

*WATSUJI TETSURŌ'S RINRIGAKU: Ethics in Japan*, by Watsuji Tetsurō. Translated by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter, with a Foreword by William R. LaFleur. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 381, with notes, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 0 7914 3094 4 (pbk)

SHIGENORI NAGATOMO  
Temple University

WATSUJI TETSURŌ (1889–1960) is usually juxtaposed in stature and importance with Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), the initiator of the Kyoto school, the two being regarded as the most representative thinkers of modern Japan. While some of Nishida's works and those belonging to the Kyoto school have in recent years generated a mild interest among those scholars who are adventurous in thought (thanks largely to such able translators and commentators as David A. Dilworth, James W. Heisig, and Jan Van Bragt), Watsuji's name has remained virtually unknown except in Japan, although some may be familiar with his other translated book, *Climate (Fūdo 風土)*. With the translation of his *Ethics (Rinrigaku 倫理学)* now available in English, Watsuji will gain recognition, I hope, as a first-rate thinker just as praiseworthy as Nishida was a world-class philosopher. William LaFleur, for instance, notes that Watsuji's *Ethics* is "the major such effort by an Asian thinker in the twentieth century" (p. vii), and this is not an isolated instance of the value of his *Ethics*.

Following these preliminary remarks, I would like to outline this review, in which I will 1) provide a sketch of what I judge to be the main philosophical contention of Watsuji's *Ethics*, though touching only the bare bones of its multifaceted dimensions, 2) critique his philosophical position, and 3) comment on the translation.

Watsuji presents his *Ethics*, his *magnum opus*, as a kind of philosophical anthropology, although his study does not delve into, and hence is not built upon, such terms as *anthrōpos*, *homo*, *Mensch*, and man, all of which carry, in one sense or other, the meaning of individual person. Instead, his inquiry thematizes a "betweenness" (*aidagara*) arising from the practical, actional connection between person and person in the dynamic spread of lived-space and time. Hence, he presents his thesis as antithetical to all ethical theories based on the analysis of the individual person in isolation. He makes this point clear in the opening statement of his *Ethics*: "A primary significance of defining ethics as the study of the human being[-in-betweenness] is to become

## BOOK REVIEWS

free from the modern error that regards ethics simply as an issue relating to individual consciousness" (p. 9).<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his work Watsuji mounts numerous arguments to demonstrate this point whenever he advances and elaborates his own thesis of betweenness. A few examples will suffice here. Modern philosophers in general use individual consciousness as a starting point for thematic inquiries into ethics, but Watsuji points out that in order to complete a system, he/she must, in the end, appeal to such concepts as the "transpersonal self, the happiness of society, and the welfare of humankind" (p. 10), viz., to ideas that transcend individual consciousness. This demonstrates that the use of individual consciousness is inadequate, hence is not comprehensive enough to address the issues of ethics. Theoretically, Watsuji reasons that an isolated individual consciousness, as in Descartes' *cogito*, implicitly presupposes the existence of another *cogito*, i.e., when Descartes wrote, "*Cogito, ergo sum*," he assumed a writer-reader relationship. In other words, Descartes' *cogito* is an artificial, intellectual abstraction out of this relationship, without which it is meaningless to declare, "*Cogito, ergo sum*." This also holds true, for example, with Husserl, who thematized intentionality as issuing from an individual. However, Watsuji observes that "my" intentionality is mutually defined by another's intentionality: the way "I" look at the other is defined by the way the other looks at "me" and vice versa. The act of transcendence effected by "my" looking at the other is transcended by the way the other looks at "me," which is the point Sartre also makes, by characterizing it as "transcendence transcended." From these examples, Watsuji concludes that consciousness is actually a consciousness of the betweenness between person and person (see, for example, pp. 31 and 77). All these mistakes, he argues, arise as a consequence of utilizing the methodological stance of "contemplating nature" as if it could be equally applicable to the human being-in-betweenness. Therefore, Watsuji maintains that, in order to understand ethics correctly, one must study the human beings-in-betweenness.

