



content | the creative mind

1

The Dilemma

Anglo-Dutch gurus Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner have become the go-to guys on multinational mergers. Their recipe: making opposites attract.

Doctors

by Art Kleiner

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"We have three fundamentally different cultures," says Martin Gillo of his company. Born in East Germany, raised in West Germany, and a 20-year veteran of the American microprocessor industry, Mr. Gillo is a living embodiment of those three cultures. He is the director of human resources at one of the most innovative semiconductor factories in the world, the Advanced Micro Devices (AMD) plant in Dresden, Germany. An aficionado of management thought, he is convinced that the success of the enterprise depends on AMD's ability to synthesize the best of the triad.

"The Americans are can-do, pioneering, optimistic," Mr. Gillo says. "They shoot first, aim later. The West Germans want to be absolutely thorough and correct, and sometimes they fall into 'analysis paralysis.' And then you have the East Germans. For 40 years, under Communism, they smuggled their machine tools in from the West. When something broke, they couldn't call up for a spare part. They created brilliant solutions on their own, but they never learned how to take entrepreneurial risks because the official party lines did not like to see them fail. Now here we are, in our state-of-the-art plant, trying to build computer chips together."

Quite a number of companies, in Europe and around the world, are struggling with similar cultural issues. The problem has accelerated with the past decade's wave of mergers and acquisitions; at least a dozen major studies, from both academic institutions and consulting firms, have found that many acquisitions lead to lower shareholder value. When researchers survey the participants, they almost always point to cultural mismatch as the single most important factor in this loss of value. Globalizing companies have learned that it's surprisingly difficult just to get people from different nationalities to work together

well, let alone to craft a corporate culture that takes advantage of the best qualities of each of its component groups. And thus demand continually rises — as it did at AMD — for the ideas of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner.

Dr. Trompenaars, a 48-year-old Amsterdam-based consultant of French and Dutch descent, and Dr. Hampden-Turner, a 65-year-old British writer with a long history of social science research in America, are the two most prominent figures focusing on cultural diversity in business today. Their corporate consulting business, Trompenaars Hampden-Turner (THT), has grown 40 percent per year for the past five years. It was itself recently acquired by the accounting branch of the KPMG consulting firm.

THT's clients, besides AMD, have included Vodafone Group PLC (the cellular telephone giant whose acquisitions of AirTouch Communications Inc. and Mannesmann AG bridged the Atlantic and the North Sea), Motorola Inc., British Airways PLC, Unilever PLC, Scottish Enterprise, Nissan North America, Merrill Lynch, General Motors, and the Royal Dutch/Shell Group oil companies, where Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner first met and forged their practice.

THT's prominence is perhaps best conveyed by this anecdote: In 1998, when the leaders of Daimler-Benz AG and the Chrysler Corporation saw a merger on the horizon, each side called Dr. Trompenaars, from Stuttgart and Detroit, respectively, asking for a workshop to help them psych the other out. Ultimately, he turned down both as clients, because they were not interested in meeting in one room to work out their cultural differences together.

Although tensions from mergers and globalization provide the bulk of their business, it's inaccurate to pigeon-

hole Dr. Trompenaars, and especially Dr. Hampden-Turner, as narrow “culture guys.” Their “dilemma theory,” as they call it, argues that we can never grow to become great business leaders until we actively strive to embrace the behaviors and attitudes that feel most uncomfortable to us. The most effective management practices, they say, are those that gently force engineers, managers, and employees to embrace the unthinkable.

Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner are intellectual heirs to some of the longest-lived traditions in organizational learning, including the legacies of epistemologist Gregory Bateson, “organizational culture” conceptualist Edgar Schein, and the legendary Shell scenario planner, Pierre Wack. Their in-person consultations provide a kind of corporate guerilla theater, in which the gregarious and exuberant Dr. Trompenaars plays the role of a nightclub comic and the reserved and erudite Dr. Hampden-Turner conducts intensive psychologically probing interviews. Along the way, they use every trick they can muster to subtly undermine the desire that many managers have to learn just enough about their international partners to control or convert them.

