



Watsuji's Ethics from the Perspective of *Kata* as a Technology of the Self

This paper investigates the history of systems of thought different from those of the West. A closer look at Japan's long philosophical tradition draws attention to the presence of uniquely designed acculturation and training techniques designed as *kata* or *shikata* (型 or 仕形), shedding light on *kata* as a generic technique of self-perfection and self-transformation. By seeing *kata* as foundational to the Japanese mind and comparing it to Michel Foucault's research on technologies of the self, the groundwork is laid for a comparative analysis in terms of the principle of ἐπιμελεῖσθαι σαυτοῦ (taking care of oneself), an ethical and aesthetic paradigm dating back to European antiquity. Not only does this bring to light their similarities as techniques of individuation, it also reinforces the importance of Watsuji's relational understanding of human being.

KEYWORDS: *kata*—Watsuji Tetsurō—Michel Foucault—technologies of the self—*aidagara*—*rinrigaku*—interrelation—in-betweenness

The word *kata* is used in Japanese to refer to a set of uniquely designed acculturation and training techniques and practices known as *shikata* or *kata*. Contemporary research has neglected the importance of *kata*, whose various expressions developed over centuries, in favor of notions like *ambiguity* (曖昧さ), *dependency* (甘え), *the Japanese sense of beauty* (美学) and even *bushidō* (武士道, the way of the samurai). In so doing, a fundamental pillar of the Japanese pursuit of self-transformation and a potential key to a more comprehensive understanding of the Japanese mind has fallen by the wayside. Admittedly the idea of *kata* is as elusive to scholars at home as it has been to their counterparts in the West. This is not to say that we lack resources on the subject but only that the notion of *kata* itself does not seem to have received the fuller attention it deserves.¹

Kata or *shikata* refers to a particular way of doing things that puts the emphasis on the form and order of an actual process. Analyzing the etymology of the compound term *shikata*, we see that *shi* 仕 has the double sense of *support* and *serve*, while *kata* 型 or 形 commonly translates as *form* or *pattern*. Boyé De Mente has defined *kata* as a relationship between

an inner order (the individual heart) and a natural order (the cosmos), and these two were linked together by form—by *kata*. It was *kata* that linked the individual and society.²

In his view, *kata* is to be seen as a sort of repetitive self-actualizing process or action, while at the same time it serves the formal function of unifying the

1. One notable scholar known for his extensive research on the topic of *kata* is Minamoto Ryōen. Unfortunately, none of his works have been translated into English and the only available reference to his comprehensive work on this subject remains the excerpt in HEISIG, KASULIS, MARALDO 2011, 930–5.

2. DEMENTE 2003, 15.

physical and the spiritual aspects of the human existence. It is not a question of embodying or harmonizing with any universal, metaphysical principles. *Kata* is not a vehicle for conveying hidden truths or uncovering the inner nature of things, rather it is simply a *model for shaping interrelational experience*. De Mente further argues the institutional and ritual characteristics of *kata* suggest a connection with morality in the sense that one's actions can be said to be "in *kata*" or "out of *kata*" (型にはまる・はまらない). To be "out of *kata*" is to oppose reason or the will of society, and in this sense, as we shall see, puts us in touch with the foundations of ethics in Japan.

WATSUJI'S *RINRI* AND *AIDAGARA* IN RELATION TO *KATA*

Watsuji Tetsurō's major work *Rinrigaku (Ethics)*³ offers an original and critical perspective on modern attempts to ground ethics solely on the actions and decisions of the conscious individual subject. Watsuji argues against western conceptions of human being that put the individual at the center of all modes of existence and then substitute it for the totality of all human existence. This view of the world, Watsuji claims, can be traced back to the assumption that the isolated ego is the proper starting point for modern philosophy.⁴ When this approach is applied to the field of ethics and the existential problems that face us as human beings, it ends up with a flawed account of human agency for the simple reason that the solitary, isolated subject is merely an abstraction from a wider complex of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, this fixation on the isolated ego as a conceptual pivot distracts attention from what Watsuji sees as the true starting point for ethics: *concrete human existence* with an emphasis on human beings as contemplating subjects. This is why he insists that ethical problems cannot properly be framed without reliance on ideas such as social happiness or human welfare, therefore ethics cannot rely on individual consciousness

