

Watsuji Tetsurō's Ethics of Milieu

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When we reflect on a given philosophy, we tend to associate it with a *place*, implicitly assuming that geographical location itself modifies the very reflexive processes of thought. If this is the case, might it not be possible to think of the “place” in which a philosophy develops as a milieu or site of formation and development? May we not think of “place” itself as a construction that takes place within the very different circumstances of previous encounters—encounters that may, in turn, shape philosophical identity?

The “place” of the philosophical texts explored in this essay is post-Meiji Era Japan, one of the most fertile sites of radically different thought in-the-making. During the first part of the twentieth century, the philosophers of the Kyoto School, centered around the charismatic figure of Nishida Kitarō, worked to elaborate a new topology of philosophical thought, fundamentally different from but nevertheless in dialogue with that of the West. From this encounter between the Kyoto School and the West, new and original approaches to the traditional problems of philosophy emerged, allowing us, even obliging us, to rethink the very terms by means of which we understand our relationship to the world. It should be stressed in this connection that the Kyoto School did not simply re-contextualize or re-situate existing Western philosophical con-

cepts. Since equivalents for fundamental philosophical terms often did not exist in the Japanese language, Japanese thinkers were forced over the course of several decades to create new words and concepts *within* their own idiom in order to “translate” and express the philosophical thought of the West.¹ In reading the philosophies of other cultures, Japanese and European thinkers alike must remain attentive to the presuppositions inherent in language itself.

Watsuji Tetsurō, the subject of this essay, could easily be pointed to as an example of a philosopher whose thought took shape on the fertile ground of such cross-cultural encounter. Many of Watsuji's own reflections on the nature of the human being were developed in the context of a dialogue with Heidegger's *Being and Time*, as well as with existentialist thought more generally (which tends to conceptualize existence in ways relatively near to that of Buddhism). Although the two approaches are in many ways close, existentialism remains an analysis of the human being as an autonomous individual, primarily understood neither in its relation to others nor to the living environment. Watsuji, on the other hand, defines ethics as “the study of human beings,”² understanding by this the relationship between the individual and society, between human beings and their milieu, which he takes to be a fundamental characteristic of human existence.

Given the social and environmental problems that face us in the early years of the twenty-first century, we might say that at this moment in history the relationship between human beings and their existential milieu has shown itself to be more problematic—and more dangerous—than ever before. One does not have to fall into gloom-mongering to realize that current understandings of this relationship have come to threaten the very survival of our milieu and hence, too, of the human beings that depend on it. It is our contention here that Watsuji's thought can give us the intellectual means to approach this relationship from a truly ethical perspective. Through Watsuji's *mesology*, understood as the study of the existential milieu, and his ethics or “study of human beings,” we will

1. As an example, see the essay by SAITŌ Takako in this volume (pages 1–21).

2. 「人間の学としての倫理学」[Ethics as a study of human beings] was published in 1934, one year before *Fūdo*. This essay anticipates the content of his *Ethics*.

argue, it is possible to conceive of a new and different approach to such relationships, rooted in the distinctive traits of particular cultures and their respective ideas of the world. Focusing on the texts of *Ethics* and *Fūdo*,³ we begin with an analysis of Watsuji's conception of human existence and then proceed with an explication of his major concepts. It is our hope that this reading will help to open up some of the possibilities, and potential applications, of this singular thinker.

WATSUJI'S JOURNEY

Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) is regarded as one of the great figures in the circle surrounding the “Kyoto School.” I use the term “surrounding” deliberately because, in spite of the fact that Watsuji was deeply influenced by Nishida's philosophy, he is generally not considered a member of the closest circle of Nishida's “school.” One of the reasons for this may be geographical. Although in 1925 Nishida offered Watsuji a lectureship at Kyoto Imperial University to oversee all the courses in ethics, a mere two years later Watsuji was sent to Germany for three years of study and research, as was customary for many Japanese academics at that time. In the end, Watsuji was forced to return to Japan prematurely due to the death of his father. After holding a part-time position at Ryūkoku University, in 1931 he was appointed professor at Kyoto University. In 1934 he was offered the position of full professor at Tokyo Imperial University's Faculty of Letters. Watsuji took up the position in 1934 and remained there until his retirement in 1949. Thus, although Watsuji clearly shared Nishida's project of deepening the dialogue between East and West and of building a “neontology”⁴ respon-

3. WATSUJI Tetsurō『倫理学』[Ethics], included in『和辻全集』[Collected works of WATSUJI Tetsurō, hereafter WTZ];『風土』[Milieu, referred to in the text as *Fūdo*], WTZ VIII: 1–256

4. This neologism is taken from the paper of Michel Dalissier, included in the present volume (pages 99–142). It is meant to stress the difference between the standpoints of nothingness and of being. The Greek term *meontology*—the ontology of non-being as opposed to that of absolute being—does not work, since the distinction marked here is not that of the dualism of being and non-being. This term is also

sive to a milieu other than that of Europe, the geographical distance between them helps to explain why Watsuji is nevertheless often considered separately from the core of the Kyoto School.

