

# Guiding Principles of Interpretation in Watsuji Tetsurō's *History of Japanese Ethical Thought*

With Particular Reference to the Tension  
between the *Sonnō* and *Bushidō* Traditions

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Considering that Watsuji's *Nihon rinri shisōshi* 日本倫理思想史 [History of Japanese Ethical Thought] appeared in 1952, this seminar affords us the opportunity to look back and assess its contents fifty years later. My own approach will be both appreciative of his literary psychology and yet frankly critical of his ethical thought.

In the preface to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* Kant remarks that “there are scholars for whom the history of philosophy (both ancient and modern) is philosophy itself; for these the present *Prolegomena* are not written” (KANT 1977, 1). This critical coin finds purchase in those who have conflated and do conflate *philosophy* with the *history of philosophy*. After Kant, such conflation actually achieved a huge legitimation in the right- and left-wing Hegelian schools. In the 1920s Watsuji and other Kyoto School writers bought into a latter-day version of this legitimation when they read Heidegger's *Being and Time* and other contemporary European works of the period.

In the aftermath of Hegelianism in Europe, strains of so-called Con-

tinental Philosophy (e.g., in Heidegger, and especially in the Parisian Heideggerians) featured sense-constituting historico-cultural assumptions of their own. In contemporary postmodernism, history is refracted into differences, that is, into competing cultural histories—and “herstories”—which is to say, into agonistic linguistic matrices and their attendant cultural symbolics foundationally legislated as to their irreducible particularities. If I may evoke the spirit of the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce, I call such deliberately particularistic constructions *nominalistic*, and I don't think they can withstand serious scrutiny. (Moreover, while it is beyond the scope of this seminar, I think the particularistic premises of multiculturalism need urgently to be scrutinized in the light of the threat of Islamic extremism in the world today—a point that will become clearer as I proceed.)

To stick with my more rarified subject, the postmodern discourses, as they claim to break away from the universalistic thought patterns of modernity—that is, of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European Enlightenment thought with its provenance in ancient Greek philosophy—decidedly take their stand on a hermeneutical principle of *cultural differences*. This tendency was also exhibited in the Kyoto School writers whose agenda in large part consisted in assimilating the Hegelian and post-Hegelian thought patterns even while asserting *their* dialectical differences from them. The perhaps shining example of this was Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), the bottom line of whose career-text can be regarded as commuting “ethics” into “theocracy”—the theory that the state is the temporal manifestation of the divine order. In such terms Watsuji's postmodernism joins hands with pre-modernism in its most crucial respect, namely theocracy, as witnessed again by Islamic fundamentalism today.

Mention should be made of the complex dialogue that took place among the principal Kyoto School writers in the war years of the 1930s and 1940s. This was a time when the Japanese philosophers especially strove to be *nihonteki* 日本的 (“Japanese”). They subscribed to differential historicist views of “East” and “West.” They were generally prone to imply the superiority of Japanese thought even in Asia, and to assert what they featured as Japan's philosophical mission in world history.

Given this atmosphere in which Watsuji among others rose to aca-

democratic prominence, one of the hidden variables for our seminar to consider is that of *historicism* itself in the form of the advocacy of *cultural hermeneutics* rather than *philosophy* universally considered. Another is to consider that cultural hermeneutics in its various postmodern formulations joins hands with pre-modernism, especially in the form that boils down to theocracy. Yet another issue that comes out of this paper is whether either Watsuji's cultural hermeneutics of *sonnō* 尊王 (Veneration of the Emperor) or the separate strains of *bushidō* 武士道 (the Way of the Warrior) can legitimately be called *ethical* theories at all, as distinguished from descriptions of *politico-theological* symbolics.

Although this is something of an aside, let me approach the same point in terms of the multicultural *politics* that dominates the modern university today. Wittingly or unwittingly, the modern university already fosters differential historicist thinking in the way it divides academic life into such administrative units as “Western philosophy,” “Asian philosophy,” and “Asian Studies.” “Asian Studies” and “Asian philosophy” indeed are often somewhat strangely placed under other academic umbrellas, such as Religious Studies or Comparative Literature. Asian Studies or Religious Studies becomes the “home” of further administrative cuts made among Middle Eastern, Indian (South and Southeast Asian), Chinese, and Japanese thought traditions. In this bureaucratic way the university forces genuine forms of *perennial philosophy* to survive in the form of *regional-based* tracks of academic courses taught out of unrelated anthologies, as for example in the various “sourcebooks” of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese traditions. The “Asian” varieties are generally manned by scholars who work independently of “Western” varieties. But, to be sure, the Western traditions also tend to be split up into scholastic specializations such as Continental, British, and American schools of thought, often accompanied by a hegemonic promotion of a particular disciplinary establishment.<sup>1</sup> In effect, the university establishes competing “histories of ideas” and students learn to think in such eristic terms. Instead of philosophers canvassing the traditions with a goal of discovering the perennial true ideas—the most adequate system or sys-

1. Cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) which endeavors one still fashionable kind of deconstruction of intellectual history writ-

tems of ideas and their overlapping or complementary features—their tendency is to burrow into separate turfs—which is to say, into the sanctuaries of their own hermeneutical circles.