3. This paper is a result of multiple presentations aimed at expanding my earlier research by encompassing Watsuji's use of the notion of *rin* as an expression of *kata*. In my doctoral thesis (SEKULOVSKI 2013) I argue that François Laruelle's non-standard philosophy, as an all-encompassing posture and practice of Man, has similarities to the notion of *kata* and can therefore help generate new forms of what Laruelle calls *generic knowledge*.

4. WATSUJI, 1996, 11.

alone and needs to give way to a more relational and interdependent understanding of human being.

Kata and the Grand “rin” of human beings

While Watsuji acknowledges that the notion of *rinri* (倫理 the Sino-Japanese term for ethics) is rooted in ancient Chinese thought, he makes it clear that he does not intend to argue for a revival or modern reconstruction of the Chinese classics in order to restore the significance of ethics as a Way. Rather, he attempts to situate ethics firmly and irrevocably within human relationships, and to center its attention on what goes on in the “in-between,” on the actions and consequences that arise in interactions among individuals. Watsuji understands the glyph *rin* to carry the sense of *nakama* (なかま) or “fellowship,” that is to say, a system of relationships among a given group of individuals that determines their mode of human existence. *Nakama* is thus intended not as an abstract logical principle but as a concrete point of reference to the interactions that bring people into contact with one another. At the same time, Watsuji continues, *rin* includes the dimension of *kimari* (決まり agreement) or *kata* (form) as the basis of bringing order (秩序) to human relationships. In a word, *rin* is the *Way of human beings*.

Watsuji understands the second glyph, *ri*, to connote a general sense of *rationality*. It refers to the patterns of activity or relationship that can be seen to take place in the fellowship of *rin*:

Therefore, *rinri*, that is, ethics, is the order or the pattern through which the communal existence of human beings is rendered possible. In other words, ethics consists of the laws of social existence.⁵

The significance of *rin*, as *nakama*, *kimari*, and therefore also *kata*, constitutes the order among human beings, in this manner, *rin*, *kata*, and, *aidagara* are correlated in such a manner that the latter empowers the *rin* (as a form) rendering it possible and empowering its continuity.

What lies in-between?

On this basis, Watsuji postulates:

5. WATSUJI 1996, 11.

The locus of ethical problems lies not in the consciousness of the isolated individual, but precisely in the in-betweenness of person and person. Because of this, ethics is the study of *ningen*.⁶

It is precisely the emphasis of this “in-betweenness” among individuals that allows Watsuji to rethink the concept of ethics and move away from the kind of individual-centered ethics that runs deep in the philosophical traditions of the West. There is no way to get at the heart of ethical problems solely in reliance on the experiences and contemplative efforts of individuals. Attention to the in-betweenness of person and person is crucial if we are to shift ethics away from regulative principles and the clarification of moral responsibilities towards our fellow human beings and towards the study of the human. The Japanese word Watsuji uses for “human” is composed of two characters: *nin* or *hito* (人), meaning person or human being, and *gen* or *aida* (間) meaning space or between. Watsuji insists that a human being is not simply an individual but a member of various social groupings, and as such should be defined fundamentally as a “we” rather than as an “I.” Accordingly, “to be an I” means “to be a part of a correlative we,” that is, a “we” composed of multiple “I’s.” This in turn implies that for a human individual to “exist” means to “be among” one’s fellow human beings. This essential correlatedness is what Watsuji calls *aidagara* or *betweenness*.