Although Watsuji had many philosophical interests, his thought is primarily oriented to ethics, understood in the sense of the original Greek *ethos*, or the rules proper to each community. For Watsuji such an ethics is inseparable from the study of milieu or “mesology” (in Augustin BERQUE’s translation⁵). Just to skim through Watsuji’s bibliography is intimidating. In addition to commentaries on major philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant, Watsuji wrote a number of treatises on ancient architecture and thought as well as traditional Japanese drama, ethics and aesthetics, Buddhism and Confucianism, Greek thought, and so on. Such a diversity of themes and subjects underscores the fact that Watsuji’s philosophy is located at the intersection between past and future and also between the diverse *places* in which various forms of thought and philosophy have developed.

One might even say that Watsuji’s intention was, in his own inimitable way, to sketch a “cartography” of thought. Watsuji’s first graduation thesis—on Nietzsche—was rejected by Inoue Tetsujirō, then the highest authority in philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University. He then wrote a new dissertation in 1912 on “Schopenhauer’s Pessimism and the Theory of Salvation,” followed by an essay on Kierkegaard in 1915. Watsuji’s strong affinity for Nietzsche is reflected in a comment in his diary: “I believe that authentic Japanese blood corresponds to Nietzsche.”⁶ The opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian in Nietzsche’s philosophy is echoed in Watsuji’s own articulation of human existence. And, like Nietzsche, the young Watsuji was very attracted to Romantic poetry. It is not hard to imagine him as a sensitive and idealistic thinker, passionate about life in its tragic essence.

used in some interpretations of Sartre.

5. *Fūdogaku* 風土学 means literally the study of climate and culture. BERQUE translates the term as “mesology” in his French translation of the introduction and first chapter of *Fūdo* (1996). In his own research, Berque applies Watsuji’s concepts of 風土学 *fūdogaku* and 風土性 *fūdosei* (*mediance*) to phenomenological geography. We use these concepts throughout our paper.

6. Abstract of Watsuji’s diary, in ISAMU 1981, 280.

In any case, Watsuji's interest in the romantic exaltation of the individual eventually gave way to a more balanced understanding of human nature. Watsuji became increasingly interested in the thought of Natsume Sōseki, whose own work contested the advantages of Western-style individualism, and this interest ultimately moderated his fascination with Western ways of life. Through his participation in a reflection group led by Sōseki in the last years of his life, Watsuji began to doubt the sustainability of a society based only on the glory of individual interests. Combined with his own experiences of living and travelling abroad, Sōseki's influence persuaded Watsuji to seek out new ways of understanding human existence.

Although Watsuji ultimately became a strong critic of the “frenetic” individualism characteristic of modernity, his developed thought does not call for the *destruction* of the individual. Instead, he argues that to the extent that individuals exist, they are always and necessarily connected to others. A wholly independent individual, with no relationship to others, can only be a chimera, a phantom of the living human being in its full complexity and relationality. Watsuji's goal became to articulate the human being not as an isolated atom but as a being whose very existence is constituted by a “practical interconnections of acts.”⁷ Because humans are relational beings, Watsuji argues, their very individuality stems from their difference *from others*, or in other words, from the heterogeneity of the multiple contingencies of existence.

Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which Watsuji came across in Germany shortly after its publication in 1927, undeniably had a huge influence on his own work. It was after reading this text, as Watsuji himself writes at the beginning of *Fūdo*, that he first came to seriously consider the importance of environmental milieu for human existence. Nevertheless, if we look closely at Watsuji's work we can find traces of an awareness of *mediance* even prior to his readings of Heidegger.⁸ Further, where Hei-

7. This is Carter and Yamamoto's translation for the expression: 主体の行為の連関 *shutaiteki kōiteki renkan*. See WATSUJI 1996.

8. A reflection by Yuasa Yasuo on volume 22 of Watsuji's *Collected Works* indicates that already from his early years Watsuji was concerned with milieu, especially in the context of aesthetics.

degger focuses on temporality alone as the defining structural moment of human existence, Watsuji, even in his early work, considers spatiality of equal importance. Reading *Being and Time* was a great philosophical awakening, but in the end Watsuji remained unsatisfied.

