

A Japanese Ethics of Double Negation: Watsuji Tetsurô's Contribution to the Liberal- Communitarian Debate

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Watsuji Tetsurô (1889-1960) is rightly regarded as one of Japan's most important philosophers. As Japan sought to make a place for itself amongst the world powers during and after the Meiji Period (1868-1912), thinkers like Watsuji critically examined both the traditional Japanese way of life and the Western values which were in the process of dominating the globe scientifically and intellectually. Watsuji's significance lies in his ability to draw on the Japanese language and culture in order to make uniquely Japanese contributions to ethics, philosophical anthropology and social and political philosophy.

Watsuji's book *Rinrigaku*,¹ published in volumes from 1937 to 1949, challenges Western conceptions of the relationship of the individual to society. While the title translates to "ethics," in the first section of the book, comprised of seven introductory chapters, Watsuji focuses on rethinking the ontological foundation of human existence. According to his philosophical anthropology, humans exist only *between* society and individuality; humanity is constituted, first of all, neither by individuals nor by society, but rather in the dialectical movement between the two. The basis for Watsuji's ethics, what he calls "the fundamental law of human being," is founded on this principle of "betweenness."

Upon comparing Watsuji's thought as presented in *Rinrigaku* to the ideas within the contemporary debate between communitarian and liberal philosophers, common concerns are immediately apparent. The liberal-communitarian debate consists of competing ideas of the relation between the individual and society and of how social and political life should be understood. This essay is primarily concerned with comparing the foundations of human existence as seen in the liberal-communitarian debate, on the one hand, and in Watsuji's *Rinrigaku* on the other.

Watsuji's understanding of human existence within society may at first appear quite similar to the views held by communitarian philosophers, particularly their criticism of individualism. However, while both Watsuji and the communitarians are influenced by Hegelian thought, Watsuji draws specifically on Japanese culture and language, as well as obliquely yet crucially on Buddhist metaphysics, for the primary inspirations of his thought. Central to his idea of the social human is a "movement" of "double negation," which draws on the Buddhist notion of "emptiness" (*shunyata*, *kû* 空) and states that the individual and society both lack any fixed identity. Furthermore, a human may only be understood as situated within, and reciprocally determining and determined by, his or her particular cultural, historical and geographical climate. In these ways, Watsuji's thought exceeds the ideological confines of the liberal-communitarian debate, and his work demands to be carefully reflected upon before making any conclusions regarding the conception of human social existence.

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The autonomy of the individual is an idea which is central to liberal social thought and much of Western consciousness. Liberals believe that the individual within society is

able to freely determine the nature of their own existence within the social whole. According to liberal social theory, a human being must be recognized and respected because of his capacity to choose his own way and purpose of life. A liberal thinker might argue that this autonomy is the "essence of human being."² According to this view, the individual may define his own values, his own role in society and the relationships in which he is involved based on personal preference or advantage, and society must not favor any particular conception of the good life over another but give equal respect and dignity to all. Community, then, in liberal social theory, is secondary to the autonomy of free and independent individuals who are brought together conditionally.³ Community is a means toward the individual end of freedom and security to live as one sees fit, and depends on the decision of the autonomous individual to remain within it.

Communitarians, however, contend that an individual's identity is not independent of society, and must be understood within, and not prior to, their particular social context. To a communitarian, as Michael Sandel argues, individual identity must be associated not with personal freedom, as a liberal might claim, but with communal goods.⁴ Social good must be seen as what is good for the community and not what maximizes personal independence. Alasdair Macintyre agrees, arguing that the problem with liberal individualist values is that community and the individual's bond to it should be based on communal good, and that personal choices should take these communal goods as their foundation.⁵ Liberals, according to the communitarian critique, fail to fully recognize the significance of society as more than simply that which allows individuals to co-exist for mutual advantage. Individuals must maintain a strong sense of their existence as

existence within society in order for society to benefit those individuals which constitute it.

Any human behavior must not be understood merely as the desires of independent individuals, based on utility or pleasure, but must always be understood within the context of the society, history and culture of which the individual is undeniably a part.⁶ To a communitarian, it is not individual autonomy but social influence that primarily defines a person. An individual may not identify herself by purely internal means, independent of and prior to society. A person's definition of herself always begins with how she finds herself within society.⁷ As Swift and Mulhall write, "The identity of the human self is bound up with the self's sense of the significance and meaning of the objects and situations it encounters in life."⁸ The nature of self-apprehension is determined by the particular experiences encountered in life, such as social roles, language, objects, and whatever else is commonly found within society. Charles Taylor argues that even the liberal idea of the free, autonomous and "unencumbered" individual owes its existence to the values of the particular society of which it is a part. "Developed freedom requires a certain understanding of self... This self-understanding is not something we can sustain on our own."⁹ Even the autonomous liberal individual is bound to society, as it is within her interest to defend the communal values which maintain their individualist values.¹⁰ Maintaining the values which make individualism possible in a society is, in fact, a *public* good. "Individualism" is, paradoxically, a social construction. Thus, it is the communitarian view that liberalism *misunderstands itself*.