Indeed, if you followed dilemma theory to its logical conclusion, you would attribute every pernicious culture clash, and most other management problems, to the human habit (especially common in Western cultures) of casting life in terms of all-or-nothing choices: winning versus losing strategies, right versus wrong answers, good versus bad values, and so on. As a manager, when you unconsciously approach a business issue (or any issue) as a contest between good and evil, you lose sight of the potential benefits the “evil” side has to offer. It’s far better to interpret, say, the battle between English and French management styles, or American dominance and

European resistance, as a dilemma that can be reconciled when both sides see they have something to learn from the other.

“Once you become aware of cultural differences,” Dr. Trompenaars says, “you see that everything is one big dilemma. Some companies, especially in the U.S., have solved this by ignoring the differences, calling it ‘globalization,’ and running lots of workshops to teach the others how to think. We find that backfires in the long run.”

Dr. Trompenaars’s and Dr. Hampden-Turner’s two most recent books set out to unravel the problem of globalization, starting by pulling the threads of, in one case, cultural diversity, and, in the other, leadership. Both books are based on a data bank that Dr. Trompenaars has gathered over the past 15 years, from more than 50,000 surveys of managers and executives around the world. Both books, drafted by Dr. Hampden-Turner, draw heavily on the two men’s lifelong preoccupations. The “cultural diversity” book, *Building Cross-Cultural Competence: How to Create Wealth from Conflicting Values*, is a tour de force, an overview of the major cultural dilemmas (individualism versus collectivism, neutral versus emotional temperaments, and so on) that Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner codified a decade ago, when they first started working together. (See “Seven Modern Dilemmas,” page 11.) The book goes much deeper than the usual tourist-guide-sensibility overviews of cultural differences, the kind of guide that says Americans are frontier cowboys or Japanese are politeness-obsessed consensus builders, to investigate why people of different backgrounds approach the world in such different ways.

The “leadership” book, *21 Leaders for the 21st Century*, is a collection of profiles of corporate CEOs, such as the Dell Computer Corporation’s Michael Dell,

the McDonald's Corporation's chief Jack Greenberg, and Club Med president Philippe Bourguignon. To Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner, the quality underlying their success is a rare kind of personal capability, linked of course to dilemmas: the ability to embrace seemingly contradictory values in the service of a greater long-term goal. For example, the duo lauds Virgin Atlantic Airways Ltd. founder Richard Branson for his tongue-in-cheek ability to bridge the seemingly contradictory ideals of business profit and anti-establishment protest, through a strategy of canny indirection. "Richard Branson allows press, politicians, and the public to do most of the moralizing," they write. In any business he enters, "he offers a lower-price, quality alternative, thereby becoming the consumer's champion and the media's darling." It works so well that a poll of British young people voted Mr. Branson one of the few people they trusted to rewrite the Ten Commandments.

It's significant that both Dr. Hampden-Turner and Dr. Trompenaars are European; their work embodies a prototypical European understanding of the quirks of fate that can give two groups of people, living a few miles apart, thoroughly different cultures and languages. At the same time, there's a distinctively American tenor to their work, a reflection of the 25 years that Dr. Hampden-Turner lived in the U.S. (where he studied and taught at Harvard, and then spent two years studying the California counterculture) and Dr. Trompenaars's own doctoral work at the University of Pennsylvania (where he developed his questionnaire at the Wharton School of Business). Americans tend to believe that personality is independent of culture; that people can reinvent themselves whenever they wish, if only they can find the proper technique. Perhaps that's why American companies are

the most avid Trompenaars–Hampden-Turner clients. It's not just that they are trying to become globe-trotting multinationals and are unsure of the reaction they will get on other continents. The THT theory of cultural dilemmas offers such a company the opportunity to reinvent itself and thus escape its seeming destiny.