Ultimately, as Watsuji saw it, Heidegger's focus on temporality results in the determination of *Dasein* as an irreducibly *individual* existence. This insight led to Watsuji's short opus, *Fūdo*, still one of the most discussed of Watsuji's books abroad. Although undeniably subject to potential criticism, the central idea of *Fūdo* was a breakthrough in understanding the relationship between human beings and milieu. In fact, most criticisms of *Fūdo* have less to do with its central theoretical propositions than with the supposed determinism that follows from these conclusions. In his defence, the objectivity required for a true theory of determinism is simply not present in the work. Many of the statements cited as evidence of determinism are in fact closer to the subjective observations of a travel notebook than to the clear-cut assertions of a scientific inquiry. Much of the time Watsuji's observations amount to little more than basic praise of Japanese specificity.

Nevertheless we must take these criticisms seriously. Here, however, it is worth questioning whether or not the English translation of *Fūdo* (against which most of these criticisms are lodged) accurately reflects the Japanese original—all the more so given that Watsuji himself expressed doubts as to the accuracy of the English translation, which was published by the Japanese Ministry of Education and commissioned by UNESCO. Based on my reading of the two texts, I would say that the English version tends to represent Watsuji's thoughts in a significantly more deterministic way than anything to be found in the original. Furthermore, Watsuji's primary focus, the interdependence of human beings and the places in which they live, suggests the *diversity* that can be found in the world in spite of the homogenizing processes of globalization. Watsuji is not proposing a kind of uniform world community at the *expense of* individual differences, but rather a world community that can exist in harmony *in spite of* these differences. Along these lines, we should take seriously Watsuji's own idealistic purpose as expressed in his foreword to the English translation of *Fūdo*:

If all the peoples of the world would only try to understand each other by forgetting for a moment the apparent peculiarities which history, traditions, habits and environment have shaped and would think solely of the common problems facing them as human beings since the dawn of civilization, the universal character of all peoples would appear and all causes of prejudice and misunderstanding would disappear and all mankind would unite in their efforts to enrich their lives with spiritual values and happiness.⁹

Unlike certain received ideas concerning Watsuji's "true" intentions, I find the inner project of Watsuji's philosophy to be in fact very close to the ideal expressed in this abstract. Moreover, Watsuji's continued interest in Western philosophy and his ongoing mediation between European and Japanese thought should be taken as an indication of his interest in the uniqueness and specificity of any given milieu, even though, for Watsuji, such individual differences will ultimately serve as further testimony to the universality of the human experience, insofar as the fact that all human beings differ from one another is also something we share.

WATSUJI'S THEORY OF THE EXISTENTIAL MILIEU

Watsuji's theory of milieu is, *a priori*, based on a very simple idea: it is nonsense to cut the human being off from its existential milieu or the study of milieu from its history, and vice versa. Every milieu is historical and history, in turn, is "medial." One of Watsuji's goals is to reintegrate aspects of the human experience that prevailing philosophical schools and disciplines typically divide up and treat in isolation from one another. For Watsuji, conceiving of "existence" in the terms of dualisms or distinctions only destroys the full reality of what it means to be a human being. Instead, the concrete existence of human beings should be understood as grounded in the "practical interconnections of acts" which are always both individual *and* social, temporal *and* spatial. To ignore these interconnections is inevitably to divide the human

9. WTZ xxiv: 146. "The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples," written in September 1959 and published on March 31, 1960.

being into two dimensions, the individual and the social, and to further strengthen this division by studying each side in a separate disciplinary field. In the case of the social sciences, this division results in the separate fields of psychology/anthropology and epistemology/sociology. Such separations, we might add, are the result not only of the division of human existence into the disparate dimensions of the individual and the social, but also the consequence of a long and entrenched tradition within Western philosophy that opposes mind and body and makes this opposition into the fundamental principle of human existence.

At the beginning of his *Ethics*, Watsuji uses Scheler's anthropological typology to underscore the fact that the human being has *always* been considered only through the lens of a dualistic conception of a mind and body. Although the respective studies of the mind and body share much in common, the fundamental gulf that separates them is never crossed, not even in early twentieth-century thought. Watsuji's thought, on the other hand, opens up an approach through which it is possible to link together everything that goes into making a human being human. Watsuji's thought, through a new logic of non-opposition, can also help us to recover much of the complexity and fullness that was lost or excluded by the West.

