

Solidarity as a Universal Virtue

: Reevaluating Watsuji Tetsuro's *Rinrigaku*

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Abstract

Cultural conflicts and worldwide economic imbalances are caused by a lack of global virtues. The purpose of this paper is to propose that some Japanese virtues could be spread across the globe as universal virtues. Watsuji Tetsuro's *Rinrigaku* emphasizes just such a virtue, which can be the basis for a globalized system of virtues. His concept of "Dialectics in an experience of a tourist" is especially relevant in this pursuit. This particular type of dialectics demonstrates the relationship between the traveler and the community traveled to, and how both parties are influenced by each other. The nature of tourism spreads spatially separate community-based values across the globe. In spite of his theory's excellence, we must go beyond it to establish universal virtues.

Key Words: universal virtues, solidarity, community

1. Introduction

What precisely are global issues? Couldn't it be said that almost all of the problems we have in the 21st century should be labeled "global issues?" It is widely agreed upon in modern culture and modern science that everything is connected and influenced by everything else. If this is indeed true, there seems to be faint hope for us as a civilization and for our planet when we broaden our vision to include all parts of our troubled world. However, large global issues can be solved by simply looking at the problems surrounding ourselves and our communities. In other words, the first step to solving global issues should be cultivating our own individual and communal virtues. For example, if we are self-disciplined, we will be more likely to abide by society's most fundamental, self-evident principles. If we are of a generous character, we will probably help the poor. We try to cultivate virtues at home, at school and in society in order to achieve these, beneficial results. It goes without saying that virtues vary depending on countries and even communities. Nonetheless, we might be able to find or create universal virtues that are common for everyone on this planet.

While living in the U.S. shortly after the Tohoku disaster, I consistently heard people praise the solidarity being demonstrated by the Japanese people at that time. While the victims

undoubtedly learned very serious life lessons from the Tsunami, the tragedy had a unique influence on me: I finally realized the importance of Japanese thought on the world stage. It was on my flight back to Japan when I made the firm personal commitment to turn my academic concerns towards Japan in order to hopefully benefit the rest of humanity.

The purpose of this paper is to propose that some Japanese virtues could be transformed into universal virtues. Then we as a globalized world can use these virtues to solve issues that affect all of us. I will focus on the potential of an immensely important Japanese virtue: solidarity.

2. Why do we need universal virtues?

According to William A. Galston, virtues can be classified into two sections. The first are virtues that have intrinsic benefits; they are "dispositions that constitute our excellence or flourishing qua human beings."¹ The other type of virtues offer instrumental benefits. They are "dispositions that enable us to perform well the specific tasks presented by our situation."² I choose not to focus on the former type of virtues because it is simply too difficult to change something on an intrinsic level. Moreover, virtues are acquired rather than innate. Therefore, I want to pay attention to the circumstances within which virtues are formed.

^{*1} General Education

Our upbringing; i.e. where we grow up and how we are educated, determines such values. Thus, great emphasis should be placed on the communities we reside in. Such attention should not only be placed on small communities but also entire countries. We learn how to behave in a particular situation by watching others around us or by being taught by members of the community. These virtues and simple rules are formed in order to allow a community to function and hopefully prosper. After all, the reason we form communities is to ease the difficulty of daily life, which would be hard to conduct without the help of others. Therefore, we can say that virtue is a product of community.

Now I want to discuss how virtues are cultivated in the community. For example, how can tolerance be cultivated? Imagine that there are two people, A and B, whose interests are conflicting. If the conflict continues they won't cooperate, thus decreasing progress within the community. It is tiresome and inefficient for a community to constantly try to resolve disputes both large and small. Instead, the community will try to persuade the troublesome members to act more in accordance with the group's values. However, the problem here is that persuasion tends to take the face of oppression. The true meaning of persuasion is not to oppress people but to encourage them toward understanding.

Concretely speaking, we need to encourage both A and B to yield to each other in order to preserve the functionality of the community and of themselves. This is the starting point in the process to create the virtue of tolerance.

Even though there is strong credence to the argument that "strong virtues will make for strong communities", liberals insist that we can maintain social order by moral precepts and/or rules alone. However, they also worry about interference with free choice and personal prerogatives from the community; rules tend to infringe on freedom. However, they forget that obedience of moral precepts or rules is dependent on our virtues, and freedom cannot be realized without any restrictions. Even though we propose moral precepts, obedience depends on individual personalities. And if everyone insists on his or her

own freedom one-sidedly, their freedoms will conflict with one another. Thus we need to cultivate our personalities in a virtuous manner.