I now turn back to Watsuji Tetsurō who contributed his own considerable prestige to these multicultural and historicist premises. As you all know, his many writings featured a method of doing what he termed “philosophical anthropology” that centers on the “existential spatiality” or “human climaticity” (*fūdo* 風土) of cultures. In that framework he depicted the “typhoon nature” of Japanese culture and constructed a literary narrative of the superiority of Japan’s spiritual culture grounded in its pristine mythology of Veneration of the Japanese Emperor.

We can catch the gist of this if we briefly attend to Watsuji’s evolving career-text. After youthful studies of Schopenhauer (1912), Nietzsche (1913), and Kierkegaard (1915), Watsuji, at the age of 29, produced a best-selling work, *Gūzō saikō* 偶像再興 [Revival of Idols, 1918]. Apparently the young Watsuji took no heed of a central tenet of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche which consisted in their strong rejections of Hegelianism.<sup>2</sup> Instead, his attention gradually “turned” toward Heidegger’s existential phenomenology. After reading *Being and Time* in Berlin in 1927, he went on to interpret Japanese artistic and religious cultures in such works as *Nihon seishinshi kenkyū* 日本精神史研究 [Studies in the History of the Japanese Spirit, 1926–1934] and in another best-seller, *Fūdo* 風土 [Climate: a Philosophical Consideration, written in 1928–1929, published in 1935]. His appropriation of Heidegger’s existential phenomenology only continued and intensified as he matured. It is deeply inscribed in his three-volume *Rinrigaku* 倫理学 [Ethics] of the 1930s and 1940s and finally blended into his *Nihon rinri shisōshi*, said to be the crowning work of his career.<sup>3</sup>

ten in a Foucauldian perspective. In contrast to this approach, I am lamenting the balkanization of philosophy into “niche ontologies” that produce regional specializations at the expense of the perennially universal truth-qualities of the great philosophical classics.

2. William R. LaFleur gives a plausible account of the young Watsuji’s *Sturm und Drang* period, in which he Romantically rediscovered Japan’s ancient Buddhist shrines, as a Taishō period intellectual’s gesture against the older generation of the Meiji period (LAFLEUR 1990).

My thesis is that, in view of his overall achievement, Watsuji can now—fifty years later—be regarded as a pioneer in the Japanese advocacy of the principle of particularistic multiculturalism that only later has become the rising tide lifting all boats in Western postmodern circles. In the larger historical picture, it is fair to say that the Kyoto School writers of the pre- and postwar years rang the changes on the Meiji-period motto of “Eastern ethics, Western techniques” that contains the multicultural credo in its own way.<sup>4</sup> If anything, the contemporary postmoderns, post-colonialists, and the like are “Johnny-come-latelies” compared with their Japanese counterparts (cf. DILWORTH 1987).

The Japanese scholars who actually studied in Europe—including Tanabe, Watsuji, Kuki, Miki, and Nishitani—understandably brought back the latest philosophical news from Berlin or Paris. They returned to Japan to engage the European authors in homemade polemics. But my critical point here is that these Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian trends—Eastern and European—had the net effect of reducing philosophy to differential cultural hermeneutics. In that trajectory the gamut of philosophical questions were largely addressed within the politicized framework of “Eastern ethics, Western techniques.”

#### WATSUJI’S HERMENEUTICAL LINE IN THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE ETHICAL THOUGHT

Let me now turn to Watsuji’s hermeneutics of Japanese culture in *Nihon rinri shisōshi*. Watsuji’s heuristic of the “Japanese Spirit” proceeds in two overlapping patterns of articulation. One is “dialectical” in the technical sublational sense. This methodic operator is at work in Watsuji’s insistence that the *historically negated* strata of Japanese aristocratic culture (centering on Veneration of the Emperor from the earli-

3. In preparing this paper I was greatly aided by the stimulating work of Graham Mayeda, *Time, Space, and Ethics in the Philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō, Kuki Shūzō, and Martin Heidegger* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