Here Watsuji is following the lead of Nishida, who questioned the primacy of Aristotle's formal logic in order to formulate his own logic of "non-contradictory opposition," expressed in terms of abstract and concrete logic. In Nishida's formulation, concrete logic alone reaches or includes the whole of human existence, while abstract logic serves only as an intermediary means of conceiving this whole. Watsuji's study of the milieu is an attempt to overcome this distinction between the concrete and the abstract in the terms of subjectivity and objectivity (as deployed in the study of human existence). We should note here that, contrary to charges of determinism, Watsuji emphasizes the subjective element of human beings' interactions with their milieu as well as the process of *reciprocal* determination that such interactions bring about.

At this point let us look more closely at Watsuji's theory of milieu.¹⁰

10. See WATSUJI Tetsurō, 『風土』第一章の出版「思想」WTZ XIV: 365.

Fūdo 風土, or milieu or, more literally, “wind and soil,” refers to the soil, landscape, dimensions, and environment of a given land as well as the more subjective determinants of a place. Objective facts are only one part of what is expressed in the word *milieu*, and indeed the ordinary connotations of the term are probably more accurate when all is said and done, namely the totality of what surrounds human beings living together in a given place. In order to explain the phenomenal nature of milieu, Watsuji uses the easily understood example of cold. In general, Watsuji writes, we analyze cold first in the terms of phenomenological intentionality and therefore relate the feeling of coldness strictly to *individual* consciousness. But obviously we cannot stop at intentional structure in analyzing the “I” who experiences the cold. The perception of cold also has important social connections. We experience the coldness of the air *together*, even if every individual’s experience differs in subtle ways. This example shows the “betweenness” of a community experiencing any given constitutive element of their milieu at the same time. Rather than simply experience “coldness,” we also experience, or discover, the “we” as a social link¹¹ in a primordial way. Thus the experience of cold cannot be considered an independent or isolated perception. It is only in connection with the phenomenal perceptions of others that we can be said to truly “feel” the cold.

In fact, our experience of any number of “natural” phenomena is multidimensional, involving both the physical senses and subjective emotions and feelings. Thus, within a given cultural milieu, we may feel melancholy during the autumn, as the leaves fall, or happiness along with the blossoming of cherry trees in the spring. In these experiences it is not just that we are being influenced by strictly climatic phenomenon, but that “we find ourselves as the social link within the milieu.”¹² Far from determining the “I” as a subject experiencing some objective phenomenon, this “common” understanding of experience suggests that both individual and social creativity are involved in human responses to phenomena within their milieu. When it is cold, for example, we have

11. This “social link” is 間柄, which we might also translate with Bernard Stevens as “interity.”

12. WTZ XIV: 396.

various forms of heating and clothing which differ according to place and culture. In the springtime we might enjoy the beauty of the landscape together by picnicking under the trees, playing music, or dancing—again, all social, place-specific forms of experiencing and responding to a shared milieu. Such examples suggest less an inner subjectivity than an implicit understanding of our being-in-common within a milieu. The shared character of such responses becomes explicit in the architecture, food, and clothing of a given place, and these elements, in turn, serve to witness to a community's response to its milieu. Although such cultural artefacts can be exported and shared by other cultures, they retain the traces of the specific milieu in which they were formed. To generalize the point, we might say “you can take a person out of their milieu, but you can never take the milieu out of that person's heart.”

Not just some but *every* fact of daily life is determined through the relationship between a community and its milieu that has developed over decades, even centuries. What we experience in our own milieu is in fact a cumulative reflection of the way in which the people of this milieu have come to understand it over the course of generations. Although we carry this “medial” past into all our present experiences, it should not be understood as a deterministic burden but rather as a testament to the endless adaptations people make relative to their environment and changing circumstances. In fact, as Watsuji says, because human existence is primordially always relative to a “going outside of ourselves”¹³ into and through relationality, the social link that we discover in our shared experiences of milieu is the very locus of our freedom as human beings. Ultimately our experience of milieu takes place within the dual framework of a receptivity to the phenomena we find, in combination with activities related to this receptivity or reception. Watsuji calls this dual structure *kanjushi hatarakidasu kōzō* 感受し働き出す構造, emphasizing the reciprocal influences at work within our everyday experience, involving and implicating our feelings as well as our ways of being in the world as human beings.

13. This expression is based on Heidegger's interpretation of the word *ex-istere*. WATSUJI uses the expression 外に出ている, “going outside,” to stress the fact that a human being as such is always involved in a relationship to exteriority.

