The Concept of "Third Cultures" in Intercultural Ethics

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Existing views of cultural adaptation in the field of intercultural communication suggest that it is the sole responsibility of people who are visiting or living in foreign cultures_"sojourners" as they are referred to in the literature_to adapt themselves to the cultural norms of their host cultures. This paper will criticize dominant theories of adaptation and show how the concept of "third cultures" offers a better model for understanding how people with different cultural norms interact with each other in cross-cultural situations. The concept of "third cultures" can be applied to a variety of cross-cultural problems in the fields of bioethics and environmental ethics.

The concept of adaptation, as it has been developed in the theory of intercultural communication (see especially Furnham and Bocher 1986; Ellingsworth 1988; Kim 1989; Kim 1991; and the essays in Kim and Gudykunst 1988), emphasizes the necessity of sojourners adapting themselves to the norms of the host culture. This view is expressed in the popular slogan, "When in Rome do as the Romans do." In this model, the adaptive process is entirely one-way, with the burden for adaptation resting entirely with the sojourner. The notion that host cultures should also make efforts to adapt themselves to the needs and values of sojourners is missing. While sojourners are expected to "respect" the values of their host cultures, no burden is placed on host cultures to respect the values of sojourners. Sojourners are thus unable to critically reflect on whether the norms of their host cultures are really worth adopting or not, and host cultures are unable to critically reflect on the possible positive contributions that the norms of sojourners could make to their own cultures.

This view of cultural adaptation is modeled on the concept of biological adaptation which, in classical Darwinian theory, sees adaptation as a matter of organisms fitting themselves into ready-made natural environments. The classical theory has been criticized more recently, however, by dialectical biologists (Levins and Lewontin 1985) who argue that the relationship between organisms and their environments is not one-way, but dialectical. Organisms both constitute and are constituted by their natural environments, in what Rose, Kamin, and Lewontin refer to as the "interpenetration of organism and environment" (1984, 272). Organisms cannot be understood apart from the environments they inhabit, while environments cannot be understood apart from the organisms which inhabit them. In Lewontin's words, "...an environment is nature organized by an organism" (1982, 160). Organisms do not simply find preexisting niches within a fixed ecosystem but rather create those niches by modifying their environments. Interactions between organisms and their environments are complex and reciprocal. Cause is multidirectional rather than unidirectional: organisms both change and are changed by their environments. This relationship is best described as "coevolutionary" (Durham 1978, 1991; Lumsden and Wilson 1981; Norgaard 1994) or "transactional" (Dewey 1949, 69; Weichhart 1993) because it involves mutual adaptation on the part of both organism and environment.

There are well-known difficulties with attempts to derive theories of culture from theories of biology (*cf*. Sahlins 1976), and any connection between the two is at best analogous. Arguments in favor of a dialectical view of the relationship between individuals and cultures, while similar in logic to the relationship between organisms and environments, must be developed independently. Probably the best attempt thus far to develop a dialectical view of the relationship between individuals and cultures can be found in social

constructionist theory (Berger and Luckman 1966). In the constructivist view, individuals are socialized into accepting the dominant views of reality given to them by their cultures. The socialization process involves not only accepting particular understandings of how the world is (i.e., knowledge), but also particular understandings of how the world should be acted in (i.e., values). Nonetheless, knowledge and values are themselves cultural creations. The world itself does not tell us how it should be understood or acted in, as naturalism contends. And precisely because knowledge and values are cultural constructions they can always be reconstructed in different ways. Individuals are capable of engaging in critical reflection on how the world is to be understood and acted in, and to thus transform existing social understandings and relationships. Cultural norms and laws are social constructs which constrain human freedom, but humans are nonetheless free to change the cultural norms and laws which govern their societies.

The constructivist view is more radical than either traditional liberal voluntarism or Marxist determinism (*cf*. Bhaskar 1979; Giddens 1984, 1990, 1994). The liberal view sees individuals as being "free" to do what they want without recognizing the extent to which internalized social norms constrain individual action. Marxist determinism (e.g., Althusser 1971, 1977), on the other hand, sees individuals as being so constrained by the cultural norms that they have been socialized into that independent action is impossible. All thought is "false consciousness," arising out of existing social relations, and social change occurs only in the context of larger historical processes which individuals themselves have no control over. The constructivist view acknowledges that individuals are to a large extent socialized into accepting certain worldviews and cultural values, but nonetheless sees individuals as being able to step outside of their own culture and to criticize its norms and values. This "stepping out" may result in nothing more than alienation, i.e., the attempt to create alternative values which exist independently of the dominant culture but do not really challenge its ultimate legitimacy. Constructivism becomes radical, however, when people are empowered to actually change existing social norms and social structures.

