting their labour, their sexual attributes or what have you. Other arguments may be that we need to look at the environment as a whole, to understand the ecological system and our place in it; we need the synthesising approach of humanistic psychology, rather than the reductionist approach of behaviourism, in order to understand the whole person; we need holistic medicine to treat the whole person, rather than just his or her symptoms.

Other synthesisers will argue that we need clarity of values, an overall plan, standards that everyone will adhere to; we need to iron out the inconsistencies and separations. Everyone, it will

be argued, must be free to develop into a fully integrated individual - and/or to know where s/he stands in relation to the rest of society, and/or the rest of the cosmos. We must recognise the brotherhood/sisterhood of the Family of Wo/Mankind. We must recognise and celebrate the truth that we are One.

Now let me make it quite clear, I have no great aversion to such sentiments - well, not to most of them. Indeed, I can be found promoting some of them on occasion. Modern society does undoubtedly fragment our lives, and our relationships with our fellow humans are often impersonal and instrumental. But I am not altogether sure that I want to pursue my relationship with the milkman further than a 'good morning, it's clearing up a bit, isn't it?' and I don't expect that he wants to waste any of his valuable time going further than a 'Yes, but they say it will cloud over again later. Do you want an extra pint for the weekend?' Furthermore, as the reader may well have noticed, not all the sentiments which I have just listed were necessarily compatible with each other.

The question which we have to ask moral synthesisers is: what kind of a whole are you planning to produce? An answer that tells us that it will include good things and exclude bad things will, I suspect, be either vacuous or dangerous. The vacuity arises from an answer that tells us merely that the society will

be an improvement on the present one without telling us what constitutes an improvement. The dangers arise when it is assumed that the good society consists of a cultural synthesis which is self-evidently the ideal to be aimed for - or, if not self-evident, it is assumed to be fairly self-evident that those who propose the synthesis are sufficiently enlightened through their mystical, spiritual, or intellectual powers - or, perhaps, their position in society - to know what they are doing.

Plenty of arguments concerning the dangers of the idealistic pursuit of Utopian ideals have been advanced. A frequently mentioned danger of such pursuits is that (real, live) men and women tend to get sacrificed now for the sake of a future Society or (to use a more popular synthesiser's term) the 'community'. It is not necessarily because they are lacking in vision that some people will admit to having great difficulty in visualising what perfection or the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, or the Ideal Society would look like. Some people's ideas of Heaven or the withering away of the state can sound like pure Hell or a bureaucratic prison to others. This does not mean that the world could not be a lot better than it is. Obviously it could be. This paper is not intended to invoke Dr Pangloss. But it does contend that it seems to be a lot safer to try to get rid of particular evils (famine, disease, displaced persons' camps, pollution etc.) about which there is considerable agreement - than to try to impose ideals, about which there is

little agreement, except at uselessly abstract and general levels.

It could be argued that making a distinction between, on the one hand, getting rid of evil and, on the other hand, imposing good is itself a vacuous exercise: getting rid of evil is good, and to make the world better is to make the world less evil. This is, of course, correct, so perhaps I can make the point more clearly by suggesting that it is safer to attempt an analysis of an evil in order to lessen it, than it is to attempt to create a culture which embodies a synthesis of THE Good. Let me repeat once more, I am not suggesting that we should not try to make the world a better place. I think we should. I am arguing that if we were to think about making it a less bad place and to go about the improvements slowly, trying to remedy 'bits' where things are obviously wrong, we have more hope of success in the venture than by trying to create the morally synthesised whole.

One of the reasons that one could put forward in support of such a position is that our capacity for an epistemological synthesis is so limited that we really do not know when we are playing with fire and could get our fingers burned. What knowledge we have of history does, however, seem to indicate that attempts to impose an ideal whole upon society, while they may have eliminated some evils, have rarely, if ever, achieved the

synthesis that was desired and, by the standards of those who were committed as well as those who were not committed to the vision, the situation has frequently become far worse as the result of the visionary efforts - and this would seem to have been the case whether it was a religious or a secular *Gestalt* which had inspired the transformers, whether they were Christian Crusaders, Islamic Ayatollahs, dictatorial Fascists or revolutionary Marxists.

One of the explanations why such culturally synthesising transformers (as opposed to culturally analysing reformers) will almost inevitably result in failure may lie in the very fact that any attempt to produce a moral synthesis is almost certainly bound to involve a clarification and a simplification of the messy reality that actual cultures consist of. It is possible that the messiness has a positive function in so far as it provides the checks and balances which prevent the members of a culture from pursuing too straight a path. The pursuit of consistency and absolute values in an attempted cultural synthesis can, after a certain point is reached, result in (at least) two problems which might be described with two concepts borrowed from economics: 'opportunity cost' and 'negative marginal utility'.

'Opportunity cost' is, perhaps, the more obviously recognisable concept. It refers to the neglect of one set of values through

the single-minded pursuit of other, possibly 'more absolute' values. 'Negative marginal utility' refers to a situation in which, after a particular point is reached, the single-minded pursuit of a particular goal or value actually achieves increasingly less of the very goal/value which is being pursued.

There is no space to examine these concepts in detail in this paper, but perhaps it would help to clarify the general argument to mention briefly a study by one of the founding fathers of sociology: Emile Durkheim.