THE PLACE OF ETHICS IN HUMAN EXISTENCE

The Japanese word for human being is *ningen* 人間, which can be rendered literally as a person (人) in an interstice (間). In fact the second character is a word with multiple meanings and pronunciations. It can describe the “emptiness” of an artistic creation in which its beauty is revealed, for instance, or a suggestive, breath-like moment of silence in music. Reflecting this rich possibility of meaning, the concept of *ningen* as a whole underscores the spatiality of human beings and the bodily nature of their existence. It is through this fundamental embodiment that human beings begin relating to others; first to their family, then to school and their workplace, and finally to the “entirety” of the nation. Because of the “negative structure of human existence,” each stage is related to the next by way of a negation. Even so, each negation, in a certain sense, preserves or depends on everything that came before it. Thus when we negate our individual self to affirm ourselves as sharing in a relationship, we affirm at the same time that such relational being is possible by virtue of our individuality. An exclusively independent individual is an illusion; it would be no more than a corpse, a mere physical body in which no real human being could exist. A full “human being” is inseparable from both his individual and communal dimensions and, indeed, can only be said to truly exist by virtue of these relations.¹⁴

In any case, human beings, understood in this way, are fundamentally spatial, existing only as an interstice or meeting place between the individual and everything to which it is related, both other human beings as well as the surrounding milieu (which will, in turn, have been shaped through interactions with human beings in the endless play of mutual determinations). Accordingly, Watsuji suggests that it is more accurate to speak of “humanology” (*ningengaku* 人間学) or the study of humans as interrelated beings, than simply of anthropology (*jinruigaku* 人類学.), the study of humans. From the perspective of ethics, this humanology is an “ethics” in the sense of a science of the ways in which humans situate themselves and relate to others in a friendly community.

14. See WATSUJI 1996, 125.

To proceed with our explanation of human existence, we noted previously that the human being is *not* a “mere” individual, since individuality “is nothing but a moment in human existence.”¹⁵ In contrast to Descartes’ I=I, Watsuji poses the relationship between beings as the very basis of existence. Indeed for him, *to be* a human being *is* to be located in “betweenness” (*aidagara* 間柄). This *aidagara* entails not only the relationship between two individuals, but also the social relations of an entire community. Consequently it is possible to see *aidagara* as requiring by its very nature of the study of milieu as an ethic. For Watsuji, ethics is defined as the study of human beings and has nothing to do with the study of what a human being is in general, or of morality based on individual consciousness. Watsuji’s “ethics” is the concrete study of humans as social and individual, or rather of human’s socio-ethical existence. Such a formulation is, of course, opposed to transcendentalist ideas of a “universal” human kind of being divorced from the particularity of its own becoming. As Watsuji writes:

Such a thing as the existence of human beings in general does not exist in reality. What was deemed universally human by Europeans, in the past, was outstandingly European-like.¹⁶

Watsuji, Nishitani, and the Kyoto School in general found this “European-like” concept of the human being problematic; it simply did not fit with their own understanding of the human within an Asian context. In fact, although the Enlightenment view of human nature eventually became the guiding principle of “universal” human rights in modernity, in fact that view represents a specifically European viewpoint. For Watsuji, on the other hand, the study of human existence supposes the study of the milieu in which humans live and all these elements must be understood together in order to fully comprehend the complexity of the actual lived world. The heterogeneity of communities and their respective milieus must be preserved in order to understand both the specificities of different cultures and their relationship to one another. Hence Watsuji’s attempts to analyze Japanese culture in terms of its

15. *Ibid.*, 24.

16. *Ibid.*, 26.

uniqueness and in the terms of commonalities shared with other cultures in order to preserve its unique existential milieu for future generations. His goal is both to keep alive the sense of milieu that might otherwise be lost in the mimesis of European thought, and, at the same time, to allow for a concept of milieu that can be shared with and used to understand other cultures and the more comprehensive ways in which all cultures relate.

“*Ningen*,” Watsuji writes, “is nothing else than the realization of that movement of negation.”¹⁷ The dialectic of this negation is clearly rooted in Nishida’s concept of the “self-identity of absolute contradiction.” According to this formulation, within the spatio-temporal structure of human existence, both past and future are present in the moment as the locus of their interrelation. Nishida’s broader concept of the historical world, as that which constructs itself through the dialectical movement from created to creator, is also present in Watsuji’s description of existential milieu, although he explicitly locates himself in Heidegger’s methodological lineage. For example, he defines the human being as a “being for life” (*sei he no sonzai* 生への存在), methodologically following, though obviously not replicating, Heidegger’s definition of *Dasein* as “a being-toward-death.” Since Watsuji’s *ningen* is both an individual and a social being, its death as an individual body does not mean the “death” of its presence in a community, since it can endure in the form of a creative presence and in relationships to other human beings. If past and future are negated in the present, the present can be a place in which to build a *historialité* with the future on the horizon.