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Watsuji shares the same criticisms of the liberal conception of society. However, in order to understand Watsuji's philosophy and to see why it is distinct from communitarian thought, it is necessary to first start with his understanding of climate and the profound effect it has on the individual and community. Climate, to Watsuji, is more than mere geography or meteorology. He informs readers of his book *Climate and Culture* that climate actually determines the nature of man's existence and self-apprehension within it. He argues that through physical sensations shared by a group of people, such as cold, heat, or humidity, a common self-perception is developed. Specific tools, clothing, buildings, and entire ways of life are determined by the aspects of physical climate and the ways in which people find themselves in it.¹¹ It is necessary, however, to understand that the relationship between human society and the climate in which we define ourselves is not one-sided climatic determinism. Humans also shape climate, but this undertaking is too great for the lone individual to accomplish. Climate is affected by society through time, throughout history. Watsuji claims that "it is not only history that is the structure of social existence, for climate is also a part of this structure and, at that, a part quite inseparable from history... History and climate in isolation from each other are mere abstractions."¹² History and climate are, in fact, united as one.

It is largely from physical existence within climate that social existence is determined, but the determination is reciprocal. Climate is a "lived social space"¹³ which may be altered doubly throughout history by the society living in it. The first way in which climate and culture define each other might be made clear by imagining a dense forest climate in which people take advantage of the abundance of trees, situating their lives around the harvest of lumber and hunting the animals of the forest. The people

thrive and multiply and, eventually, generations pass and the trees become scarce. The people don't have their lumber to produce what they once did and the animals they had once hunted are gone. These new people, occupying the same space as their ancestors with the same weather patterns and geography, must now farm for food and build homes out of mud or stones or whatever else is available. Their lifestyle was determined by climate, climate was in turn affected by lifestyle, and the now changed climate once again altered lifestyle throughout history.

Climate is also determined by the way in which it is perceived by the society within it, and likewise climate determines a person's conception of herself, but that is not to say that humans are detached from climate as subjects contemplating objects. Humans are a part of climate itself as well as the way in which climate presents itself. To use Watsuji's example, the climate is cold because a person perceives herself being cold within cold weather.¹⁴ However, it is not merely one person's self-discovery that Watsuji is concerned with, but the whole of a society's perception of itself within its environment; not merely "I feel cold," but "we feel cold." Culture is fashioned around the communal self-discovery within a certain climate. Things like goods for pleasure as well as those perceived as necessary for survival, language expression, and leisure activities are all based around the human's discovery of himself within his surroundings. In this way human expressions are phenomena of climate.¹⁵

Watsuji's understanding of climate and culture agrees with the communitarian's critique of the liberal individual's understanding of the self in society. That is that, contrary to liberal opinion, the individual is necessarily "socially immersed" and cannot choose to become a part of society based on advantage or pleasure.¹⁶ Watsuji would add,

however, that the communitarian argument captures only one aspect of the true human being. In *Rinrigaku*, Watsuji writes that the idea of the individual is but only "one moment of human existence" and should not be taken as the "totality of human being."¹⁷ He agrees with the communitarian criticism of liberal thought; it is an abstracted view of the social human's true situation. Community, as well as individuality, is only one aspect of human being. Society is only society if it consists of many individuals. Neither the individual nor the community is able to exist independently.¹⁸ Furthermore, the human individual is, Watsuji argues, only human within social connections of community. If one is independent of society and its social roles, then one is, as Watsuji writes, merely "material solid" devoid of any "individuality such as is characteristic of a human being."¹⁹ In other words, to be human one must necessarily have the capacity for and actuality of interpersonal relationships. The completely independent human is not human at all.

