

Transcendence of the State in Watsuji's Ethics

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In *Rinrigaku* 倫理学 [Ethics, 1937], Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960) defines the state (*kokka* 国家) as the ethical organization of ethical organizations (*rinriteki soshiki no rinriteki soshiki* 倫理的組織の倫理的組織) (WATSUJI 1962, 595–96). This expression has a double meaning. The first, more literal, is that the state is the all-encompassing organization that gives each of the included levels of organization (the couple, the community of siblings, the family, the territorial organization, and finally the cultural community) its proper place in an ethical hierarchy. Since the state is the only level of organization that has no ego (*shi* 私), it is also the only one that can transcend all the others and give them their proper ethical places. Other levels of organization have their own ethical aspect, but one limited by a specific kind of egoism that requires a higher level of organization. This higher level of organization is the state, as the ethical organization of ethical organizations. The state is the only level of organization that is synthetic and conscious of itself, thus the only one without egoism. Therefore, the state is the only level that can guarantee ethics without egoism.

But there is another possible reading of this passage and many others in the section entitled “Kokka” in the first volume of *Rinrigaku*. It is

this alternative reading that I want to explore. I base my analysis not only on the quote given above about ethical organizations, but also on other passages in *Rinrigaku* and in *Fūdo* 風土 [Climate, 1935]. These give us a somewhat different vision of what Watsuji sees in the state.

Watsuji defines the state as the community that is thoroughly ethical, even though any state is limited in its manifestation of human relations. This limitation comes from the historical-climatic nature of the state, that is, from the specific historical development of each state in its milieu (WATSUJI 1962, 15–22). The state as totality, in its concrete forms, is always relative and limited, but this is the way in which the human totality manifests itself (at least up to now, but we can infer from Watsuji’s way of writing about it that it is really the highest possible level of human organization). Despite this limitation, the state, when organized and acting properly, embodies ethics, albeit in a special cultural form, in a special definition of morals. Even more, a humanity-encompassing state would destroy cultural diversity, and thus destroy the basis of morality. Whatever its form, the state defines the ultimate ethical principles. As was mentioned, it encompasses all other communities or organizations and it guarantees their ethical aspects and their hierarchical order. It is in this sense that Watsuji writes that “totality is always realized as a limited and relative totality, which is its way to manifest itself as absolute totality” (WATSUJI 1962, 593).

As the basic ethical community, the state is the level that manifests most clearly the double negation that is the basis of ethics, according to Watsuji. The first negation is the one whereby the individual negates the community of which he is a part. The second negation is the one in which the individual negates himself and returns to his community (WATSUJI 1962, 26–27). Whereas the first negation is necessary for ethics to exist, it is really the second that creates ethics in a proper sense. This double negation is the essence of ethics, but it is also the basis of the community and, above all, it is the fundamental principle of this all-encompassing totality that is the state.

The state can take different forms or be conceived in different manners. In Roman times, the state was *res publica*, a common thing. In England, the state is conceived as Commonwealth. For Watsuji, these definitions, which are centered on things, do not define the state properly, but they

at least identify what is central to the state, as something that people have in common (WATSUJI 1962, 594). It is what people have in common that defines them as members of a state.

For Watsuji, what people of a state have in common is not a material thing or wealth. What they have in common is the fact that they live together in a historical-climatic community, that is, in a common ethical life, under the state and guaranteed by the state. This is what is called “public” (*kō* 公). According to Watsuji, the ancient Japanese recognized this character of the state when they defined it as *ōyake* 大家 (the great family). As public, the state transforms individual existence and makes use of all individualities to create an ethical system (WATSUJI 1962, 594).

As such, the state cannot be conceived of as one part of a society, opposed to all other parts, such as the economy or churches. On the contrary, economic organizations, churches, and even regional communities are only parts of the state, which encompasses them. The state is the locus (*basho* 場所) of all other communities, and above all it guarantees their ethical character (WATSUJI 1962, 597–8). The state cannot be reduced to the level of a part of society, whose function is to defend society or to maintain order. The fact that the state regulates communities at other levels, and upholds their ethical character, means that the state is superior to these other levels. Watsuji sees Western individualism as the origin of the conception of the state as only a part within society, because Western theories derive the state from individual interests. In the theory of individual rights, the state is generated by the people as a collection of individuals whose acceptance is essential to the existence of the state as public. In Watsuji’s view, this is wrong, because there is no state whose sovereignty is based on a contract that is imposed from the outside on a people and a territory.

Sovereignty for Watsuji is the consciousness of the totality of human existence, and the intermediary of this consciousness is the cultural community (the nation). But this consciousness is complete only with the state. In this sense, it is the state as an ethical organization, which transcends communities at all other levels, that links in a concrete way the three abstract elements of people, territory and sovereignty (WATSUJI 1962, 605–606).

While encompassing all other communities, the state does not define their content in detail. It only gives the general rules to be followed. The state disseminates these rules through education. But it can also impose them by force. This force emerges from the ethical character of the state. In primitive societies, the law is god-given, and any crime appears as the profanation of the sacred (*seinaru* 聖なる) (WATSUJI 1962, 601). This indicates that the law is the emanation of the living totality and, as such, it has a force that is stronger than any individual's. All individuals are born into a society that already accepts the sacred. This sacred is the authority or the power (*iryoku* 威力) of the totality (WATSUJI 1962, 602).