But if any national character can claim the ultimate influence on the THT method, it's probably the Japanese. Both men have a longstanding fascination with Asian culture. They both describe their work by mentioning the Japanese word *shukanteki*. It means subjectivity — or, literally translated, the "host's point of view." In Japan, this is always considered subservient to the mind-set of *kyakkanteki*, which doesn't mean rationalistic objectivity in a Western sense. It means the ability to perceive oneself from the outside, or to take on the fresh naiveté of a stranger. Literally, it means the "guest's point of view." That's the essence of the Trompenaars–Hampden-Turner approach: learning to adopt the guest's point of view about the host's point of view. Only by becoming acutely aware of the reasons for the differences between guest and host, between seller and customer, and between acquirer and acquiree can we see how those barriers might be overcome.

The Dresden Dilemma

Consider, for example, the dilemma that Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner uncovered at the AMD factory in Dresden. The plant, only a few miles from the center of the city, which had been firebombed by the Allies during World War II, was intended as a flagship for the emerging high-tech center in the city. It takes an extremely skilled workforce to make the chips, which pack 40 million transistors into a silicon wafer the size of a fingernail. AMD had chosen Dresden in part because it



Charles Hampden-Turner (left)
and Fons Trompenaars

had been the home of one of the most advanced East German universities before the Berlin Wall fell. Its location, central to Europe and convenient to Scandinavia, also made it ideal.

But when the Americans and West Germans arrived, it soon became clear that culture clashes could provide a real obstacle to success. Some Americans assumed that everyone would naturally want to follow the best practices brought from the U.S. Some Germans perceived the Americans as condescending. There were West Germans who saw the plant as a chance to help their East German brethren make up for the years of isolation, and East Germans who burned when they felt their unique talents for ingenious solutions were being overlooked.

Typically, these kinds of feelings can breed misunderstanding in even simple situations, such as figuring out

how to conduct meetings. The American managers preferred freeform brainstorming sessions in English, where they could develop ideas openly and spontaneously in the group. The Germans, coming from a culture in which it is a breach of privacy to open someone else's refrigerator, typically did not want to present their thoughts unless they were well prepared. A conventional solution (for a typical American-owned company) would have been to force everyone to adopt U.S. informality. The AMD Dresden startup team rejected that approach, and considered alternating German-style formal meetings one week, and American give-and-take sessions the next.

Instead, in a series of meetings with the team, Drs. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner suggested that they could have it both ways, but not at the same time. To combine the strengths of their different perspectives, the Americans and the Germans would gradually have to build up their capabilities together. The Dresden team designed a meeting format that opened with American-style freewheeling brainstorming sessions, in which new ideas were encouraged from anyone, regardless of place in the hierarchy. But they also set up a formal reflective process — for summarizing and thinking through the ideas between meetings, and then presenting them again, in improved form, during the next meeting. When appropriate during the brainstorming sessions, ideas are written down and posted on boards, to ensure that participants who aren't confident of their verbal skills can also add ideas easily. Although AMD's lingua franca is English, the meetings are held in both English and German; any member may switch to either language at any time to express an idea, without recrimination.

The story seems, at first glance, like a compromise, as if each side magnanimously gave in to make the other feel

at home: “We need them, so we’ll adapt a bit, even though it’s really better our way.” But the dilemma process works only when both sides change; when the Americans (in this case) learn the skill of more thoughtful deliberation, and the Germans can operate with more off-the-cuff dynamism. Mr. Gillo credits the resulting multi-cultural style (and a similar effort to bridge the gap between East and West Germans) as a key competitive advantage of the plant. After less than two years of operation, the AMD Dresden factory is breaking production speed records; last year it went through three generations of chip redesign without major errors, compared to one redesign every 18 to 24 months for most plants.

“We caught up to one major delay within weeks,” Mr. Gillo says, “by having people placed at the airport to pick up critical parts from America, driving them into the factory, and getting them right into the machines without delays. It reminded me of the women’s relay team in the 1998 Olympics. The American runners were faster individually, but the Germans beat them by half a second because of the way runners were attuned to each other, and handed off the baton.”

Could AMD use the same technique to encompass more cultural differences — such as French, Chinese, or Turkish influences — and gain even more competitive advantage? Mr. Gillo thinks that it would bring no further marginal improvements, “since in most dilemmas there are only two dimensions at work.” Yet many global businesses must now work with several cultures on the same team. In effect, they are running ad hoc experiments in cross-cultural collaboration, without really considering the complexities in any systematic way. If the AMD story is typical, then success may depend, far more than we commonly think, on the willingness of ordinary people to

open up their defenses and talk about the unmentionable subject of ethnic and national personalities — and particularly the ways in which the most disparate cultures can learn from each other.