Our problem is that the world is now one large community. That's why we need universal virtues. Cultural conflicts and world scale economical gaps are caused by a lack of global virtues. In regards to this matter, Kwame Anthony Appiah raises a criticism against universal values traditionally proposed by cosmopolitanism:

The cosmopolitan curiosity about other peoples does not have to begin by seeking in each encounter those traits that all humans share. In some encounters, what we start with is some small thing we two singular people share... The conclusion is obvious enough: the points of entry to cross-cultural conversation. They do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough we share, there is the further possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not yet share.³

When we follow his theory, we soon encounter a problem. It is indeed possible to realize shared understanding and agreement between A and B or a resolution between the disputing parties A and C, but the concordance found between A and B might conflict with that between A and C. We still need a universal bond in this world to ensure harmony. Up to this point, this matter has been dealt with by cosmopolitanism.

This being the case, before we discuss universal virtues we have to consider the possibility of cosmopolitanism. According to Richard Shapcott, "cosmopolitanism is the ethical argument that all people should be treated as equal, regardless of their race, gender, abilities and so on."⁴ Generally speaking, cosmopolitans have an image that global citizens coexist in the world state under universal morals. Shapcott argues his theories against cosmopolitanism as follows:

a) The international insecurity in the

international state of nature.

- b) The existence of profound cultural and normative pluralism which entails the lack of universal agreement about the 'good' or the 'right.'
- c) Any attempt to act in or realize universal values would be an unjustified imposition of one account of 'the good society' upon others.
- d) A world state based on universalism would be a source of violence, domination and tyranny.⁵

Although these criticisms are reasonable, they are not critical. We can overcome these problems by simply improving the system. Rather, we should criticize cosmopolitanism normatively. I think the typical communitarian criticism against liberalism, what is known as the "unencumbered self;" an abstract individual who is not responsible for others, can be applied to cosmopolitanism here. Cosmopolitanism also presupposes the same kind of individuals who are not responsible for others. In that sense, I take sides with communitarianism.

Even if we insist on communitarianism, we might be asked whether virtues cultivated in individual communities could be universal or not? Regarding this question, we should think that common experiences can cultivate common virtues. There is the possibility that common virtues established in a small community actually extend across state and country borders. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to say that universal virtues stem from local communities. As this idea is totally new, it deserves a new title like "communipolitanism." This philosophy calls for the establishment of universal virtues that are first born and nurtured in the community. Yet this statement begs the question: Where can we seek a model of these virtues?

3. Watsuji's Solidarity

I intend to utilize the Japanese philosophy of virtues at the community level, which can then be used as a basis for universal virtues. There are two main reasons why I am presenting this idea. One is the fact that Western philosophy has

gotten stuck. It is not only ironic when we playfully tease and label globalism as Americanism; it is the truth. And the world has become stained by these Western-oriented values. Globalism based on Western values is facing serious problems. Since Western philosophy has yet to provide a solid, legitimate foundation for globalism, it is reasonable to look to Japanese values for a solution. Fumihiko Sueki explains this clearly:

If you think so, *Tetsugaku* as philosophy has more than one thousand year's tradition, but we can also say that "*Tetsugaku*" with a quotation mark is a new discipline, which was born in Japan one hundred or more years ago. The merit of this discipline is firstly that we can overcome Western-oriented thought. It is [undoubtedly] important to learn Western philosophy, but we don't need to be ruled completely by it. Secondly, we also can say while Western philosophy is lost and recognizes its own decline, "*Tetsugaku*," born in Japan as a new discipline, is filled with the potentiality for being constructed and developed for the future.⁶

The other reason why I desire to find a model in Japanese philosophy is more positive in nature. For centuries Japanese philosophy has placed great importance and value on the tradition of solidarity. Such a strong emphasis on this ideal is a healthy breeding ground for establishing universal virtues. Solidarity connects all countries, people and their values. While Western philosophy presupposes "being," Japanese philosophy presupposes "nothingness." In fact, "absolute nothingness" is often discussed in Japanese Philosophy, most notably by Nishida Kitaro who founded the Kyoto School of Philosophy.

However, we shouldn't forget one more aspect that Japanese philosophers have discussed extensively in relation to solidarity: group harmony. While Western philosophers have discussed the subjectivity of individuals ad infinitum, Japanese philosophers consistently return back to unity and solidarity. Representing

this school of thought is Watusji's *Rinrigaku*, which established another area of the Kyoto School. The concept of solidarity as formulated by *Rinrigaku* could be the basis for universal virtues. Thus, I'd like to review the validity of Watusji's solidarity theory. Then I will propose a new theory that goes beyond Watusji's.