In order to begin to understand Watsuji's rather bold statements, it is necessary to examine the language in which his thought is based. In *Rinrigaku*, he explores the etymology of Japanese words in order to show that his language provides unique insight into the structure of human being. The double structure of the word *ningen* (人間), which is translated as "a human being" or "human beings," is particularly significant, as it represents Watsuji's argument for the double structure of the human. *Ningen* is a unique word in that it specifies human being as a "double existence" of individuality as well as membership within society. This is clearly demonstrated upon examining each of the two characters that constitute the word *ningen*. The first (*hito* 人) is translated as "an individual human being." The second character (*aida* 間) is translated as

"betweenness." *Ningen* originally meant "the public," but came to mean "individual human being living within the public sphere." It now means neither "individual" (*hito* 人) nor "the public" or "the social world" (*yononaka* 世の中), but signifies, as Watsuji argues, a "dialectical unity of those double characteristics that are inherent in a human being."²⁰ What the word *ningen* denotes is the unified existence of the individual within social betweenness; the interconnection of relationships, consciousness and social expression. By possessing the word *ningen* as part of their language, the Japanese are given unique insight into the double nature of human existence.

Human existence to Watsuji is neither completely individual nor completely communal, but rather a combination of the two. In his essay "The Japanese Spirit," Watsuji contends that isolated, independent, individual human action is impossible. All actions necessarily exist within "the sphere of human relations," within the "betweenness" of society.²¹ Furthermore, in *Rinrigaku*, he argues that there is not even such a thing as purely individual consciousness. Social consciousness and individual consciousness are one and the same.²² This may seem to be quite a stretch to Western readers, but it is not as extreme as it may sound.

Consciousness of oneself always extends into society. This point is illustrated in *Rinrigaku* by Watsuji's example of the lone philosopher. Even if this philosopher is concerned only with the contemplation of his own existence, even if he never leaves his study, he is still connected to others. He is writing and thinking in a language that has been created by others, and his work may be read by others in the future. Though the solitary philosopher is, at the moment, physically alone, he may become a teacher for his readers.²³ The philosopher is fulfilling a social role; he is part of a common relationship.

Furthermore, things like his pen, his paper, and his books were all created by other people. The commodities surrounding him and being used in his lone philosophizing, as well as his language, and also his experiences that have led him to become this philosopher that he is, all connect him to society. Neither he, nor any human being, exists as completely independent of society.

The existence of the individual as embedded within the social web of community is what Watsuji calls “betweenness;” the *aida* (*gen* 間) of *ningen*. Betweenness is manifest in the entirety of language, and also in commonly understood colloquial and facial expressions. For people within the same social sphere, these things are understood as more than mere sounds and muscle movement. The betweenness within a society is not evident only in language, it is also found in commodities made available based on common utility or simple popularity. Things like fashion and appetite as well are determined by what is available, what has been experienced and what has been deemed desirable.²⁴ Betweenness is determined by the people within it, but it also determines them. Watsuji writes that betweenness is “constituted ‘among’ individual persons... [and] the individual members who compose this betweenness are determined by it.”²⁵ This “practical interconnection of acts,” the communally connected consciousness and its expression within society, is an expression of social climate, which reciprocally determines and is determined by physical climate and history.

The notion of betweenness is, at first, quite communitarian. It is an idea which agrees with the communitarian assumption that people are obligated to bring out the best in society and obey its rules because of its effect on the people within it. But the similarities between Watsuji's betweenness and the communitarian bond with community

are only superficial. At the heart of Watsuji's betweenness is not simply obligation to community, but a "double negation," of both the individual and society. An individual sees herself as an individual by rebelling against the group.²⁶ The individual may adopt liberal ideas of individualism and rebel against social rules, connections and expectations. This is one movement of what Watsuji calls "double negation." The second movement is the individual's negation of herself by returning to the whole. An individual negates her own individuality, she returns to the whole, through voluntary association with a group.²⁷ She might join a church group, or a club, declare herself a fan of a sports team, one member of a student body or faculty, a company employee, a family member, *et cetera*. All of these things voluntarily negate the negation of the whole that is the perception of independent individuality.

The only way that society may be considered "society" is if it is constituted by many individuals united as members of one group, sharing a common identity; it is thus the negation of individuality. Individuals then seek to restore their lost individuality by once again rebelling against, by negating, the group. The movement of negation necessarily continues back and forth between the individual and society.²⁸ The individual negates the whole, then negates himself and returns to the whole, then negates the whole once again, and so on. Watsuji declares that "individuality itself does not have an independent essence. Its essence is negation, that is, emptiness."²⁹ Individuality does not exist independently, but only as one part of the movement of negation. "Emptiness" is Watsuji's way of understanding this dynamic negative essence or non-essence of the individual and the community.

Watsuji draws the notion of "emptiness" from the Buddhist tradition embedded deep within Japanese culture. Robert E. Carter explains that, according to Buddhist teaching, "everything is deprived of its substantiality, nothing exists independently, everything is related to everything else... and even the *self* is but a delusory construction."³⁰ This illusion of the self must be negated in order to understand the true nature of humanity and of the world, but that is not to say that the whole which negates the individual possesses a substantial identity. With emptiness as its foundation, an "identity of self-contradiction,"³¹ as Carter proposes, characterizes both aspects of social existence. Neither the individual nor society may claim concrete or independent identity.

