



Ethical Disagreement Across Cultures: The Case of Japan

Samuel Hughes

Fellow of the Dalai Lama Centre for Compassion

One of the questions that has attracted interest from both Europeans and Japanese people since the Meiji Restoration has been how great the differences in European and Japanese ethical life are, where by 'ethical life' is meant not the theories of the philosophers, but the implicit and explicit ethical judgements of ordinary people. Opinion on this is extremely varied: perfectly respectable commentators have taken the view that ethical life in the two cultures is utterly different and incommensurable, and the view that it is basically just the same, with merely cosmetic differences. In this essay I should like to review some of the contributions that have been made to this question, grouping them for convenience into what we may call the 'humanistic', the 'experimental' and the 'moral theoretical'. While we will be able to identify some kinds of agreement and disagreement fairly readily, the nature of the more fundamental areas of ethical life will prove elusive; indeed, part of what I hope to show is that establishing whether there is consensus across cultures at these deeper levels is simply very hard to ascertain.

We may begin with what I shall, very loosely and un-rigorously, call 'humanistic' studies of ethical life in Japan and its differences to ethical life in Europe. By this I simply mean informal cultural observation: the study, without an experimental methodology, of the ethical judgements of Japanese people. I should say at once that by distinguishing this work from the 'experimental' I do not mean to denigrate it as unserious; on the contrary, for much of it I have immense respect. Contributions of this kind began to emerge during the Meiji Period, after the recommencement of interaction on a large scale between the West and Japan. Some of the earliest instances were texts written in English by Japanese intellectuals with the aim of explaining and vindicating their country's ideals to a Western audience. Nitobe Inazo's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1900) and Okakura Kakuzō's *The Ideals of the East* (1903) and *The Book of Tea* (1906) quickly became famous in their own time, with *Bushido* supposedly influencing Robert Baden-Powell's model for Boy Scout Movement. They are still in print today. The Western writer who is perhaps best-remembered

from this period is the inimitable Lafcadio Hearn, a Greek-Irish adventurer who emigrated to Japan, married a Japanese woman and taught at a Japanese school while writing *Glimpses of an Unfamiliar Japan* (1894). In later times this canon has expanded exponentially, especially in Japan itself, where works of *nihonjinron*, or ‘studies of the Japanese people’, have become a popular genre of non-fiction: especially celebrated writers include Kuki Shūzō, Takeo Doi, Nakane Chie, Maruyama Masao and, among foreigners, Ruth Benedict, whose work I discussed a little in an earlier essay.

It is a fair generalization to say that these works highlight many differences between Japanese and Western culture, and between Japanese and Western ethical views in particular. The broad themes of disagreement will be familiar to anyone who has encountered this literature in the most cursory way: the significance of social hierarchy, the nature of family obligations and obligations to foreigners, the value of self-expression, and so on; more specific disagreements about homosexuality, pornography, whaling and politics perennially attract attention. Considering all this, it might seem that the answer to our question is obvious: there is quite a lot of overlap between ethical life in Japan and Europe, as well as quite a lot of disagreement: all that remains is the (substantial) empirical task of detailing the issues on which we agree, and those on which we differ. My sense is that something like this is the view taken by many anthropologists.

Philosophers tend to think that this does not exhaust the matter. The reason for this is that philosophers are interested not only in people’s judgements about applied moral issues, but also in the principles to which people appeal in justifying those judgements, or the intuitions which arguably support those principles. This is part of the reason that why universalistic views of ethics are far more widespread among philosophers than they are among anthropologists: philosophers are aware that there is disagreement on applied moral questions, but suspect that there might nonetheless be convergence at a more fundamental level. My impression is that this view is often regarded as wildly implausible and maybe as covertly ethnocentric in other university departments; perhaps that is so, but it is important to appreciate that philosophers generally regard it a hopeful picture, on which these universal principles can be appealed to challenge unjust practices in a community—for our purposes, practices in either the West or in Japan—, however established they may be.

A couple of analogies might help to make this view clearer. One is to grammar. The speakers of a language are not normally able to articulate the grammatical rules that govern their language use; they may not even know that such rules exist. But those rules do exist; we can work out what they are by studying the patterns in the grammatical judgements we make, and this explicit knowledge can then help to arbitrate disagreements in particular problem cases. Many ethicists

think that studying ethics might be like constructing the grammar of a universal language: in particular, they think that there are principles that are implicit in our practices but of which we are not consciously aware, and that gaining explicit knowledge of these principles could help us to arbitrate in difficult cases. The thought for our purposes is that this grammar might be the same everywhere: rather as, say, it has turned out that there are present and past participles in French, English and German, we shall find that in ethical life everywhere the same significance is attached to the distinction between acts and omissions, or known and intended consequences.