As may be apparent from the preceding examples, Watsuji rejects the methodological stance of theoretical "reasoning" that aims at a manipulation of concepts which is devoid of practical, actional meaning. Instead, he relies on Dilthey's hermeneutics of "understanding," particularly focusing on the meaning of "expression" (*hyōgen* 表現) as generated out of the living dynamism that the incarnate subject (*shutai* 主体) exhibits in the matrix of betweenness, where the matrix of betweenness, for Watsuji, unfolds in and through the standpoint of everydayness. For this reason, he takes the

<sup>1</sup> The passages cited in the following may differ slightly from the translated version.

everyday fact as a starting point of his inquiry. Because he applies this methodological stance to the Japanese cultural-historical context and its expression, his *Ethics* is often characterized as a Japanese, or more broadly, an East-Asian systematization of ethics, which finds its origin, in spirit, in the articulation of the classical Confucian tradition. This characterization is also exemplified by the fact that he problematizes the issues of ethics through the hermeneutical analysis of various Japanese words, such as *ningen*, *sonzai*, and *rinri*, whose meanings have been sedimented within the Japanese cultural-historical context in order to establish "the principle of ethics." Consequently, his philosophical position reflects this orientation. Because of this orientation, Watsuji's *Ethics* was criticized in the past as conservative by Marxist intellectuals in Japan, who thought Marxism was ideologically superior to traditional Japanese values.

As an illustration of the above point, consider the Japanese term, *ningen* 人間, which Watsuji employs as one of the key terms in developing his ethical system. It is usually understood to mean a human, a person, or a man (in the generic sense), but Watsuji hermeneutically shows that *ningen* means "being in the midst of the [inter-generationally, spatially lived] world as well as a person in that world" (p. 15). This is because the term *gen* 間, comprising the second half of the compound *ningen*, means "betweenness," which in Watsuji's *Ethics*, connotes a lived, spatial-temporal spread that is generated out of the living dynamism of actional, practical connection. This being the case, Watsuji states that "it [i.e., *ningen*: the human being-in-betweenness] does not simply designate a person, nor does it simply mean a 'society', wherein we can discern a dialectical synthesis of the dual character of *ningen*" (p. 15). He elaborates this dual character of the human being-in-betweenness in terms of the relationship between an individual and the whole, where the whole may be a family, a group of friends, a community, a God or a nation. According to his analysis, an individual is simply a dialectical moment; it exists only when negating the whole, by wearing a cluster of *personas*. On the other hand, the whole is also a dialectical moment; it exists only when negating the individual. An individual or the whole is an expression of this negation in the dialectical process; neither an individual nor the whole can exist on its own. In Watsuji's ethical scheme, then, negation becomes "the fundamental structure of the human being-in-betweenness."

Watsuji further analyzes the structure of negation involving these two dialectical moments of the individual and the whole. His analysis is primarily intended to articulate philosophically the "fundamental principle of ethics" that governs the human being-in-betweenness, and derivatively to refute ethics based on the analysis of an isolated individual. In discussing the idea of the whole, Watsuji makes a distinction between a finite whole and the absolute

## BOOK REVIEWS

whole: a finite whole designates various kinds of betweenness realized through the union of a multiplicity of individuals, whereas the absolute whole is that which hierarchically subsumes various finite wholes. Our concern here is Watsuji's understanding of the absolute whole. He defines the absolute whole as "aris[ing] only in the undifferentiation of the differentiated individual. It is the realization of nondiscrimination that transcends the multiplicity of individuals. It negates the distinction between discrimination and nondiscrimination, and as such is the absolute negation" (p. 99). Borrowing Nāgārjuna's terminology, Watsuji calls the absolute whole *qua* absolute negation, "emptiness." He introduces the idea of emptiness in his *Ethics* as the primordial ground *sine qua non* for theoretically conceiving and practically realizing a nondual relationship between an "I" and the other, because for the actualization of such a relationship, an "I" and the other must be separated by absolutely nothing. Watsuji uses this as a theoretical basis for "a synthesis between difference and identity . . . within a finite whole" (p. 99). As such, it is "the foundation for every finite whole."