Watsuji writes in *Rinrigaku* that emptiness is the "absolute" of human existence, and indeed of all of existence.³² Even the absolute, emptiness, which is the basis for existence lacks a concrete identity. It may not be defined as the sum of its parts, but only as that which may give rise to any particular. It is the absolute "non-identity" within which any provisional particular identity exists. In "The Japanese Spirit," Watsuji writes: "The absolute is absolutely void of a particular identity. Thereby, it can be every kind of particular and relative."³³ This dynamic non-identity is demonstrated by Watsuji in his descriptions of the human's shared social existence as betweenness, the unified existence of climate and culture, and of the double negation of society and individuality.

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It is necessary for Watsuji that the movement of the double negation continues without end. If a person becomes stuck on one moment or the other, both society and the individual's humanity will cease to be. Consequently, Watsuji rejects both totalitarianism and individualism. It is true that his thought leans towards a form of communitarianism,

as is evident in his view on the significance of social climate and his rejection of purely individualistic assumptions of human being in society. However, strictly speaking, he is neither communitarian nor liberal.

There is, in fact, much debate regarding Watsuji's purported advocacy of a totalitarian state, based on some of his writings during World War II. I would argue that, while this may well have been his understanding (or, it could perhaps be argued, his self-misunderstanding) of the movement of negation at certain times, it is not Watsuji at his best. We clearly see in *Rinrigaku* that, at the time of its writing, Watsuji believed that the movement of double negation must not end with the negation of the individual and the affirmation of society; it must rather go on to once again negate society and affirm the individual. He writes that "if an individual submerges herself in the whole and refuses to become an individual again, then the whole perishes at the same time."³⁴ At certain times, therefore, the movement of double negation demands that a person rebel against a totalizing community in the name of individual freedom, even if the latter freedom must in turn once again be negated for the sake of returning to a non-totalizing community.

Whether Watsuji succeeded in giving equal recognition to both sides of the movement of double negation remains debatable. What is not debatable, however, is the significance of his ethics of double negation as a contribution from Japan to the ongoing liberal-communitarian debate over the proper way to conceive the relation between the individual and society.

* I am indebted to Dr. Bret W. Davis of Loyola College in Maryland for his help throughout every stage of researching and writing this paper. From introducing me to Japanese philosophy, to devoting his time to in-depth discussions of *Rinrigaku*, and his advice during the revision process, I am grateful for all of the assistance he has so generously offered.

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- ¹ Watsuji Tetsurô, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).
- ² In their book *Liberals and Communitarians*, Mulhall and Swift write that, according to his communitarian critics, John Rawls is committed to this idea of personal freedom as the essence of human being. Rawls himself denies that this is the case. However, communitarians still claim that his argument relies on such presuppositions.
- Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992) 45.
- ³ Charles Taylor, "Atomism," *Communitarianism and Individualism*, ed. Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 30.
- ⁴ Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 66-67.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ⁶ Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, "Introduction," *Communitarianism and Individualism*, ed. Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 2.
- ⁷ Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 13-15.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁹ Taylor, "Atomism," *Communitarianism and Individualism*, 49.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.
- ¹¹ Watsuji Tetsurô, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988) 12-15.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 9.
- ¹³ Robert N. St. Clair, "The Phenomenology of Self Across Cultures," 29 April 2005, <<http://www.louisville.edu/~rnstcl01/R-Phenom-Self.html>>, par. 7.
- ¹⁴ Watsuji, *Climate and Culture: A Philosophical Study*, 12.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7-8.
- ¹⁶ Robert E. Carter, "Interpretive Essay: Strands of Influence," *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, trans. Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) 333.
- ¹⁷ Watsuji, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 9.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 101, 124.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-19.
- ²¹ Watsuji Tetsurô, "The Japanese Spirit," *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy: Selected Documents*, trans. Agustin Jacinto Zavala and David A. Dilworth (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998) 242.
- ²² Watsuji, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 30-31.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-39.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.
- ²⁶ Robert E. Carter, "Interpretive Essay: Strands of Influence," *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 331.
- ²⁷ Watsuji, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 114-117.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23, 117-8.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 350.
- ³¹ Robert E. Carter, "Interpretive Essay: Strands of Influence." *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 348.
- ³² Watsuji, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 99.
- ³³ Watsuji, "The Japanese Spirit," *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy: Selected Documents*, 245.
- ³⁴ Watsuji, *Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, 118.