



Pluralism in Japanese Ethics

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Perhaps the most famous ethicist in the Japanese tradition is Watsuji Tetsurō, who worked at the Universities of Kyoto and Tokyo in the early twentieth century. Watsuji was a peripheral member of a larger group of Japanese philosophers, known now as the Kyoto School, who sought to bring together elements of Asian thought, especially from Madhyamika Buddhism, with the post-Kantian philosophy dominant in Europe at that time. In his most important work, *Rinrigaku*, he offered an account of what he took to be the universal structure of ethics, as well as discussing some of the specific features of ethics in Japan. I will offer a brief outline of some of Watsuji's claims in *Rinrigaku*, before drawing out a facet of his position that I think is interesting and suggestive, in particular, what I shall call his pluralistic conception of ethics.

Drawing especially on Hegel, Watsuji claims that ethical life involves two steps. In the first, the individual establishes him or herself as a free subject. This, Watsuji thinks, constitutes a kind of negation of the community: a free individual is no longer determined in how he lives by unthinking custom or practice, but chooses to live in a certain way, determining himself out of his freedom. In the second step, however, the individual freely chooses to negate himself by choosing to do what the community asks of him. Watsuji thought, accordingly, that ethical life could be destroyed in two ways: either by a repressive community, which prevents individuals from establishing their freedom in the first place, or by individual selfishness, the refusal of individuals to exercise that freedom in accordance with the community's norms, leading to the dissolution of the communal life. Rightful action, by contrast, is constituted by the acts that those two steps involve: by the acts in which an individual establishes his or her freedom, or those in which he or she freely obeys the community.

Watsuji held that all societies' ethical systems have this structure, but he was aware that different societies ask different things of their members. As I understand Watsuji, he was quite prepared to accept the implication that individuals in different communities have obligations to

do different things, though of course all those things would share the feature of being what the community asked of them. The result is a view of ethics that is almost, but not quite, relativistic. There are two universal moral rules: that one must preserve one's freedom against its annihilation by the community, and that, this freedom having been established, one must obey the community's norms. However, there is as much variation in what is involved in subordinating oneself to one's community as there is variation in what communities ask of their members. The system is not formally relativistic because the fundamental imperatives have a universal form, but its implications are in some respects quite close to those of relativism as it is ordinarily conceived. I shall call this sort of ethical system 'pluralist'.

Now it is obvious that there is an authoritarian dimension to Watsuji's ethics, which became especially pronounced during the 1930s and 40s, when Watsuji tended to de-emphasize the need for individuals to preserve their freedom and to emphasize only their obligation to do as it commands. There is an extensive literature on this subject. The interested reader need only turn to the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy for references. I should like here, however, to focus on what I have called Watsuji's moral pluralism. It is readily apparent, if perhaps rather ironic, that this pluralism is closely related to his authoritarianism: because much of morality is determined by contingent facts about the community's norms, other communities' members are not usually acting wrongly when they behave differently from one's own, and if one forced them to act in accordance with one's own community's norms, one would be forcing them to do the wrong thing. Assuming that one should not cause others to do the wrong thing, then, one should forbear from imposing one's community's norms upon others, rather than trying to impose one's norms upon them. There is thus a sort of respectfulness of other communities in Watsuji's ethics, though justified in rather a surprising way.

The philosopher Otabe Tanehisa has suggested that pluralism of this sort features prominently not only in Watsuji's thought, but also in Japanese culture more generally: the idea of exporting their values or their social system around the world is very remote to most Japanese people. The roots of this, Otabe suggests, lie in Japan's position as a cultural importer. For many centuries, Japan's high culture—Buddhism, the Noh, the Confucian classics—was influenced by Chinese and Indian sources, and educated Japanese people composed poetry and official documents in the Chinese language, although the Japanese tended to interpret and adapt these foreign practices in order to integrate them with the national tradition. Few Chinese, on the other hand, would ever have learnt Japanese, and explicit cultural influence from Japan was very slight. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a somewhat similar relationship has obtained between Japan and the West: Japan has sought to adopt Western methods and institutions

without abandoning a distinctively Japanese way of life. Japanese people have therefore tended to emphasize the importance of preserving the integrity of their way of life, rather than projecting it internationally.