Matters of Morality

“Americans say the French are always late,” Dr. Trompenaars is saying, in a speech before some accountants in Baltimore. “But it’s nonsense. I once met a Frenchman who was on time.” A few minutes later, he says, “Being married is like having an English car; the excitement you get when it works is amazing.” And then he describes how he used to make a point about dilemmas “by asking my audiences to hold their breath for two minutes. Just two minutes. But I had to stop. In Germany, I was losing people — they try it.”

Finally, he confronts his hosts: “What is American culture? Is it East Coast or West Coast? Texas or Boston? As a foreigner, I can tell you: It is ice water, shopping malls, and this interesting liquid you call ‘coffee.’”

Dr. Trompenaars himself is the product of a Dutch father and a French mother. (“Their marriage has lasted,” he says, “because they never understood each other.”) He is sometimes described by his clients and friends as a European Jay Leno, but his features and gestures more closely resemble those of Zero Mostel, the saucer-eyed American comedian best known as the huckstering impresario in the film *The Producers*. Dr. Trompenaars’s jokes work onstage, in part, because of his animated Mostelesque double takes, as if he can’t believe he’s getting away with this kind of public stereotyping. Only occasionally is he rebuked on the grounds of political incorrectness. His patter works, of course, because he steers clear of jokes about race or gender, but also because it is

Many acquisitions lead to lower shareholder value. Cultural mismatch is almost always the most important factor in this loss of value, researchers have found.

tailored to business audiences, who must come to terms with people different from themselves, if only because the boundaries between their comfortable workplaces and the outside world are dissolving. If they don't laugh, they might erupt in despair.

The serious part of a Trompenaars talk typically begins when he presents the following conundrum: You are riding in a car one evening, driven by a friend. You notice the car is traveling at 30 miles an hour in a 15-mph speed zone ... and then the car strikes a pedestrian. The weeks that follow are a nightmare. Your friend is arrested. As the only witness, you are called to testify. Your friend's lawyer asks you to say the car was not speeding. You know your testimony could help your friend go to jail — or stay out of it. Under oath, however, you feel a compulsion to tell the truth. What do you say?

This dilemma, first posed by the American sociologist Samuel Stouffer in 1951, pops up from time to time in popular culture; it's the plot pivot point, for instance, in Atom Egoyan's heartbreaking film *The Sweet Hereafter* (and in the Russell Banks novel on which the film is based). It always comes down to the same basic, impossible choice: Do you stay loyal to the universals — in this case, the law against perjury — or to the particulars of, say, your family and friends?

Dr. Trompenaars typically asks audiences not just how they would handle the dilemma themselves, but what they think the most moral choice would be. And then he gives them a rundown on past responses from different nationalities. The Swiss, the Americans, and the Canadians are the most eager to tell the truth, even if it means sending their friends to jail. They are, as the Trompenaars–Hampden–Turner lexicon puts it, “universalist”: At a level deeper than conscious choice, they tend

to believe in the value of principles that apply to everyone equally, and they want to see those principles enforced fairly, even at their own expense. Hence their relatively large populations of lawyers. At the other end of the spectrum are the “particularist” cultures like China, Russia, Korea, Venezuela, and East Germany, where people are primarily loyal to their individual relationships, and feel that loyalty carries more moral weight than any abstract principle. The English and French tend to fall in between; with the car crash story, for instance, they have been known to reserve judgment until they learn what happened to the pedestrian. Dr. Trompenaars describes an English woman who, when she was told that the pedestrian died, said that now she felt morally obligated to tell the truth. But her French counterpart insisted that now the friend needed help more than ever. And the Italians? “They want to know what happened to the car,” Dr. Trompenaars says.