4. According to *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Japan* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), Sakuma Shōzan (1811–1864) is generally credited with coining the slogan *wakon yōsai* 和魂洋才 (“Eastern spirit, Western techniques”) in the Meiji

est mythologies and on the political institutions of the Nara and Heian court cultures together with their religious and aesthetic sensibilities) *lived on as negated* in the “middle” or feudal periods of Japanese history and provided the driving force for the Meiji Restoration and beyond. The theoretical model here is of a kind of quantum lattice in which the pristine cultural “spirit” of the Japanese national consciousness is stored and energizes the phases of Japanese “ethical thought.” To put it in the framework of his philosophical anthropology, “ethos” and “ethical” as used by Watsuji have the sublational connotations of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* or the equivalent in his own technical concepts of *fūdo*, *ningen sonzai* 人間存在 (human existence), *bito to bito to no aidagara* 人と人との間柄 (betweenness), and *yo no naka* 世の中 (the social world) which he parsed in various totalistic articulations of individual and communal consciousness.

A second conspicuous pattern of conceptual organization of the work shows up in Watsuji’s agonistic mindset. By agonistic I refer to the way he constructs an eristic tension between “Western” philosophical, religious, and cultural concepts and his Emperor-based “Japanese” model, to say nothing of contrasting the Shinto-Buddhist-Confucian syncretisms of Japanese religiosity with the three Abrahamic religions of Europe. “Japanese *fūdo*” works in Watsuji’s writings as a kind of conceptual *sakoku* 鎖国 (closed country)—a barrier and a buffer against the “abstractions” of “Western rationalism,” and more specifically against the “Western Enlightenment” with its universalistic forms of ethical individualism, social contract theory of sovereignty by institution, aesthetic universalism, and even Marxist internationalism.

But again, in his agonistic hermeneutics of indigenous Japanese “ethical thought,” Watsuji’s *fūdo* concept works to devaluate and condemn the military-class leadership of the Japanese feudal eras in favor of the ever-resurfacing tradition of national consciousness of the Japanese people centering on Veneration of the Emperor. Essentially, he blames the ascendancy of the warrior class in Japan’s feudal history for Japan’s falling behind the progress of Western civilization in the comparable time

period. Shōzan’s version has its precedent in an earlier (ninth-century!) motto, *wakon kansai* 和魂漢才 (“Japanese spirit, Chinese knowledge”).

period. He does so by rehearsing a line of criticism inscribed in such monumental historiographical works as Kitabatake Chikafusa's *Jinnō shōtōki* 神皇正統記 [Chronicle of Gods and Sovereigns], the Mito School's *Dai Nihonshi* 大日本史 [History of Great Japan], Arai Hakuseki's *Tokushi yoron* 読史余論 [Lessons from History], and Rai San'yō's *Nihon gaishi* 日本外史 [Unofficial History of Japan], each of which carried forward the narrative of imperial loyalism within feudal settings.

Reading Japanese political history in this perspective, Watsuji was presumably taking a position against the rise of the military establishment in his own times. At least he took his political stand to the “left” of such ultra-nationalistic authors as Inoue Tetsujirō and Nakamura Rikizō who advocated the relation of *bushidō* and *sonnō* in more nostalgically “feudalistic” terms—but, tragically, there was nothing in his Kyoto School dialectics of individual and nation that offered any real resistance to Japan's ascendant ultra-nationalism of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>5</sup> His vintage postwar *Nihon rinri shisōshi* of 1952 systematically expressed its own principle of premodern—or, if you prefer, postmodern—theocracy at odds with the universalistic premises of political modernity.

#### FROM THE JAPANESE SPIRIT (1934) AND “THE WAY OF THE JAPANESE SUBJECT” (1943)

Let me now explicitly focus the tension between the *sonnō* and *bushidō* traditions as treated in Watsuji's thought. For this purpose we can see that *Nihon rinri shisōshi* basically reprised and gave historical embodiment to the themes of his *Nihon seishin* 日本精神 [The Japanese Spirit, 1934] and his wartime piece “Nihon shindō” 日本神道 [The Way of the Japanese Subject, 1943] on the subject. There is therefore a consistent thread of thought stretching over twenty years that climaxed with the appearance of *Nihon rinri shisōshi*.

5. But in volume two of his *Rinrigaku* Watsuji notoriously produced his own version of totalitarian state-ethics; he introduced changes in the second edition of 1949—changes which, in the words of Gino Piovesana in 1968, “are still open to question” (PIOVESANA 1968, 144).