Because Watsuji’s methodology is based on Heidegger’s phenomenological hermeneutics, he takes daily facts as a starting point in his attempt to analyze the fundamental structure of human existence while maintaining its ground in a dialectic of emptiness. Watsuji considers spatiality by examining two essential realities of urban life: communication and transportation. This choice of focus indicates the salience of “passage” in his work, here generalized as the passage between the human being *within* a social space, and the passage of human beings themselves relative to social space. Spatiality is not seen here as an a priori sub-

17. *Ibid.*, 35.

stance or ground but as something that comes into being only through encounters. As a result, the temporality of space is premised on contingency (*gūzensei* 偶然性).

To understand this concept as metaphor may help. Think of space as a path or walkway. Every human being stands at a crossroad of countless different paths. If we see each individual as its own path, the possibility is always there that any given individual will or will not fully realize its path. According to Watsuji, however, an individual's success or failure is not random, nor is it simply the result of the individual's "free" will. Rather it depends on the individual's ability to rely on the path itself, to trust things as they are, and thereby to "become" itself. This self-awakening is certainly close to Heidegger's description of *Dasein* as an authentic being in the process of becoming what it is. The difference is that for Watsuji the "way" of every *ningen* is realized only through the negation of every singular moment, negations that, in turn, mark the realization of the self as a non-self or *anātman*. Seen in this way, the spatial and temporal structure of the human being is nothing other than the "practical interconnections of acts" that ground human existence.

To be sure, the concept of "space" is not without its ambiguities. Watsuji uses the word *kūkan* 空間 (space) when referring specifically to the place of "betweenness," echoing Nishida's use of *basho*. In this context, *kūkan* designates the space of self-awakening, not in a metaphysical but in a practical, everyday sense. Watsuji further distinguishes his concepts of space and time from milieu and history. His use of the term *fūdo* comes very close to Nishida's *kankyō* (environment), although in his book *Fūdo*, the term *kankyō* is used to designate the environment as an objective existence—a measurable, quantifiable "place"—whereas *fūdo* is used to designate the subjective milieu. *Fūdo* itself is thus the space of those reciprocal co-determinative interconnections between milieu and human existence that operate in the dynamic of self-negation. As such, Watsuji's exposition of the structure of space and time in human existence should only be taken as his way of introducing the reader to his methodology in preparation for the more concrete analyses that must be performed within the *specific* "space" of the milieu. Just as seeds cannot grow simply by themselves, so this kind of analysis can only take place within a specific, singular context.

TRUTH AND TRUST AS THE SEEDS OF ETHICS

Human existence is both individual and social, grounded in the “practical interconnections of acts” and realized as a socio-ethical unity. A socio-ethical unity cannot exist apart from the existence of distinct individuals, but in order for this unity to become a real “community,” individuals must negate themselves, even as the community, in turn, must be negated in order for individuality to be realized within it. If this reciprocal movement were terminated, socio-ethical unity would give way to a totalitarian society. Accordingly, it is inaccurate to claim that the individual in Watsuji’s thought is “absorbed” in the whole, given that the individual is, in fact, the very basis of any *true* unity. The more an individual is realized, the more a true socio-ethical unity can be achieved.

Furthermore, for Watsuji every community of human beings needs to be grounded on a structure of solidarity, by which he understands a given set of shared commitments or “common ground.” From a simple couple to an entire nation, every stage of the development of the individual manifests its own unique structure of solidarity. The gradual accumulation of such structures eventually results in the individual’s development of a unique “persona” indicative of his or her relationships to and connections with others. For instance, a given individual might acquire the persona of teacher, husband, politician, and father. On the basis of such structures, existential values are concretized and life in a shared community—a community of shared commitments and relationships—is made possible.

For Watsuji, human relationships are ethical from the very beginning, and, consequently, they are grounded in trust (*shinrai* 信賴). Because trust can only take place within the context of a community, and yet allows individuals to realize themselves relative to this community, it can be thought of as the “seed” of self-realization. Here we need to understand the ethical relationship between individuals as both virtual and actual. Ethics is inherent in every relation but it must be actualized through the dynamic of negation over time. Thus ethics is not normative in any universalistic sense, but rather depends on the nature of a given relationship. Accordingly, the “ought” between a father and a

son is not the same as that between two strangers or two lovers. Ethical relations vary according to who is involved and according to the larger situation or context of their involvement. Hence, on a macro-level, we cannot claim that relationships in Europe are any more ethical than those in South America or elsewhere. The facticity of ethics depends on milieu and on a mutual respect for human lives.