Of course, no one is completely universalist or particularist, and no culture is completely monolithic about this (or any other) value. Even the Americans and Swiss will lie about the accident if, instead of a friend, it's their spouse or child at the wheel. But there is one generalization you can make about everyone: We all tend to assume, at first at least, that our own culture's morality is correct, while the other side's is corrupt. Americans, for instance, sit smugly in judgment of the opposition. (“You can't trust them. They won't even tell the truth.”) But then Dr. Trompenaars mentions the Korean manager who came to him after a talk and said, “This proves that you can't trust the Americans. They won't even help their friends.” (That explains, Dr. Trompenaars adds, why Americans have so many friends. They have to keep replacing them.) Differences like these are not arbitrary; they exist, he says,

We all tend to assume that our own culture's morality is correct. That's because different groups have organized themselves to overcome problems circumstances have dealt them.

because various groups have unconsciously learned to organize themselves differently to overcome the problems that circumstances dealt them. For example, the Americans are universalist because they needed to develop a sense of fairness in an immigrant culture with fewer family ties. The East Germans and other residents of former Communist countries have learned over the years that, as Dr. Trompenaars puts it, “when your ‘universal truth’ is called Communism, it’s good to trust your friend instead.”

As the Germans and Americans of AMD’s Dresden plant did, it is possible to learn to reconcile two opposing values — to navigate a course that satisfies both friendship and the morality of absolutes. For instance, you might tell the truth, send your friend to jail, and then make yourself and your resources available to help him in any possible other way. Or, you could take the approach suggested to Dr. Trompenaars by a group of Japanese advertising executives: Tell whatever version your friend asks you to tell, but plead with your friend to find, in your common relationship, the courage to tell the truth. You cannot make the decision alone because the penalty is your friend’s, not yours. No one can come to such a solution immediately, and that’s the Trompenaars–Hampden-Turner trade-off: You need time to work your way through the sequence of logic that Dr. Hampden-Turner developed more than a decade ago.

Therapeutic Roots

If Fons Trompenaars is the verbal showman, research coordinator, and rainmaker of THT, then Charles Hampden-Turner is its spiritual center. As a writer and theorist, he developed most of the methods of dilemma resolu-



tion that they offer, and in consultation he tends to focus intensively on the most pernicious client problems. He is a tall, raspy-voiced man who speaks slowly and deliberately and maintains a subdued, motionless presence even in crowded rooms. Where Dr. Trompenaars is an avid experimenter with new technologies, Dr. Hampden-Turner eschews e-mail and writes his book manuscripts and correspondence in longhand. Where Dr. Trompenaars surrounds himself with people, Dr. Hampden-Turner travels alone.

The roots of dilemma theory go back to 1973, when Dr. Hampden-Turner, then a 38-year-old Harvard professor with a doctorate from its business school, took a job writing a report about an independent San Francisco foundation called Delancey Street, where ex-cons and drug addicts immersed themselves in group dynamics and mutual aid to rehabilitate themselves. Dr. Hampden-Turner was so impressed that he quit Harvard and spent two years living part-time with Delancey Street’s residents, often taking part in marathon group therapy sessions that lasted for two or three days at a time. “It blew my mind,” he recalled recently, during an interview in a New York hotel. “I got to hear the much funnier, heart-breaking real-life truth that existed behind their ‘official’ stories. There was a girl who had burgled a house while on heroin, and the drug made her pass out in the master bedroom, where they found her asleep amidst the jewelry she’d been stealing. We christened her ‘Goldilocks’ and gave her three stuffed bears. When you can’t laugh at yourself, I learned, you’d better start weeping.”

Gregory Bateson had proposed that addiction, schizophrenia, and dysfunction

of all kinds were caused by double binds (or, as Dr. Hampden-Turner later called them, values conflicts), in which people tried to live up to two ingrained, but contradictory, notions of what they were supposed to be. The Delancey Street people had a lifetime of experience in watching themselves try, time and again, to force themselves to overcome their bad habits,



only to be drawn back into addiction because the tension of trying to quit made it all that much harder. Ten years later (after publishing a fascinating and dense Baedeker of human consciousness theories called *Maps of the Mind*), Dr. Hampden-Turner took a job in London, for Royal Dutch/Shell Group's central office. He saw the same double binds at play in senior corporate echelons. Instead of addictions to drugs and crime, he saw in the corporate people "addictions" to misunderstanding, ill-chosen decisions, and the need to maintain control.