On the other hand, the individual, having a status of an individual through the negation of the whole, becomes individualistic when he or she separates himself or herself from the whole to which he or she belongs, in the form of a rebellion against it or simply by leaving it. Watsuji takes this individual's act of separation from the whole as an actional instance of the negation of the whole, and ultimately this negation is a negation of emptiness, i.e., the absolute whole, which is for Watsuji the primordial origin, and the source of authenticity. This negation takes the form of individuals "empty[ing] themselves in various manners, immers[ing] themselves into an incarnate subjective whole, that is, the negation must be actualized within each individual's incarnate subjectivity" (p. 117). Here we witness Watsuji's program for individuation, i.e., to become an indivisible whole. Logically, Watsuji's individual, then, comes to be defined as the "negation of negation," which he says is no other than an "absolute negation." However, since the individual cannot be an isolated individual in Watsuji's ethical scheme (because of its dialectical relationship to the whole in terms of betweenness), such an individual must return to society (i.e., the whole), and eventually to the absolute whole *qua* emptiness. Here, what he has in mind are such exemplary acts as self-sacrifice and selfless action. Although the degree of "emptying oneself" may vary from individual to individual, Watsuji thinks this returning to society is tantamount to returning to "emptiness," because "that which is a whole for the human being-in-betweenness is formed only insofar as this emptiness is realized in the betweenness of individual persons" (p. 99). In this manner, Watsuji grounds both the individual and the whole in "emptiness" as their foundation, such that, seen from the standpoint of emptiness, an individual is the "self-move-

ment of absolute negation" (p. 186). This he calls the "fundamental principle of ethics." He states: "The negative structure of human existence is the law of fundamental patternment which enables the human existence-in-betweenness to form itself as the human existence-in-betweenness. If the human being-in-betweenness deviates from this law, it is no longer capable of existing" (p. 117).

The dialectical movement for the human being-in-betweenness involves "a constant movement from the already existing betweenness to a possible betweenness" (p. 186). And this constant movement is a "returning to its authenticity by realizing that which is communal vis-à-vis the negation of individuality" (p. 186), where authenticity for Watsuji means the primordial ground "out of which we all come," that is, we are fundamentally grounded in emptiness. This means for Watsuji that "the already existing betweenness ultimately means an absolute whole of nonduality between the self and the other. It is the 'original face before one's father and mother were born'" (p. 186), which is itself a Zen expression designating a state prior to the bifurcation between subject and object. By realizing the nonduality between an "I" and the other even in the possible betweenness, Watsuji says, we "return to the original, authentic home."

Watsuji's idea of authenticity finds its way into his *Ethics* through Heidegger's influence, for he wrote this work in part as a polemical response to the latter's *Being and Time*. Here, it might not be inappropriate to present Watsuji's criticisms of Heidegger's work,<sup>2</sup> particularly the latter's concept of authenticity. In Watsuji's ethical scheme, where the betweenness of an "I" and the other is held to be nondual through the mediation of emptiness, what Heidegger called "authentic" turns out to be inauthentic. Watsuji criticizes Heidegger's analysis of *Dasein* as confined primarily to personal existence. Personal existence gains its status as existence only in opposition to the other, and as such it is the negation of the wholeness of the human being-in-betweenness. However, for Watsuji, living nondual betweenness is authentic, and personal existence returns to this ground of authenticity via self-negation. Heidegger's authenticity is inauthentic precisely because it deviates from nondual betweenness (p. 225).

This criticism is clearly derived from Watsuji's placing priority upon the whole in his ethical system, namely, the absolute whole *qua* emptiness. Watsuji reasons that human existence is stamped with a contingent character, i.e., it

<sup>2</sup> Watsuji criticizes Heidegger as placing a one-sided, hence, undue emphasis on temporality, almost to the exclusion of spatiality in his pursuit of understanding *Dasein's* ontological structure.