In Western discourse, ethics is often considered normative or proscriptive, a set of “oughts” that control human relationships, based on the assumption that humans, as individuals, are primarily motivated by their own personal interests. According to such a view, the social contract that guarantees cooperative community life requires an act of coercion embodied in the nation-state. Ethics is thus understood in the terms of external “oughts” that rely on individuals’ “transcendence” of their own self-interests. Even though the strength and determination needed to carry out such an ethical self-transcendence belongs to the human heart, it is nevertheless understood as the transcendence of a proscriptive external ought. In Watsuji’s philosophy, however, the very distinction between the “is” and the “ought” is blurred. If human beings are always and necessarily connected to others, their relationships are, a priori, ethical, insofar as ethics describes the rules that govern a community. Nevertheless, these ethically constitutive relationships must be endlessly realized through the negative dialectic that determines the human process of becoming itself.

The question thus becomes: how is ethics realized in the existence of human beings? Or, conversely, how does a relation become *unethical*? Watsuji argues that as long as each community manifests its own unique structure of solidarity and, by extension, community-specific values based on that unique structure, the ground of ethics must be sought in *makoto*. *Makoto* enables realization of the five relationships: husband and wife, father and son, elder and younger, prince and subject, friend and friend. These five relations correspond with the actualization of the path of Heaven that structures human life. It is no coincidence here that Watsuji bases his own analyses of community on practical being in the world, given that traditional Confucianism focuses on the “political” world and the rules belonging to and governing social communities. Where Confucianism grounds these rules in Heaven, Watsuji

focuses on the concrete study of human beings in the world. Even so, he was strongly influenced by Neo-Confucian thinkers who attempted to link the metaphysical dimensions of Confucius' "Way" with embodied human existence and embodied inter-subjective relations. Etymologically, he links the word *shinrai* 信頼 (trust) to *makoto* to define it as "that which relies on *makoto*," suggesting that the very reality of things, as they are, lies in their relationality: reality is truth, understood as the mutual reliance of things.

For Watsuji, "human relations are relations of trust; where human relations prevail, trust is also established."¹⁸ Trust relies on the realization of the spatio-temporal movement of individual and community. It grounds every relationship between persons, serving as a kind of tacit "contract" giving individuals confidence even among strangers. This contract, however, has nothing in common with the Western idea of a "social contract" which is said to ground human community on the organizing principles of a State. Watsuji's contract is inherent in human existence itself: as soon as individuals "come out" of themselves to meet an other (and thereby to become themselves), trust is manifest.

It is when this kind of dialectical process stops that falsehood appears. Even so, "it is always at some place and on some occasion, in the complex and inexhaustible interconnections of acts, that truthfulness does not occur in human existence."¹⁹ Falsehood can exist but, ultimately, it never replaces truthfulness as the root of human existence. This is true, in part, because truth itself is seen not as an objective fact of human epistemology but as completely and irreducibly *subjective*. Thus the attitude of the believer determines whether or not something is "true." This perspectivist conception of truth is not simple individual relativism but a consequence of the truth of "betweenness" or relationality. For example, if we intentionally lie to someone in order to hurt that person, we betray the trust at the bottom of our relationship. But if our lie is intended to soothe or comfort, we cannot really refer to it as mere deceit. Whatever truth is to be found in human relationships—understood as inherently ethical—lies within and depends on "betweenness."

18. *Ibid.*, 271.

19. *Ibid.*, 281.

Watsuji's use of the concept of *makoto* allows us to think of ethics concretely, that is, as something always and ever determined in the context of a given milieu. Once again, this milieu need to be understood as a practical reality made up of the relations between individuals, crystallized within specific communities, and interrelated in the broader context of the whole earth. It is not without reason that such an idea of truth and trust in the dual structure of human existence looks to be idealistic. Indeed, Watsuji does describe a dialectically unified world in which truth and trust, rather than deceitfulness, are taken as the norm. But it would be a mistake to think that he simply overlooks the possibility of evil or wicked acts. His is rather an attempt to move away from the assumption that individuals are a priori selfish, and to advance toward the belief that by living in a balanced way—where both individual and social interests co-exist in harmony—we can, in fact, trust our own instincts and rely on things “as they are.” Such a belief, or trust, would in turn make it possible to live in the world without submitting to the will of the “powers that be,” renouncing one's individuality under the pressure to belong to society. If we can harmonize the interests of the individual and the community, we will not have to live in fear of anyone, and there will be no threat of annihilation by others or of our desire to annihilate them.

The most important task a human is charged with is to “take care” of our relationships, both those to other beings and those to our milieu, since even as we shape and build these relationships, they, too, shape and build us. We must also take an interest in what happens in the here and now, since our immediate actions prepare and influence both our present and our future. This “taking an interest” means, ultimately, to be among things and to be concerned with them.