In my opinion the most important facet of Watusji's *Rinrigaku* is "*Aidagara* (間柄)" or "betweenness." The term *Aidagara* means "the Individual is simultaneously society."⁷ He also said "Ethics is a principle for human existence;" a principle stipulating human relationships. Watusji explains:

Moreover, this being in *Aidagara* is, from two angles. The first is that *Aidagara* is constituted 'between' or 'among' individual persons. Thus, we must say that the individual members who compose it existed prior to this *Aidagara*. The second is that the individual members who compose this *Aidagara* are determined by it as its members. From this perspective, we can say that antecedent to there being individual members, *Aidagara* that determined them existed.⁸

Watusji thinks that there is a dual relationship represented by *Aidagara*. *Aidagara* is possible because of each individual, while each individual is possible because of *Aidagara*. Human beings constantly live in relationships with other human beings. This truth is why Watusji pays attention to *Aidagara*, and why I argue that this concept is the core of Watusji's *Rinrigaku* in regards to ideas surrounding solidarity.

Given that our lives are intertwined with others, how exactly can we then help each other? Simply living in the same community does not provide the solution, for it is apparent that individualism is prevailing in our communities. Watusji insists that the first step is trust. So long as we trust each other, we can help each other. To emphasize this point, Watusji discusses the concept of time as a basis of formulating trust:

The phenomenon of trust is not merely the trust we place in others. It is to develop a firm ground work for an unstable and unpredictable future in relationships between self and others. We can only trust others based off of their past behavior.⁹

In other words, we can trust others in the future because they were trustworthy in the past. So we need to recognize what we have done if we want to be trustworthy. This level of trust can only be cultivated through common experience in the community over the long term. We call this common experience, culture.

Interestingly enough, Watusji explains that climate is "just as fundamentally a part of ourselves as *Aidagara*."¹⁰ The definition of community inherently includes the culture as shaped by the climate. Watusji classifies culture stipulated by climate into three categories: monsoon, desert, and pasture. He emphasizes the point that each climatic zone develops its own unique set of ethics. Given that this is true, how then can members from different climatic communities with different ethical values understand each other?

The concepts of "Dialectics in an Experience of a Tourist"¹¹ can aid in solving the previously mentioned problem. By giving an example of a tourist who has travelled in the desert Watusji says, "human beings cannot always understand themselves by themselves. Self-awareness usually is realized through external things."¹² The point he is making is that self-awareness of one's culture can usually be realized through the experience of a different culture.

Moreover, this dialectics relates not only to individual tourists, but also to the culture of the community which is visited by the tourist. After all, tourists naturally influence the culture of the place where they visit, and also spread the ideas they have received from one community to another. Various cultures actually spread out across the world in this way.

Watusji calls this method of cultural dissemination, "Dialectics of the Structural

Relation of the World Culture.”¹³ The dialectics in this case refers to the idea that culture is born in uniquely individual communities and eventually leaves its place of origin. This often occurs through migration or travel as these once unique ideas interact with the perspectives and values of other communities. These encounters alter both the value system of the traveler and the original community. As travel and migration continue, various cultural values spread exponentially.

Watsuji's gaze was transfixed on the idea of “one world” in this dialectics. He does not however insist that all cultures must become the same. “The universal ideal of human beings will be accomplished not merely by denying ethnic individuality, but by realizing it as a true characteristic of humanity.”¹⁴

As Watsuji didn't discuss universal virtues directly in his dialectics, we must continue beyond his theory in order to establish them. I will propose just such a step at the end of this paper.

4. *Otagaisama* as a Virtue

I'd like to propose “*Otagaisama* (お互い様)” as a universal virtue beyond Watsuji's *Aidagara*. Where Watsuji correctly understands the relationship between the self and others, *Otagaisama* is the idea that solidarity stems from reliance. This means that solidarity can only be produced when reliance is present. If help is needed in a community where there is a lack of reliance, solidarity will be difficult to find.

In order to have solidarity in a global society where we don't directly know each other, we need to help others in situations where the mere *potentiality* for reliance exists. We should develop the traditional notion of solidarity into a new virtue which is suitable for the global sphere. I believe that the Japanese expression *Otagaisama* can provide just such a virtue. It is generally understood that *Otagaisama* means “to help each other.” However, in my opinion this word contains a much deeper meaning. English simply doesn't have an equivalent expression. If one forcibly tries to translate the Japanese idea, “reciprocity” might be suitable. Yet, this is still

inadequate because reciprocity needs mutual benefit. Meanwhile, *Otagaisama* differs from the English expression in that *Otagaisama* is possible without any personal benefit.