Constructivism can thus be linked to a radical democratic political theory which goes beyond both traditional liberalism and Marxism. Constructivists share with recent communitarian thinkers (Sandel 1982, 1996; MacIntyre 1985, 1988) the idea that individuals are to a large extent constituted by the cultures they inhabit and therefore that mutual moral obligations exist between individuals and society. Individuals must act in ways that take into account not only their own benefit but also the benefit of others. Societies as well have a moral obligation to provide for the good of their members. In the Aristotelian maxim good individuals cannot be produced in the absence of good societies and good societies cannot be produced in the absence of good individuals. Communitarians go wrong, however, if they completely suppress individual autonomy and see the individual as nothing more than a cog in the social machine. Here constructivists agree with liberal political theorists (Rawls 1971, 1996; Dworkin 1977) that certain fundamental individual rights must be protected. Liberals go wrong, however, if they think that society can be constructed purely on the basis of individuals seeking their own self-interest. In the constructivist view the relationship between individuals and society is dialectical: each is mutually dependent on the other.

In applying constructivist thought to the problem of cross-cultural dialogue on ethics (Evanoff 1996, 1998, 1999), it can be noted that the ethical norms individuals bring with them to the dialogue process tell them how to deal with people in the context of their own culture, not with people from another culture whose norms are different_thus the need to arrive at a shared set of ethical norms for cross-cultural interactions. There are at least three different ways in which cross-cultural dialogue on ethics can be approached. Modernist/foundational approaches attempt to ground ethics in a set of universal principles that are seen as being valid for all persons, irrespective of cultural background. The difficulty

with this view is that it fails to acknowledge the extent to which all such principles are themselves cultural constructions, and thus ends up simply privileging one particular cultural perspective over others; historically this has most often been a Eurocentric worldview. Postmodern/relativist approaches avoid such "totalizing" by arguing that cross-cultural dialogue on ethics is impossible given the incommensurable nature of cultural discourses. But the difficulty with this view is that it provides no basis for joint action among people from different cultural backgrounds in situations in which require it.

A third approach, and the one argued for here, is a constructivist approach which argues that if ethics is indeed a matter of social construction, then there is no reason why ethical principles and norms cannot be constructed *across* cultures as much as they are *within* cultures. Cross-cultural encounters create an entirely new context in which the rules that will govern the relations between cultures do not yet exist and hence must be constructed. New ethical frameworks can be negotiated through a process of cross-cultural dialogue which draws on, but does not remain bound by, the ethical insights contained in any one tradition.

The constructivist position endorses the democratic principle most fully worked out by "discourse ethics" (Apel 1980; Benhabib 1986, 1992; Habermas 1989, 1993) that everyone who will be affected by the adoption of a particular norm should have the right to participate in the decision-making process through which the norm is constructed. Norms in this view arise directly out of the communicative process, occasioned by the need of individuals to coordinate their actions with others. They are not universal in a foundational sense, but apply only to the specific individuals involved. This caveat is important because it protects the ability of cultural groups which neither have nor want cross-cultural interactions with others to preserve their own culture from forced assimilation and other forms of cultural imperialism. In situations in which such interactions are either desired or inevitable, however, there is the need for individuals from the respective cultures to work out in advance the specific norms that will govern their interaction. It should not simply be assumed that the norms of the dominant culture will prevail, nor that the norms of the sojourner must be unquestioningly respected.

The outcome of the dialogue process should, ideally, not be a mere compromise in which either or both of the sides is obliged to give up values deemed important to them, but rather an "integrative agreement" (Pruitt 1994) which combines positive aspects of each of the respective cultural traditions in a new conceptual framework, or what social psychologists would call a "higher order schema" (Stotland and Canon 1972, chap. 7). Reaching such agreements requires each of the two sides to critically reflect on existing norms within their respective cultural traditions, to distinguish positive and negative aspects of each, and to integrate the positive aspects into a new, more comprehensive perspective. The result will be a entirely new set of norms capable of dealing effectively with mutually shared problems. The similarities between this process and Hegelian dialectical logic should be obvious.