The force of the state that emanates from its sacred character is manifested in laws (WATSUJI 1962, 604). It is through laws that the state defines the way and the degree of application of its own capacity for coercion, its own force. The state also defines its own internal organizations for the definition and application of the laws, that is government administration and the courts.

In circumstances defined by law, the force of the state can be physical and violent. Any person who goes against the law will be punished by the brute physical force of the state, a force that can be military. What gives the law and the state such strength is their sacred nature as representations of the totality. The totality has authority (*ken'i* 權威) not on the basis of force, but rather on the basis of its authority (WATSUJI 1962, 602). Even the military force of the state derives from its sacred character (*shinseisei* 神聖性) as totality (WATSUJI 1962, 602). The exercise of force by the state is public and never arbitrary or selfish (*shi'i* 姿意) because it is based on ethical principles (WATSUJI 1962, 604). Furthermore, it is conscious of itself, as is demonstrated by the constitution of each state (WATSUJI 1962, 604–605). It is this self-consciousness (*jikaku* 自覚) on the part of the state that makes it superior to the cultural community as the absolute totality (*zettaiteki zentaisei* 絶対的全体性) (WATSUJI 1962, 605). Any state that is included in a larger totality loses its character as state. Any state that loses its sovereignty is no longer a state because sovereignty (*shukensei* 主權性) cannot be superseded by any other authority (WATSUJI 1962, 605). As a

consequence, the state as sovereign is the supreme totality (*kyūkyokuteki na zentaisei* 究極的な全体性) (WATSUJI 1962, 605).

Watsuji also defines emptiness (*kū* 空) or nothingness (*mu* 無) as the absolute totality (WATSUJI 1962, 27). There is thus in Watsuji's ethics the question of articulating this type of absolute totality with the state. In *Rinrigaku*, Watsuji does not give any indication of the way this problem might be resolved.

What distinguishes modern states from primitive chiefdoms, according to Watsuji, is usually the separation, in the former, of the state from the sacred. This separation, which is linked to the development of individualism in the West, has obscured the basic sacred character of the state as totality. But there is a modern society that has kept this sacred character of the state as totality, and it is the Japanese imperial state, as indicated by the term *matsurigoto* 政, or more literally 祭事 (WATSUJI 1935, 149). According to the conception which is associated with this term, the emperor is at the same time the political leader of the state and the supreme religious leader. He embodies both aspects of the totality that is the state. As such, his nature as political-religious leader is a purer manifestation of the supreme sacred totality (WATSUJI 1935, 150).

It is the definition by Watsuji of the state in general as the ultimate sacred totality, the absolute totality, and of the Japanese imperial state as its clearest and most complete embodiment, that can be construed as referring to the state as transcendent. Following this position, the state stands above all communities and above all individuals. There is no totality that stands above it. As such, the state defines its own way of exercising authority. Moreover, as we saw, it is the totality that encompasses all other levels of community. Finally, this totality is sacred, and this sacred character is especially clear in the Japanese imperial state.

In an earlier paper (BERNIER 2008), I examined how Watsuji, while rejecting any transcendence based on a personal God outside of this world, or on abstract principles, as in the West, finally reverted to positing the transcendence of the Japanese imperial state as sacred, because of the descent of the imperial line from Amaterasu Ōmikami (WATSUJI 1935, 150). Here, I have tried to show that this transcendence, while perhaps derived fundamentally from Watsuji's reverence for the emperor (although he also refers to sacred chiefdoms in so-called

primitive societies to buttress his position), can also be seen in his philosophical and theoretical development on the state in general, even outside of Japan. It is clear in *Rinrigaku* that he attempts to establish the sacred and absolute character of the state in a universal way without making use of Japan's imperial system.

Watsuji's theory of the state shares some similarities with Durkheim's theory of religion: Durkheim conceived of the sacred as derived from society itself, as the sacralization of society, in *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912]. But there are also differences. Watsuji's position seems closer to Durkheim's when limited to stateless societies, in which case, according to him, the sacred totality is not conscious of itself. Therefore, for Watsuji, in this type of society, the sacred character as derived from the totality is less clear as compared to state societies, where the state is consciously, at least in Japan, the supreme embodiment of the sacred totality. Moreover, according to Watsuji, it is not society as such, but *kokka*, the state, which is the ultimate sacred totality, because it is conscious of itself as totality. Watsuji's position on this point differs from Durkheim's. We could say that Durkheim's position is sociological, in the sense that the sacred derives from society, whereas Watsuji's is more political, centered on the state.

For Watsuji, the state is the ultimate transcendent totality, because it is sacred, and also in the sense that it cannot be superseded by any other form of organization. Furthermore, in the case of Japan, Watsuji conceives of the sacred character of the state as deriving not only from the totality as sacred, but also from the imperial line as descendant of Amaterasu Ōmikami. Despite these differences, there is a similarity in the position of Durkheim and Watsuji in linking totality to the sacred despite the fact that one sees totality as society and the other as the state.

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