A second analogy, stressed by some though certainly not all philosophers, is to mathematics. Mathematical axioms are, on one view, known non-inferentially, through a sort of rational intuition. If someone fails to grasp them, he or she is simply making a mistake, and should think harder. If the mathematical analogy is stressed strongly, then even if the members of two communities disagreed at the most fundamental level of principle, there could still be *potential* convergence between them at the still more fundamental level of intuition: if only one or both groups re-examine their intuitions carefully enough, they will come to revise their principles accordingly. Hence while Peter Singer is sympathetic to the claim that ‘there is in Japanese ethics nothing corresponding to the key Christian injunction “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself”’,¹ he argues that the truth of utilitarianism is a truth of reason, accessible in principle to all rational creatures.² If Singer is right, then our actual principles may differ fundamentally from those of the Japanese, yet at some fundamental level we may have common access to common moral truths.

The question, then, is how we learn about these fundamental principles or intuitions. One method favoured by some philosophers is the use of ‘Trolley Problems’. A Trolley Problem is a kind of thought experiment. In one of the first Trolley Problems, one imagines oneself in control of a speeding train (in American English, apparently, a ‘trolley’), which is about to run down five people on the track ahead of it. One can, however, redirect the train onto a reserve track, on which only one person stands. Most people think that redirecting the train is morally permissible in this situation, maybe even obligatory. The situation is then modified: one imagines that one is on a bridge over the train track, and that the only way to stop the train from killing the five people in its way is by hurling a bystander in its path. Most people think that this is morally forbidden. There are now scores of Trolley Problems in the literature, in which are varied the numbers of tracks, trains and people, the reasons for their presence, and the nature of one’s control over them. The idea with Trolley Problems is that, by radically simplifying complex real-life situations, they allow us to discern the structure of our fundamental moral reasons more clearly. In real life, any

¹ Peter Singer, *How are we to live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148.

² e.g. Peter Singer, ‘Ethics and Intuitions’, *Journal of Ethics* 9 (2005): 331-352, esp. 351-2. Note that Singer is reluctant to call the source of the utilitarian principle’s supposed justification ‘intuition’.

two actions will differ in indefinitely many ways, and it can be difficult to tell which of those differences is responsible for a difference in our overall judgement of the action. In a Trolley Problem, the situation changes in only one stipulated way, and so, the theory goes, we are able to isolate its significance for our overall judgement.

Over the last twenty years a significant empirical literature has developed testing intuitions on Trolley Problems across different cultures; the most popular comparison has been between Westerners and East Asians. The results of these studies have been striking—indeed, to my mind, rather astonishing—: in nearly every case they have found no relationship between the cultural background of the respondents and the answers they give. Instead, unvarying proportions of people across different populations give the same responses: for instance, about 90% would redirect the train in the first case mentioned above, and about 90% would not push the bystander in front of it in the second. Even the one study that dissents finds differences only on quite a modest scale. These results certainly do offer some support to the universalist view that, at a fundamental level, our moral principles are the same.

I think, however, that we should be wary of drawing conclusions too quickly. One reason is that many philosophers doubt that the intuitions produced by Trolley Problems should be taken very seriously. The fact that everything except a few key features of a situation is discarded in a Trolley Problem might impoverish intuitions as well as refining them: perhaps we have very different intuitions about what we can do to a human being when we vaguely imagine one in fanciful scenarios than when we really encounter one in the world before us; if so, maybe the latter intuitions are the ones that would really count. Even if this is not right, though, Trolley Problems could at best tell us only about certain areas of ethics. We may learn much from them about interpersonal justice, but it is less clear that we can learn from them what it is to act with honour, kindness and loyalty, or how those obligations should be weighed against one another when they conflict, or whether certain controversial characteristics—pride, deference or chastity, say—are virtues at all. Perhaps, indeed, it is in areas like these that we would especially have expected there to be moral disagreement between Europe and Japan in the first place. So, although the results of experimental philosophy are certainly welcome and suggestive, they have not solved our problem in its entirety.

A third method, which I will call ‘moral theoretical’, draws on the work of a culture’s own moral theorists in trying to understand its ethical systems. A rough justification for this method can be given by drawing on the grammatical analogy used earlier. Suppose we are trying to understand the grammatical principles of a hitherto-undiscovered language. We observe speakers’ usage, learning much about phonetics and vocabulary but remaining, so far, unable to understand

its grammatical principles. We attempt rarefied tests of people's grammatical intuitions by giving them cleverly contrived sentences and asking them whether they are grammatical or not: we learn something from this, but only about certain narrow areas of the language. Then we discover that speakers of this language already have an established grammatical tradition, that many of them believe they already know their language's grammatical principles, and that they are happy to explain them to us. It would seem sensible, clearly, to take up this invitation.