The word “volunteer” is often viewed as help without personal benefit, yet often the result of volunteering is self-satisfaction. Moreover, if “volunteer” is used in the context of Christianity, it might be confused with “penance.” Whereas volunteering is based on self-interest, *Otagaisama* is based solely on altruism. Altruism as it is traditional understood in Buddhism is similar to this Japanese expression, but in order for it to be accepted as a universal virtue we have to separate it from religion.

Otagaisama is a virtue that has been fostered in peoples' daily life, with little connection to religion. It is natural that we say “*Otagaisama* when in need,” for this value doesn't necessarily mean that we really expect to be helped in return. Rather, this value is simply an expedient way to let a person accept some help without giving him excessive mental burden or a feeling of guilt.

Furthermore, *Otagaisama* presupposes the fact that human beings inevitably cause trouble for others. We sometimes help others even though they harm us. That's why it is possible to extend a hand even to an enemy. However, we should be careful not to base this “help” on compassion or pity, but rather on “respect”. “*Sama*” from *Otagaisama* is a respectful expression used toward others. Respect is an important tenant of *Otagaisama*.

In her book, *Inequality in the Way of Living; an Argument for an Otagaisama society*, Sawako Shirahase proposes to build a society in order to overcome inequality. She aims for “a society which tries to make the most of individual power.”¹⁵ her envisioned society can therefore be one capable of realizing the virtue of *Otagaisama*.

However, the problem we face is whether or not Japanese *Otagaisama* can be implemented on a global level. We first have to demonstrate its plausibility. We can use Watsuji's “Dialectics in an Experience of a Tourist” here again as starting point and then go beyond his original theory. When we bump into a foreigner in our own

community, we sometimes go out of our way to help them despite the fact that they do not initially have the community's trust per se. This help is given from a different viewpoint than the help we give to members in our immediate community. When we help a visitor, it is very likely we will never meet them again. Clearly, this interaction differs from the values of trust and reciprocity developed within a community.

The reason why we can extend the value of *Otagaisama* outside of the community is that our awareness is relativized via contact with a different culture. In that moment the community we belong to is enlarged to one of a more global scale. We can recognize the stranger as a human being living in the same community, which is the earth we all share, and reach out to him. I believe that *Otagaisama* is the only virtue that doesn't ask for anything in return, making a gesture of genuine kindness possible.

5. Conclusion: For the World Government

In 2012, the EU was awarded The Nobel Peace Prize. They received this prestigious award while they were seemingly on the verge of collapse due to the global financial crisis. They may not have been given the award because they were succeeding, but rather as congratulations for the bold economic experiments they were conducting to maintain social stability.

Can we as a civilization become integrated and united beyond the framework of nation states? This has been a heavily debated topic ever since Immanuel Kant proposed it over 200 years ago. As I referred to earlier, Watsuji also thought extensively about this idea. He says, "'one world' should be formed not by force but by reason as an ethical organization for peoples of all nations."¹⁶ However, he argues this world government is not an empire to be ruled exclusively by one sovereign nation.

Rather, he imagines a government where every state executes its own sovereignty through upper organization by first abandoning its own sovereignty. While this seems contradictory, Watsuji feels it is not. Watsuji expresses this idea as "the unification of diversity."¹⁷ Therefore, a fundamental characteristic of this one global

nation is to avoid infringement upon the diversity of cultures. In a deep sense, this one global nation retains respect for each country's climate.

For as I discussed above, virtues which have been fostered in their own unique climate have the potential to unify the world. *Otagaisama* is one of them. I do not argue this to be the only virtue to unify the world. But I want to emphasize the huge potential impact this uniquely Japanese virtue can have on creating harmony and peace in the world.

Notes

1. William A. Galston, "Introduction", in John W. Chapman and William A. Galston, eds. *Nomos XXXIV: Virtues* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p.3.
2. *Ibid.*, p.4.
3. Kawame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in A World Strangers* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company Ltd., 2007), p97.
4. Richard Shapcott, *International Ethics: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.8.
5. *Ibid.*, p.51.
6. Fumihiko Sueki, *A Place of Philosophy: A Meaning of Thinking in Japan* (Tokyo: Transview, 2012), p.13.
7. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), p.205.
8. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Rinrigaku (1)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007), pp.88-89.
9. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Rinrigaku (2)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007), p.24.
10. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Climate and Culture*, p.14.
11. *Ibid.*, p.94.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.65-66.
13. *Ibid.*, p.94.
14. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Rinrigaku (2)*, p.444.
15. Shirahase Sawako, *Inequality of the way of living: For Otagaisama Society*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010), p.221.
16. Watsuji Tetsuro, *Rinrigaku (4)* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007), p.310.
17. *Ibid.*, p.319.

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