## BOOK REVIEWS

is determined by given historical, cultural and climatic conditions. An individual is "thrown," to use Heidegger's terminology, into an already existing network of betweenness. This has the implication for Watsuji that the individual does not determine the nature of the betweenness, but rather the whole vis-à-vis the betweenness determines the individual. For example, in a father-child betweenness, a father becomes a father to the degree to which he fulfils his responsibility as a father to his child, wherein the truth of this betweenness is assessed in terms of the degree to which trust and sincerity are expressed. For Watsuji, this means that one who fails to fulfil one's responsibility is not a human, i.e., as in the example used here, in the capacity of a father. By virtue of this priority of the whole over the individual, he argues that ethics means an order or rule stipulated by the nature of betweenness in order to govern and to regulate a multiplicity of individuals (*rinri*; ethics).

Now, I would like to offer a few remarks concerning the shortcomings of Watsuji's *Ethics*. The first point concerns his failure to thoroughly observe his methodological standpoint. The second point, which is an extension of the first, is related to his position of the whole taking priority over the individual.

Watsuji takes the everyday fact as a starting point of his inquiry, but he does not limit his investigation to this standpoint. This becomes especially evident when he defines authenticity as the nondual relationship between the "I" and the other vis-à-vis the idea of absolute negation or "emptiness." It seems that Watsuji's "emptiness" remains a metaphysical postulate, for in the standpoint of everydayness no experiential correlate to this idea is found. It occurs only through the transformation of the everyday standpoint by means of rigorous, religious self-cultivation. Watsuji's "human being-in-betweenness" knows little of this experiential dimension. Hence, when he mentions the nondual relationship between the "I" and the other as the ground of authenticity, he is only pointing to an ideal relationship. From a broad perspective, this shortcoming arises because Watsuji subsumes religion under the nation in his hierarchical ethical system.

The second criticism concerns Watsuji's placing priority of the whole over the individual. In his enthusiasm for refuting individually oriented ethics, he overemphasizes the significance of the whole without paying equal attention to the depths of the experience which the incarnate subject undergoes in life. This is evident in his treatment of "the structure of temporality" and "the structure of spatiality," where he prioritizes the public dimension of these structures. However, both temporality and spatiality are grounded first in the experience of the individual, incarnate subject. Watsuji ignores this point. This is particularly evident when he thematizes the phenomenon of death. In his *Ethics*, death occurs to someone else, not to oneself,<sup>3</sup> where Watsuji remains simply as an observer.

The present translation by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter comprises roughly one-third of the original version that appeared in three volumes between 1937 and 1949. It is a momentous achievement, the fruit of a cooperative endeavor spanning more than eight long years. I celebrate this translation, first because both Yamamoto and Carter have generally succeeded in presenting Watsuji's philosophical point, argument and position very clearly, while reflecting Watsuji's lucid style of writing. I have one small regret to express, however. Watsuji's use of the Japanese language is at times so skillful that it seems to me his philosophical language defies rendering into equally powerful and precise English counterparts (e.g., both *shutaiteki* 主体的 and *shukanteki* 主観的 are translated as "subjective," and there are also inconsistencies in the translation of *ningen* 人間 and *ningen sonzai* 人間存在). For this reason, the translation would have benefited from a more extensive treatment of these terms in the footnotes, while being sensitive to Watsuji's influence from European thinkers (e.g., Husserl's "natural standpoint" is translated as "natural level").

The timeliness of this translation, however, is not to be undermined by the many linguistic and philological concerns, especially given the current situation in North American societies where the media reports almost daily various forms of social deterioration and disorientation (e.g., crime and drugs). I wonder if this is due to an overemphasis on the individual and material wealth, to the total neglect of Watsuji's "betweenness." Consequently, it appears to me that a "flattening" of all values toward the singular goal of individual monetary wealth has taken possession of the people's minds and infiltrated the vital structure of society. Watsuji's *Ethics* will provide intellectuals with an occasion to reflect upon the present social condition, and perhaps lend some impetus to correct the imbalance and restore order, and even move toward the globalization of the world.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Yuasa Yasuo, *Watsuji Tetsurō: Kindai Nihontetsugaku no unmei* [Watsuji Tetsurō: The Destiny of Modern Japanese Philosophy] (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1995), p. 352.