The success of the dialogue process can be determined by the pragmatic criteria of whether the problems are eventually resolved to the satisfaction of the interacting groups or not. Instead of simply comparing divergent and perhaps incommensurable cultural traditions with each other, the adequacy of the traditions can be tested against the particular problems to be solved. While each of the cultures may have something to contribute to the resolution of the problem, each may also be lacking in certain conceptual and normative resources which would help them to solve it. Since all cultures simplify the range of potential human experience, none can regard itself as "universal" and there can be no single culture which serves as a model for all others. Particular cultures offer myriad alternatives for human behavior. By engaging in cross-cultural dialogue we are able to extend the range of our own potential experience. Holenstein writes, "Foreign cultures give us access to possibilities of

development which are apparently at our disposal by nature and which only circumstances prevent from appearing in our own culture. Different cultures develop different human skills to varying degrees" (1995, 76).

This dialectical approach to cross-cultural dialogue involves the ability to not only appreciate cultural differences, but also to integrate aspects of various cultural traditions into our own ways of thinking and behaving (Bennett 1993)_a process that can be engaged in by both sojourners and their host cultures. Cross-cultural dialogue employs a transactional model of communication (Barnlund 1970) which moves beyond merely understanding or "respecting" cultural differences towards creating a "third culture" which combines elements of each of the participants' original cultures in novel ways. John Useem, one of the originators of the term "third culture" (Useem, Useem, and Donoghue 1963), defines it as "...cultural patterns inherited and created, learned and shared by the members of two or more different societies who are personally involved in relating their society, or segments thereof, to each other" (1971, 14). Yoshikawa has similarly spoken of a state of "dynamic inbetweenness" in cross-cultural exchanges between Asians and Westerners, a "third perspective" which "...does not represent exclusively either the Eastern perspective or the Western perspective" (1987, 329). Adler, quoting Tillich, contends that the development of a multicultural personality involves the creation of "...a third area beyond the bounded territories, an area where one can stand for a time without being enclosed in something tightly bounded" (1977, 26). The concept of "hybridity" has also gained currency in post-colonial cultural studies in Britain (Young 1995; Werbner and Modood 1997). In attempting to maintain nationalistic purity in the face of colonial domination, dominated groups often merely reproduce an "us-them" mentality which does not effectively challenge the source of their oppression. Bhabha (1994) contends, contra separatist theories, that the creation of a "third space," which hybridizes various aspects of both the dominating and the dominated culture, transforms those who were formerly colonized and disrupts the authority of those who were former colonizers.

The creation of "third cultures" is by no means a simple task and there are still a number of difficulties which must be overcome. For example, there may be disagreements not only over substantive issues but also with respect to the reasoning processes that should be used in conducting the dialogue. Researchers in the field of intercultural communication have identified cultural differences not only with regard to *what* is expressed, but also with regard to *how* it is expressed. Communication styles vary from culture to culture (Barnlund 1975), as do "epistemic structures" (how arguments are built) and rhetorical patterns (how arguments are presented) (Condon and Yousef 1975, chap. 10).

Morioka (1998), in a criticism of my earlier attempt to outline a constructivist approach to intercultural ethics has further suggested that many individuals regard "blind conformity" to the status quo as a good thing and therefore see no reason to engage in reflective criticism or cross-cultural dialogue. No doubt this criticism is empirically valid. Constructivists themselves speak of personal constructs as being "tenacious" (Kelly 1963, 9) and of social constructs as tending towards "inertia" (Arbib and Hesse, 1986, 133*ff*.). Even when individuals recognize that the social system they live in is evil or unjust, the socialization process can sometimes be so powerful that change is inconceivable. Societies can exert powerful pressures on individuals to think and act in certain ways, either by suppressing innovation or by not making other alternatives available, and powerful elites can manipulate the communication process to their own advantage. From a normative perspective, however, what are the alternatives? Either we resign ourselves to the status quo, along with whatever evils and injustices it contains, or we attempt to work for something better through radical social change. Either we suppress the points of view of those who

disagree with us or we attempt to create forums through which differences can be aired and, hopefully, mutually satisfactory agreements can be reached.

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