Watsuji's view of ethics is, of course, consciously quite different from those of most Western philosophers, few of whom would assign to the community so fundamental a role in determining what is right and wrong. His moral pluralism, however, seems to me to be a position to which adherents of many traditional Western ethical theories might be implicitly committed, despite appearances to the contrary.

For a simple example, consider consequentialism. The simplest form of consequentialism is the claim that, roughly, whenever one has a choice, whoever one is and wherever one is, one must do the thing that will make the world better. This is not a pluralistic view, in the sense I am using the term: it claims that there is only one rule that should ever be appealed to in determining how one should act, in every time and place. Most consequentialists, however, do not subscribe to such a simple version of their position. In general, consequentialists recognize that if we always tried to make the world better in their every action, our efforts would frequently be counterproductive, because (for example) we would spend too much of our time making complex calculations about the effects of our every action, or because it would be impossible for people to form friendships with particular others. To simplify somewhat, the standard consequentialist response to this problem is to suggest that we should ordinarily act on the basis of guidelines or derivative principles, rather than on the basis of calculations in every case about the effects of our actions: those guidelines or derivative principles, however, should be chosen on the basis of how far they will make the world better.

It looks to me as though indirect or rule consequentialisms of these kinds are pluralistic, like Watsuji's ethics. This is because which guidelines or derivative principles are best will vary from context to context, perhaps quite dramatically: it might be true that, under some social conditions, one would maximize 'the good' by following some authoritarian set of rules, whilst under some other conditions it would be maximized if by following liberal ones. What the community's norms are will influence rather than actually constituting which rules transpire to be the ones which one should follow, but they could still play a very central role, given for instance how disruptive it would be for one to follow different rules from one's neighbours.

A more complex case is that of Kantian ethics. A common non-scholarly view of Kantian ethics is that it is 'deontological', an inflexible universal rule derived from pure reason, which must be applied in every time and place in exactly the same way. This of course is a decidedly non-pluralistic conception of ethics: on the most extreme interpretation, it may imply

that whenever anyone acts for any reason other than Kant's Categorical Imperative, that person is acting wrongly. Most scholars, however, reject this interpretation of Kant's ethics, and see them rather as being fundamentally concerned with respect for persons rather than abstract calculations about the universalizability of maxims. On this view, the key formulation of the Categorical Imperative is the second one, always to treat humanity in oneself or others as an end in itself and never solely as a means. It is this strand of the Kantian tradition that has had a decisive influence on European culture over the last two centuries, via Hegel, Marx, Sartre, Maritain and Rawls.

It looks to me as though Kantian ethics, conceived thus, will be at least somewhat pluralistic too. We can see this straightforwardly in the case of manners: it is respectful of one's host to remove one's shoes when invited into a home in Japan, but this is not generally true in the West. The same underlying rule—to treat people respectfully—implies different actions in different cases, on account of what is taken to be respectful conduct in a given context. This might apply in cases that go far beyond etiquette. An Oxford philosopher once said to me that she suspected Inuit people were acting respectfully towards their elderly when they abandoned them on ice floes, as they supposedly used to do in accordance with their traditions. Once again, of course, this form of pluralistic Kantianism would assign a much more limited role to social norms in determining what is morally right than Watsuji's ethics would: the community's norms would be relevant in determining what constitutes respectful action towards someone, but there would certainly be contexts in which conduct condoned by the community is still wrong, as Kant supposed in the case of, for instance, duelling. But it shares with Watsuji's ethics the feature of having a very limited set of universal moral rules that would be instantiated differently in different social contexts.

Watsuji's pluralism, then, is in this respect not so far from some of the Western ethical traditions as the reputations of those traditions would suggest; comparing the two brings out an important strand of pluralism in the latter. It is interesting that Western ethical systems have acquired a reputation for being inflexibly universalistic, without actually being so, and perhaps rather salutary that superficial differences between ethics in different cultures may disguise deeper similarities.