Obviously the history of Western study of Japanese ethics has not followed such a neat and chronological narrative. But I think it is fair to say that many Westerners who have studied Japanese moral philosophy have done so in the hope that they would learn something about the ethical life of Japanese people beyond the academy. The hope is that in the former we will find an explicitly worked-out, theoretically articulate version of the latter, and that we can then judge for ourselves how similar or different it is to ethical life in the West. Often this assumption is made with disarming rapidity: I have often been surprised by how quick both Japanese and Western scholars are to characterize Watsuji Tetsuro's ethical theory as the definitive theorization of ethical life in Japan. Other scholars, of course, base their analysis on a much wider range of thinkers. The preeminent example of this is perhaps Nakamura Hajime's *The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1947, published in English in 1960), a remarkable attempt to characterize the worldviews of different Asian peoples, including the Japanese, by means of a vast study of their philosophical and religious traditions.

Those who pursue this method tend to come to the conclusion that there are very wide differences indeed between Western and Japanese ethics. Reading Western or Japanese moral philosophers, it is easy to see why this is so. In an earlier essay written for this Centre, I have outlined some elements of Watsuji's ethical thought. Although I drew out some similarities with Western ethical traditions that might easily go unnoticed, very great differences remain: virtually no Western philosopher would accept Watsuji's claim that, within certain broad limits, it is obligatory to obey the norms of the community one lives in. If Watsuji's moral theory does indeed rightly characterize the fundamentals of ethical life in Japan, and if Western philosophers' theories correctly the fundamentals of ethical life in Europe, then there is certainly a deep and unbridgeable gulf between us.

A rather obvious difficulty for this method is that, in the case of many societies, generalizing about what 'its moral philosophers' say is going to be rather difficult. Students of Western ethics will know that this is true of our own tradition: there is little of importance that, say, the ethical theories of Bentham, Kant and Nietzsche share. Their views are, indeed, largely mutually inconsistent, so it must be the case that most of them are wrong in most of what they

say. The upshot of this is that Western moral theorists cannot be regarded as authoritative sources when it comes to characterizing the fundamental principles or intuitions of European people. The analogy to grammar thus breaks down: ethical principles, it would seem, are at the very least much more difficult to identify than grammatical ones.

Now this conclusion about Western moral philosophers and Western ethical life does not necessarily generalize. If we discovered a society whose moral philosophers were in complete agreement with one another, the situation would be rather different. It would of course be possible that they were all wrong, and that in fact the members of that community had latent principles and intuitions that their moral philosophers had not recognized. But it would at least look more plausible that those philosophers might have identified the basic principles that governed members of that community, since the most obvious reason we had for rejecting this claim in the case of Western philosophers—namely their radical disagreements with one another—would be absent. If those principles were clearly very different to our own, we might begin to think that we had encountered a case of fundamental ethical disagreement.

There is an established view that Japan is such a society. I have already mentioned the penchant of many writers for describing Watsuji as the definitive Japanese ethicist; those who read studies of Japanese ethical theory, both by Japanese and by European scholars, will still encounter relaxed generalizations like this quite often. For my own part, however, I am sceptical of this. My own experience of a Japanese philosophy faculty was that its members disagreed with one another in a basically similar way to that in which philosophers in Western faculties do: some were sympathetic to ethical theories from classical Chinese philosophy, some from the Kyoto School, some from Phenomenology and German Idealism, some from contemporary analytical philosophy; some held mixed views or were undecided. To my limited knowledge of Japanese intellectual history, this has been true for a long time. Certainly it was true in Watsuji's own time, when Japanese intellectual life featured conflicting strands of liberalism, Shinto nationalism and socialism; I read with interest of the often-bitter debates between Buddhists, Neo-Confucians and *kokugaku* philosophers during the Tokugawa period. Though freely confessing my relative ignorance, my sense is that sweeping generalizations about what 'Japanese moral philosophers' say should be treated with much the same scepticism as one would treat such claims made about moral philosophers from Europe. This being so, I suspect we should also regard with scepticism the claims made by and on behalf of those philosophers that they are clear authorities on Japanese ethical life.

This is not to say that the moral-theoretical method is useless. It is of course true that there are tendencies in what moral philosophers think, and that those tendencies are related to

shifts in a wider culture. It is also surely true that we can learn something about that wider culture by studying its moral philosophy. But we should be careful. Philosophers may believe that their ethical theories capture the whole truth about ethics, but at best they have probably only captured a part of it.

I believe, then, that each of the kinds of evidence examined here should be treated with caution. Westerners are not sure about the grammar of their own ethics, or even that such a grammar exists; still less can they be sure of the grammar of ethical life in Japan; still less indeed can we be confident that the two are or are not the same. At the same time, one should not be wholly pessimistic. None of the methods I have discussed is useless; each, indeed, is potentially suggestive and valuable. My modest suggestion is that they should be used with care, and, ideally, in conjunction with one another, if we are to make progress on this most interesting of questions.