Might we not therefore conclude that for Watsuji ethics is basically always a philosophy of the milieu? Opposing every form of subjection—be it the subservience of individual interests or the interests of the community—Watsuji's philosophy urges awareness of our betweenness, of that which constitutes our distinctive human interiority, without privileging one side over the other. Human beings are not isolated atoms in larger molecules. We are, through and through, individual *and* social, constituted by a multiplicity of “betweens” that determine our being

in the here and now. This here and now, in turn, is connected to the future, in that our present actions help to shape both our own future and the future of our community and milieu. For all these reasons, Watsuji's philosophy can help us understand how to "be" together with the entire earth as our horizon.

WATSUJI'S ETHICS AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURES

In both his methodology and his sources, Watsuji was undoubtedly influenced by the Western philosophical tradition. Nevertheless his main concepts are grounded in Buddhist, Confucian, and Shinto thought—a mixture that places him at the crossroads of very different cultures. The radical otherness of his philosophy makes it impossible to limit the application of his ideas to their birthplace; they deserve to be read around the world as a discourse with the potential to deepen and change our perception of what it means to be ethical. From the ground of his own comparative studies of ethics and culture, Watsuji's thought suggests what we may call a true "ethics of milieu."

Watsuji invites us to think from a "middle" position, locating ourselves within the complex "interconnections of acts" that make us who we are. From this standpoint, ethics cannot but take shape as an ethics of the milieu, focused not on individual consciousness but on the "between" of relationships. Because we only exist on the basis of such relations we must take care of them. As "being-towards-life," humans need to engage in the here and now as the building blocks of future generations.

Even as I write, ecological disasters have become commonplace, and the urban centers continue to expand into uglier and uglier landscapes that are less and less human. Faced with a future in which these problems will only become more widespread, only the sort of philosophy of milieu that Watsuji aimed at can help us cultivate a truly ethical and aesthetic relationship to the world about us.

An eloquent example of an expropriation of Watsuji's philosophy can be found in the work of Kuwako Toshio, who develops his own interpretation of Watsuji's *fūdo* in such texts as *Environmental Philosophy*

and *The Philosophy of Sense*.²⁰ He focuses on the relation between body and space in order to construct a new framework for relating to our environment. According to Kuwako, the destruction of the existential milieu signals the renunciation of human existence itself to destructive powers.

Another important aspect of Watsuji's own work, one that was passed over in this essay, is his meditations on aesthetics. Essays such as *A Pilgrimage to Ancient Temples* and *Mask and Persona*²¹ helped to revitalize interest among intellectuals in native Japanese culture at a time when an overwhelming preference for Western culture had resulted in a feeling of general contempt for all things Japanese. There are good reasons for seeing Watsuji as concerned with rooting Japanese communal-ity in the ground of culture, as something shared by those living within a given milieu.

Because his ethics is based so completely on concrete, corporeal relationships, it leaves no room for allegiance to an empty state. Sadly enough, there *are* in fact statements in his writings expressing reverence for a "powerful state," though it is extremely difficult to determine to what degree Watsuji actually believed in such ideas, and to what degree they were simply a reflection of the prevalent State rhetoric. If criticism aimed at Watsuji's supposed nationalism cannot simply be rejected outright, neither does it make sense to decide on that basis alone to ignore or discredit the whole of Watsuji's work. It is both possible and beneficial to treat Watsuji's thought on its principal merits, as we have tried to do here, disentangled from all such nationalist pretense.

In the realm of aesthetics, for instance, the philosopher Sakabe Megumi has contributed enormously to a fair and accurate reading of Watsuji and in so doing, helped clarify the enduring value of his work. Indeed it is precisely through this sort of encounter with texts written in a different milieu and in a different set of circumstances that we can appreciate the specificity of the milieu in which we live today. Only through examining and understanding such differences can we hope

20. KUWAKO Toshio 桑子敏雄,『感性の哲学』(Tokyo: NHK Books, 2001);『風土の中の環境哲学』(Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1998).

21. 「古寺巡礼」WTZ II: 1-192; 「面とペルソナ」XVII: 285-450.

ourselves to avoid the dangers inherent in particular customs and languages.

Rather than letting Watsuji's supposed nationalism cloud the whole of his contribution to philosophy and ethics, we should appreciate the many ways in which he has opened philosophy up to fundamental human relationality, and consider how best to make use of these ideas in confronting the global changes and challenges that face us today. Even if we take Watsuji's work as no more than a hint at the true nature of human existence, that hint may well turn out to constitute for us an "ought," stimulating us to find a way to walk his path in our present circumstances, in Japan and in Europe, but also around the world.

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