The term *aidagara* is composed of two glyphs: *aida* or *gen*, referred to in the previous paragraph, and *gara* (柄), which can mean nature or—more in keeping with Watsuji’s usage—pattern. Putting the two together, then, *aidagara* translates literally as a “between pattern” or more simply, a relationship. The appearance of the same glyph 間 in both *ningen* and *aidagara* has nothing to do with the physical distance between individuals. If Watsuji’s notion of “in-betweenness” were basically spatial, it might easily be dismissed as a kind of naïve realism. Avoiding that sense complicates our efforts to translate the word in the various contexts in which it is used. At times, *among* helps elucidate its intended meaning, as in the phrase *among one’s fellow human beings*. In any case, the “space” that *gara* refers to is a *mid-place* in-between individuals, not a place that exists prior their interaction. This mid-place is defined, in turn, by an all-encompassing form or *rin* of human

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

relationships that *are individuated among and within the interrelational pattern*. To capture this all-inclusive interrelationality in which individuals are wrapped up, we might better render the word *aidagara* “with-in” instead of the usual “in-between.”

FOUCAULT’S TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Michel Foucault argued that the pursuit of ethical and aesthetical ideals in European antiquity stressed the importance of a unified practice and theory to empower a particular aesthetic of existence. The ancient principle of ἐπιμελεῖσθαι σεαυτὸν or *taking care of oneself* stands behind the time-worn idea of caring not only for one’s body but also and primarily for one’s mind or soul. This ideal flourished at a time in European history when the view of the human being as an individual agent was taking shape and thus enabled the emergence of a specific set of what Foucault liked to call “technologies of self-creation.”⁷ These acculturation and training techniques allowed individuals to pursue, alone or with help of others, a course of disciplined practice for body, soul, thought, conduct, and overall state of being. The aim was a self-transformation that would usher in a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or even immortality. As a result, the guiding principle of *taking care of oneself* was replaced with the principle γνῶθι σεαυτὸν, *know thyself*.

This shift of direction in intellectual practice affected the subsequent orientation of European civilization, accentuating the place of reason and the role of the contemplating subject while at the same time sidelining technologies of the self nurtured under the earlier ideal of *taking care of oneself*. To this day, Foucault argues, western culture is guided by the principle of *knowing thyself*, effectively enshrining the individualist spirit as the very epitome of what it means to be human. Numerous ancient cultures, like the Greeks, fostered an interest at various times throughout their history in techniques and aesthetic practices aimed at enhancing existence, in modes of individuation and forms of self-discipline carried out through observation and experimentation whose only goal was to transform and better one-

7. For further details, see FOUCAULT 1984.

self. In the case of Japan, the same *kata* that played a role in morality was also employed to facilitate and mediate one's pursuit of a certain aesthetics of existence. As was the case with the ancient Greeks, *kata* was also equated with beauty.

KATA AS A TECHNOLOGY OF THE SELF

As disciplines for body, mind, and conduct aimed at achieving purity, wisdom, and perfection, *kata* and the ancient principle of *taking care of oneself* appear to be interchangeable. A consideration of the Tea Ceremony, one of the most emblematic of the traditional arts of Japan, bears this out. *Chadō* (茶道), the Way of Tea, is based on the use of *kata* and its principles reflect the will to master oneself through various disciplines of body, mind, and conduct. Precepts of *chadō* like harmony (和), respect (敬), purity (清) and tranquility (寂) show striking similarities to precepts articulated in European antiquity. The influence of Zen Buddhism on *chadō* and other traditional arts has carried over to Japanese modes of living and ways of thinking in general. In the same way, the use of *kata* came to serve as a *generic technique for the self-creation and self-transformation of individuals*, thus expanding its impact on Japanese society as a whole. The shift in paradigms that Foucault points out in Europe does not directly apply to Japan, where the old paradigm has survived down the centuries. Simply put, we may say that *kata* serves as a means of practical connection or fellowship, and that these specific forms or patterns circumscribe the topology of human interaction within which human relationships take place.

Kata as a dynamic principle

Watsuji defines these *kata* of practical interaction as something that

cannot itself exist apart from these connections. As specific forms in which human beings act, they exist only together with these practical connections. But when dynamic human existence is actualized repeatedly, in a definite manner, we can grasp this pattern that constantly makes its appearance in separation from the basis of this dynamic sort of existence.⁸

8. WATSUJI 1996, 11.

The repetition of *kata* in a defined manner discloses the pattern of relationships within which human beings define themselves.