This was not a trivial problem for Shell. The Shell Group, as it was called, had been organized into more than 100 local operating companies around the world, all purportedly autonomous. The Committee of Managing Directors, the most senior executives in the company, recognized how damaging it was to micromanage from the top, but they could not stop themselves. Although Shell managers are generally not rewarded for being creative, the Group has a history of gathering bright people (like Dr. Hampden-Turner) and giving them room and time to bounce ideas off each other, particularly in intellectually oriented departments like Group Planning, where Dr. Hampden-Turner landed. One of his first assignments was to take part in a report on Shell's centralization dilemma, for which he interviewed a number of senior executives.

Some advocated centralization while others wanted to decentralize; some advocated diversifying into new businesses while others wanted to focus on oil; some supported broader levels of social and environmental responsibility while others resisted; and the Shell global system was continually spinning, with increasing discomfort, to meet the variety of mixed signals

it received from its leaders.

Dr. Hampden-Turner wrote all this up in a 1985 report called *Through the Looking Glass*, illustrated on the cover by a John Tenniel engraving of Lewis Carroll's Alice. In that paper, he proposed a method for dealing with dilemmas that is largely the same as the process he and Dr. Trompenaars use today. First, they name the extreme positions and the reasons they might make sense; then, they develop a strategy for cycling back and forth between the two approaches in turn, like the AMD meetings that are conducted in both German and English. Over time, gaining experience with both sides, people can develop their own new kind of system that is, for instance, both centralized and decentralized.

The *Looking Glass* paper was distributed within Shell, with strictly limited circulation; the managing directors apparently feared that if word leaked out that they acknowledged having dilemmas, the stock would fall. Even today, the paper, which has never been published, enjoys a covert photocopied pass-along circulation.

Meanwhile, Dr. Hampden-Turner's ideas came to the attention of Dr. Trompenaars, who at the time was a young human resources manager at Shell Netherlands' flagship R&D facility, the Shell Laboratories in Amsterdam. Dr. Trompenaars had been sponsored by

Seven Modern Dilemmas: The Manager's Guide to Cultural Conflict

1 Universalism versus particularism.

Some cultures (such as North Americans and Swiss) see morality as a matter of standard laws and rules, whereas other cultures (such as Koreans, Venezuelans, and Eastern Europeans) see morality as variable, depending on particular loyalties and circumstances.

2 Individualism versus collectivism.

Americans and Israelis (despite their kibbutz tradition) believe that success stems from individual achievement, while people from Japan, Egypt, and India assign primary responsibility to the group. This dilemma often makes it difficult to establish viable performance assessments; an IBM sales team dealt with the problem by awarding bonuses to excellent groups (those that had nurtured individuals) and excellent individual performers (especially those who had been the best team players).

3 Neutral versus emotional temperament.

To a Chinese person or a Northern European, a good leader never shows emotion, and rarely (if ever) raises a voice or gestures excitedly; to a Kuwaiti or Italian, displays of emotion signify passion and commitment. Reconciling these cultural mismatches generally involves studied efforts to learn the other side's cues and to moderate one's own. (Charles Hampden-Turner, who sees this one as merely "stylistic, not fundamental," omits it from the books where his name

as author comes before Fons Trompenaars's. That's why some of their work describes just six, instead of seven, dilemmas.)

4 Specificity versus diffusion.

Airlines in America narrowly define their job as transportation; "You're a piece of meat, we carry you," says Dr. Trompenaars. They serve little food on short flights. Singapore Airlines, British Airways, and most European airlines adopt a general, "diffuse" sense of responsibility for passengers as guests. Naturally, they want to serve full meals, even on a 20-minute flight from London to Amsterdam, no matter how expensive or cumbersome that may be. To reconcile this dilemma, former Scandinavian Airlines Systems CEO Jan Carlzon focused on "moments of truth": SAS would concentrate only on those diffuse services — champagne on one flight, more attention to connections on another — that would make the most difference to customers.