In *Nihon seishin* Watsuji was keen to establish the “active subject” of the “Japanese spirit” as the Japanese people themselves. He depicted this as a kind of Rousseauian “general will” (*volonté générale*) of “national self-consciousness” (*kokumin jikaku* 国民自覚) hovering above individuals. He went on to trace the source of Meiji Enlightenment thinking on autonomous political subjects to its origin in the “abstractionism” (that is, universalistic concepts) of the European Enlightenment. Marxism entered Japan shortly after the heyday of the Meirokusha writers of the first years of Meiji but only to feature its own new brand of “international abstractionism” not suited to Japanese *fūdo*.<sup>6</sup> Having thus focused the “active subject” of Japanese culture in a Shinto-nationalistic self-consciousness of the Japanese people in *The Japanese Spirit*, Watsuji addressed the indigenous Japanese ethical spirit as manifested in the his-

6. See “The Japanese Spirit” (WATSUJI 1998A). Sections 1–3 discuss how certain political slogans such as “the Japanese Spirit” (*Nihon seishin*) and “Japanese Soul” 大和魂 (*Yamato-damashii*) only retrospectively acquired a conservative cast though in their day they were progressive ideas. Section 5, 245ff. takes up the relation of past “manifestations” of the Japanese Spirit to future ones; this is also expressed sublationally. Watsuji’s recurrent logical operator is that the traditional layers live on *qua* negated, and he contends that this Japanese phenomenon is a unique and now creative force in world history.

In Section 7 of *Nihon seishin* Watsuji proceeds to insist that even the Japanese trait of admiration of foreign cultures is a manifestation of the deeper tradition. Ancient foreign artifacts in the early tombs were already connected with Japan’s national religion (*matsurigoto* 政). The same basic pattern of indigenization was evidenced in the waves of importation and assimilation of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Meiji Westernization. According to Watsuji, the Japanese people have a remarkable penchant to idealize foreign countries, and then to admire their own idealizations. That they do so to a superlative degree is a mark of the national character which is grounded in its unique religious sense of the indeterminacy of its mythic *kami*.

In Section 8 Watsuji explicitly takes up the theme of the *jūsōsei* 重層性 or multi-layered character of Japanese *fūdo*. E.g., the *kuge* 公家 aristocratic culture lived on in the upper warrior class even while negated by the warrior class; the Japanese people’s “double life” in clothing, food, dwellings, etc.; the Meiji era phenomenon of Shinto *matsuri* coexisting with Buddhism and Christianity—in contrast to the Abrahamic religions’ record of destroying their rivals. Early on, the synthesis of *kami* and Buddhas was witnessed in the *honji suiijaku* 本地垂迹 (the ancestral *kami* are manifestations of the Buddhas) concept, and this con-



torical relation between the *sonnō* and *bushidō* traditions in *The Way of the Japanese Subject*. Thematising front and center the famous samurai frame of mind, he maintained that “the Japanese standpoint that transcends life and death” manifested in the samurai ethics is one that is devoid of egocentric considerations and falls outside of all the Western eudaimonistic frameworks of the Good Life.

In Watsuji’s historical analysis, after the rise of the warrior class to power in the Kamakura period, *bushidō* split into the two forms of *gekokuujō* 下克上 (“the lower orders overcoming the higher”) as played out in the Ikkō and Nichiren sect rebellions and subsequently in the rise to power of the new Sengoku period “heroes”—that is, the newer breed of *daimyō* such as Hōjō Sōun, Takeda Shingen, Uesugi Kenshin, Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu—who eventually reunified Japan. But again, his thesis is that both forms of *gekokuujō* eventually fused with the deeper currents of Imperial loyalist thought.

Kamakura Buddhism had first elevated *bushidō* to a sense of an “absolute consciousness that transcends life and death” within its “ethics of chivalry,” e.g., in the unity of Zen and swordsmanship. *Bushidō* involved not only martial spirit and skill with weapons, but also absolute loyalty to one’s lord, together with a strong sense of personal honor, devotion to duty, and the courage, if required, to sacrifice one’s life in battle or in ritual suicide. *Junshi* 殉死 (the practice of self-immolation by retainers of a feudal lord) and *katakiuchi* 敵討ち (vendetta) were further manifestations of the *bushidō* code.