In an attempt to show that society was a thing *sui generis*, Durkheim pointed out that the remarkable consistency in the rate of suicide within a given culture, combined with the different rates to be found between cultures, indicated that if we wanted to understand why people should commit (or not commit) this apparently most personal of acts, then we should look at the culture, rather than at the individuals concerned. He then proceeded to distinguish between four different kinds of culture that would give rise to an increased rate of suicide. The first two kinds were related to the degree to which a society regulated its members. If there was too much regulation, then individuals would find themselves in a situation in which their lives were so completely controlled that there would seem to be no point in going on, and there would be a spate of 'fatalistic' suicides. When, however, there was too little regulation, the individual was in a situation in which he or she was unable to

achieve anything because there were no standards and no rules - norms and goals were not circumscribed by the culture. In such a situation, one would find an increasing number of 'anomic' suicides.

The second dimension that Durkheim isolated was not the extent that society regulated the individual, but the extent to which individuals are integrated into their society. In a situation in which the individual is too integrated, he or she loses his or her identity as an individual and one finds examples of 'altruistic' suicide (the Kama kazi pilots would be an example).

If, on the other hand, the individual is not sufficiently integrated, but 'left out in the cold' as it were, then there will be cases of what Durkheim calls 'egoistic' suicide.

There are a lot of problems connected with Durkheim's work, but the points which I believe are both valid and important are, first, that the *Gestalt* of a culture can have a significant influence, as an independent variable, on the individual's life (and death), and, secondly, that a culture can have too much as well as too little of a particular characteristic. If one tries to remedy an anomic situation by producing too much regulation (or to remedy a fatalistic situation by abandoning too many rules and regulations), the new synthesis can be just as damaging as the original one. In other words, after a certain point (up to which there could well be a positive, though

probably diminishing marginal utility) there can be a negative marginal utility in any further reduction of the regulatory features of a particular culture.

And, of course, once one tries to balance the extent to which a culture regulates its members, it is possible that the integrative functions of the culture will change, as will many other inter-connected features of the culture, not all of which we may have been fully aware of until something started 'going wrong'. In other words, there could be an opportunity cost in focussing on the regulative functions of the society at the expense of the balance of its integrative (and other) functions.

I cannot give any quantitative, or qualitative, assessment of what the optimal 'value' of a culture's regulative or integrative functions might be. It is, indeed, a major part of my argument that no one is likely to come up with the optimal synthesis - although we can, we are, we ought to be aware that at particular times and places a culture may exhibit too much or too little of a particular characteristic and could, with benefit, be altered accordingly - cautiously!

My own research into the new religions has indicated several ways in which the pursuit of particular goals has apparently resulted in the very opposite of those goals being realised. Groups that promise individuals autonomy and liberation from

cultural constraints frequently seem to control their followers more rigidly than the pluralistic culture from which the group's membership is fleeing. Those who genuinely strive to bring about unification frequently seem to promote division through their efforts

It might, with reason, be said that I am putting forward a political, rather than the objective value-freedom that I may have seemed earlier to be advocating for the social scientist. This is, to some extent, true. Not all I have been saying follows from the data revealed by social science - although I believe that it is suggested by it. But it is not my intention to describe what ought to be done, so much as how we might most effectively go about our reforming of society. There is nothing wrong in trying to imagine a utopian ideal; there is nothing wrong with trying to attain what may be an unobtainable goal - I did, indeed, advocate such a pursuit in the first half of this paper when describing the quest for epistemological syntheses. What I am advocating is (to acknowledge my debt to Popper) 'piece-meal' social reform which concentrates primarily on the elimination of societies' ills. Cultural syntheses of the moral or political variety rarely permit the existence of the conflicting values that can provide legitimate checks and balances to overly assiduous chasing after particular absolutes. The too coherent culture which is usually advocated by synthetic synthesisers risks throwing many a cultural baby out

with the bath water. It is the very messiness and inconsistencies of our actual cultures which usually (although by no means always) give us the opportunity to prevent our going too far in any single direction. Of course, too much inconsistency in values and ideals, or too much relativism in cultural standards can result in destructive conflict or insipid apathy, but there does seem to be some sort of collective wisdom of normative dissonance which protects us from the ravages of untrammelled syntheses.

To conclude, I have suggested that 'epistemological' cultural synthesis is a goal that may be desirable to pursue, but that, because of the very nature of culture, it is one which is ultimately impossible to achieve. I have also argued that the pursuit of a 'moral' synthesis is fraught with dangers, many of which, given the impossibility of achieving a complete epistemological synthesis, we are unlikely to be fully aware of.

We can, however, hope to recognise some of the dangers through our, albeit incomplete, epistemological syntheses, and we might, by increasing our understanding of what makes a culture function in a particular way, be able to reduce the number of unintended and unwelcome consequences which could arise from moral synthesising.

It is partly for the reasons I have tried briefly to indicate in this paper that I admit to having reservations about the

programmes which are, perhaps, suggested by possible interpretations of the meaning of both the subject of our committee (*Ways to and Patterns of Cultural Synthesis*) and the overall title of the Conference (*Absolute Values and the New Cultural Revolution*). Perhaps the discussion will persuade me that my fears are groundless.