5 Achievement versus ascription.

America's tradition of deriving status from a merit system (achievement) creates a culture of "winners and losers" in which the "losers" are often blue-collar people, shut out from decision-making. The alternative followed in many Asian nations (and in the British House of Lords, and most labor unions), in which status is hereditary or rooted in one's community, rewards medioc-

ity. A trucking company bedeviled with safety problems resolved this dilemma by enlisting its unionized drivers as "knights of the road," making them directly involved and respected participants in increasing highway safety.

6 Clock time versus cyclical time.

By querying managers on the details of their sense of past, present, and future, Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner uncovered a wide range of "time-senses." Underneath them all is the difference between time as a linear arrow (as the Americans and English perceive it), in which events happen in sequence and punctuality is a virtue; and time as a recurrent, synchronous cycle (as the Japanese, Italians, and Vietnamese perceive it), in which people do many things at once and don't mind being kept waiting, since there is so much else going on. Had the Americans known how to reconcile their time-sense, Dr. Hampden-Turner argues, the Vietnam War might not have been a quagmire.

7 Inner versus outer direction.

Dr. Trompenaars recounts driving a Mitsubishi that collided with a Volvo. The Swedish car, built according to "inner-directed" values, was built strong, to withstand and dominate its environment. It wasn't dented, but its passenger was bruised. The Japanese car yielded on impact, responsive to its environment. Its fender crumpled, but the riders were unscathed.

Shell for a doctorate at Wharton, where he had studied cultural differences, developed a questionnaire about them, and identified those seven key dilemmas in their first form. He sent a draft of his dissertation to Dr. Hampden-Turner, who wrote back after several months, saying, “I think I can reconcile all of those dilemmas. There might be a good division of labor between us.” That set the tone for their working relationship, which carried on for several years at Shell, and then (when they both left the company to follow the lure of independent consultation) through the following decade.

This year represents a particular moment of luster for them, not just because of the two books, but because the shadow of their last book is finally receding. Called *Mastering the Infinite Game*, it argued the dilemma-resolving nature of Asian cultures would surely trump the West in business. Unfortunately, it came out in 1997, just as the Asian currency crisis hit.

Social Science as System

What, then, do we make of dilemma theory? Dr. Trompenaars and Dr. Hampden-Turner have their share of critics, most of them from inside the realms of academic sociology, quibbling over the makeup of their “dilemma” categories and carping about their consulting fees. But those critiques seem beside the point. Culture, after all, is just an opening for the thorny issue that they’re really talking about: Why people are willing or unwilling to learn new things.

“We are the first social scientists that I know of,” says Dr. Hampden-Turner, “to measure the impact of reconciling values in a valid, replicable, and systematic way.”

Dr. Hampden-Turner in particular is fascinated by — some say obsessed with — the depths of human evil that the dilemma theory illuminates. An evil person, he believes, can be defined as someone who not just tolerates, but creates dilemmas for others. Whether through deliberate malevolence, or as a natural side effect of dogmatic certainty, the evil person sets up some values as “virtuous and godlike,” as he puts it, and forces people to bury and repress the others. That is how Dr. Hampden-Turner sees the Nazis, and Kurtz, the villain of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Reading between the lines of

his conversation, you get the impression that he sees business the same way, as perhaps less extreme, but still capable of drawing people into a doctrinaire way of life that hooks them, subtly and subconsciously, into a world of thorny dilemmas.

Dr. Trompenaars, on the other hand, has a sunnier temperament and a lighter way of thinking about the problem. Dilemmas are the problem, but they may be resolvable after all — simply by introducing the guest’s point of view to the host, and vice versa. Business, in the end, is not like politics or war. In business, both the “guest” and the “host” — whoever they may be — want success, and they may find it far more effectively by learning to assimilate the ideas of the enemy until there is no enemy at all. +

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Resources

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Trompenaars Hampden-Turner International Management Consulting: www.7d-culture.nl/

For more discussion on the ideas of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner, visit the **strategy+business** Idea Exchange at www.strategy-business.com/ideaexchange/