John Maraldo points out that Watsuji's conception of *ningen* represents a dynamic concept of the self in which identity is not fixed or determined but shaped interrelationally, in-between person and person, and thus subject to continual change. For Watsuji, to be human is also to be ethical, and one cannot be either unless one is both an individual and at the same time correlated to others. Watsuji, we recall, defined ethical conduct as the order or the pattern through which the communal existence of human beings is rendered possible; in other words, to be *ningen* means to navigate freely between the social and the individual. Maraldo goes on so say that *ningen*,

although being subjective communal existence as the interconnection of acts, at the same time, is an individual that acts through these connections. This subjective and dynamic structure does not allow us to account for *ningen* as a 'thing' or 'substance.'⁹

To be *ningen* is to stand in a dynamic relationship—between the individual and the social, never just one or the other—and therefore cannot be conceived of in terms of a stable or complete structure or mode of being. Watsuji conceives *ningen* both as an individual and at the same time as a *subjective communal existence*, pointing at the non-dualist character of *ningen* seen as a totality of human beings established through the negation of individuality and expressed through the relational existence or pattern in-between person and person.

In this vein, Watsuji remarks of human existence that it

infinitely aims at the realization of communal existence by virtue that human beings are *ningen*. Because of this, the pattern of practical connections already realized serves, at the same time, as a pattern yet to be achieved.¹⁰

This pattern of connections and its resultant ethic are regarded not as a goal to be reached but as something that needs to be *achieved infinitely*. It is, we may say, a *kata* that allows human existence to be realized as com-

9. MARALDO 2002, 185.

10. WATSUJI 1996, 12.

munal existence. Its inclusive character provides for the emergence of the in-between or *aidagara* as an essential dimension of existence for *ningen*, a dimension in which the in-between is not an empty void but a form with an individuating function. The elusive character of this *kata* of interconnectedness accounts for its role as a pillar of the nondual, communal existence of *ningen* in-between the social and individual. As such, *kata* is not metaphysical in nature but relational. It presents as a model that give shape to *aida*, the with-in. For these reasons, I am persuaded that *kata* is the most fundamental constituent in the makeup of the Japanese mind in the sense that it defines the respective roles and forms that constitute the actual relational matrix of each individual *rin* in relation to the totality of *ningen*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The foregoing has tried to present a rationale for comparative research on the notion of *kata* in relation to Foucault's research on the technologies of the self in the ancient Greco-Roman world, and to suggest further examination of the role of *kata* as a fundamental pillar and technique for individual self-creation and self-transformation in Japan. My aim was to highlight possible commonalities between alternative systems of thought that appear at first to be closed in on themselves and inaccessible to one another. There is no doubt that common practices are a way to enhance mutual understanding. Further attention to the role played by *kata* in shaping the aesthetics of existence in Japan can make a contribution in the same direction.

REFERENCES

- DE MENTE, Boyé Lafayette
 2003 *Kata: The Key to Understanding and Dealing with the Japanese*. Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing.
- FOUCAULT, Michel
 1984 *Histoire de la sexualité III. Le souci de soi*. Paris: Gallimard.
- HEISIG, James W., Thomas P. KASULIS, and John C. MARALDO
 2011 *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

MARALDO, John

- 2002 “Watsuji Tetsuro’s Ethics: Totalitarian or Communitarian?” in Rolf Elberfeld and Günter Wohlfart, eds., *Komparative Ethik. Das gute Leben zwischen den Kulturen*. Köln: Edition Chora.

SEKULOVSKI, Jordančo

- 2013 *Postures et pratiques de l’Homme. Libéralisme, philosophie non-standard et pensée japonaise*. Paris: L’Harmattan.

SOSHITSU Sen

- 1994 *Vie du thé, esprit du thé*. Paris: Jean-Cyrille Godefroy.

WATSUJI Tetsurō

- 1996 *Watsuji Tetsuro’s Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*. Translated by Yamamoto Seisaku and Robert E. Carter. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.