In Watsuji’s analysis, this *bushidō* sense of death-transcending spiritual dignity and honor was loosely linked with both Buddhism and Confucianism in the Muromachi period, as eclectically inscribed for example in the House Codes of the Sengoku-period *daimyō*. Francis Xavier’s testimony as to the moral quality of the Japanese people was an important historical witness to the same around 1550. Edo-period Neo-Confucian-

continued in the Meiji and Taishō eras *jingū* as well, especially in the sphere of the fine arts. In net effect, Watsuji argues, Japanese culture can be said to be unique in the world for so accepting the new without displacement of the old, and this is due to Japan’s religious grounding in the indeterminate absolute traceable to the ancient mythology of the Imperial institution.

ism, which was strategically promoted by the Tokugawa shoguns, then rationalized *bushidō* in respect of the feudal pressures of the times. Now there were two strains of *bushidō*, the Buddhist and the Neo-Confucian, the latter conspicuously fusing with Shinto in various amalgamations—and these were all eventually sublated in the *sonnō no michi* process culminating in the Meiji Restoration.

In historical effect, Watsuji contended, *bushidō* did not accept Kamakura-period Zen's disparagement of the political dimension, and therefore it eventually merged back with the *sonnō no michi* 尊王の道 (The Way of Veneration of the Emperor). Subtending these negations and sublations, there was always the undercurrent of the ancient mythic teaching. The essence of the mythic teaching consisted in an ethics of the “pure and clear heart” (*seimyōshin* 精妙心)—namely, a “purity” or “sincerity” of heart that already connoted “sacrificing oneself in serving the Emperor.” One of its grandest historical manifestations was the dismantling of the feudal institutions in the Meiji Restoration. Another was the Japanese war effort when Watsuji wrote “The Way of the Japanese Subject” in 1943 (WATSUJI 1998B, 279–88).

## CONCLUSION

As I have suggested above, Watsuji's *Nihon rinri shisōshi* climaxes his entire career. Its rich tapestry can be appreciated from various angles, not the least being its consistent fabric of interpretation woven out of the heuristic concepts of *fūdo* (climaticity) and *jūsōsei* 重層性 (the stratified or laminated character of Japanese culture). However, Watsuji's text is not a historiographical work *per se*, but rather a literary-hermeneutical one which re-mythologizes Japanese culture in theocratic-nationalistic terms. It even manages problematically to subsume the traditions of *bushidō* within his master-narrative of *sonnō*. But the question remains whether either the *sonnō* or the *bushidō* traditions—which center on concepts of vertical relationships between Emperor and his subjects and between feudal lord and his retainers, respectively—can legitimately be interpreted as *ethical* concepts. On face value, both *sonnō* and *bushidō* are *political* concepts. And, as portrayed by Watsuji, with

the colors of particularistic religiosity which they traditionally carry, they amount to cultural symbolics of a premodern sort.

As well, if Watsuji's *Nihon rinri shisōshi* is the crowning work of his career, it can be seen to pioneer a multicultural historicist mindset that both repossesses a premodern "ethics" (that is, politics) and advocates a postmodern one.<sup>7</sup> I have made the point that in large part his central project of writing cultural phenomenology *qua* philosophical anthropology was the product of his interacting with Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Post-Heideggerian trends buy into precisely such a sense-constituting principle of particularism in their eristic advocacies of cultural-symbolical "differences." For the most conspicuous example today, contemporary Islamic fundamentalism is trading on the same mindset in political and academic settings.

Frankly I am of the opinion that this kind of polarizing ethnocentric rhetoric has not superseded the universalistic achievements of the European Enlightenment—philosophically considered, in such principal authors as Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Newton, Locke, Hume, and Kant—which Watsuji and the other Kyoto School writers frequently impugn. Their kind of anthropological hermeneutics of Asian intellectual history also diverts our attention from the genuinely universalistic forms of Asian philosophy and literature (as found for example in the classics of Indian thought and in the classic works of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). The *nihonteki* side of the Kyoto School writers' mindset, I fear, led them reactively to appropriate the Hegelian and Heideggerian strains of philosophical historicism that Kant, in effect,

7. In "Reasons for The Rubble: Watsuji Tetsurō's Position in Japan's Post-War Debate about Rationality" (LAFLEUR 2001), William R. LaFleur (with input from Richard Rorty's neo-pragmatism) portrays a postwar Watsuji with the progressive mindset of a Francis Bacon. In pursuit of this thesis he provides a footnote to the effect that, while Watsuji's *Nihon rinri shisōshi* is "arguably the major work of his entire career," it is not relevant to his Baconian/Rortyan interpretation (LAFLEUR 2001, n.4). But in fact, Watsuji's hermeneutics of *sonnō* in that crowning work requires that we probe how postmodernism and pre-modernism tend to dovetail, as for example on the theocracy issue. See also DILWORTH 1987.

had already denounced in his *Prolegomena* as wrongly conflating philosophy and history of philosophy.

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