Many of Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889–1960) reflections on the nature of being human were developed in the context of a dialogue with Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. However, whilst it would be correct to state that Watsuji did adopt the phenomenological approach of European thinkers he nevertheless remained attached to his Buddhist heritage. We can see this clearly in his use of the concept of emptiness. Emptiness appears in Watsuji’s scheme as double negation. Through the dialectics of emptiness, he attempted to overcome what he saw as the one-sidedness of other ethical systems in order to consider key dual-structures of human existence such as that of subject and object, or of the individual and totality. From Watsuji’s perspective any social analysis that rests on these dualities can only ever be provisional and reductive. However, it would be wrong to equate this account of emptiness with the nothingness of ‘Western’ thought. Here emptiness does not indicate a mere privation of being or a nihilistic void. This emptiness should be understood as holding the created as well as creative aspects of existence and therefore the possibility of change.

Whilst Watsuji’s concept of fūdo means “wind and earth...the
natural environment of a given land” (Watsuji 1935 [1961]: 1), it also includes the social environment of school, family, society, customs, and localised practices. He argues that fūdo plays an indispensible part in the development of the person. In this view fūdo is the relational space in which life unfolds and forms realities. And it is absurd, he would argue, in the study of humans and human societies to detach these from their respective milieu and their multi-layered histories. The space in which these acts take place Watsuji refers to as “betweenness” (aidagara) (Watsuji 1996 [1938]): “Betweenness consists in the fact that self and other are divided from each other ... and at the same time that what is thus divided becomes unified” (Watsuji 1996: 35). Watsuji insists that the human spatial relations he is concerned with “are not objective relations that established through subjective unity, as is the case with spatial relations between subject and object. Rather, they are act-connections between person and person like communication or association” (Watsuji 1996: 10). It is within these dynamic act-connections that ethics become concretized, embodied within various forms of ethical praxis that allow us to manage and negotiate human relationships.

At the heart of Watsuji’s betweenness is not simply an obligation to community, but the “double negation,” of both the individual and society. In the first movement the individual sees herself as an individual by rebelling against the group. The second movement is the individual’s negation of herself by returning to the whole. In incessantly situating the individual, the family, or the nation within greater and greater unities, many have argued that Watsuji could be understood as implying that the individual personality should be continuously sacrificed for the sake of (or at least absorbed into) the encompassing unit. However, as Watsuji writes “if an individual submerges herself in the whole and refuses to become an individual again, then the whole perishes at the same time.” At certain times, therefore, the movement
of double negation demands that a person rebel against a totalizing community in the name of individual freedom, even if the latter freedom must in turn, once again, be negated for the sake of returning to a non-totalizing community. What we get is a sense of the individual’s struggle with individuality, drawing further into her own being, through which to contribute to the development of society. Whether Watsuji succeeded in giving equal recognition to both sides of the movement of double negation remains the focus of considerable debate. What is not debatable, however, is the significance of his ethics of double negation as a contribution to how we conceive of the relation between the individual and society, and in terms of global relationships.

So how does Watsuji’s account play out on the global stage? As the history of the last two centuries has shown the ethical relations between nation-states clearly reaches beyond national borders and reciprocally shapes ethical communities. Whilst most accounts of cosmopolitan global ethics rely on the ‘standard narrative’ of the supposed unique Greek account of being cosmopolitan Watsuji draws on the cosmopolitan heritage of Buddhism. Through such a heritage, with its acceptance of difference and its recognition of our interdependence, and his account of a relational social ontology, Watsuji provides an account of global ethics that distances itself from abstractions such as ‘rationality’, ‘humanity’, or of a ‘world government’. Instead he argues that individual nations need to develop a heightened sense of individuality through which to contribute to a global ethic. This, of course, will be specific to the individual nation and would also highlight societal limitations. Through this process, in the contact between nations, it is possible for a nation to learn from another without one nation or community claiming to provide a privileged perspective. Watsuji stresses the importance of this:

Thinking of it in this way, the realization of moral
difference in each nation is indispensable for the fulfillment of the universal socio-ethical path. It saves each nation from conceit and spurs them to work to overcome their individual limitations. (WTZII, 348[iii], quoted in Sevilla 2015: 215).[iv]

Essential Reading:


Further Reading:


Questions:

Do you think that Watsuji’s ideas fit in with Decolonial or post-colonial accounts of global social theory or is he offering an alternative account?

What do you think Watsuji’s ideas about aidagara and fūdo contribute to debates around democracy, poverty, development, and gender?

How could you use Watsuji’s concept of fūdo to describe the
character of human societies and our entry into the Anthropocene period?

What do you think the term ‘International’ means to Watsuji?

Discuss what Watsuji would understand as the effects of colonialism within his global social theory.

[i] This follows the Japanese convention of the family name first.

[ii] It is important to note that Watsuji’s project for the Ethics was as a three volume piece. Unfortunately, at present only the first volume has been translated into English (Watsuji 1996). I would like to express my considerable thanks to Anton Luis Sevilla (2015), who generously provided me with his completed PhD that contained English translations of pertinent parts of the second and third volumes.

[iii] WTZ refers to Watsuji Tetsurō Zenshū (Complete Works of Tetsuro Watsuji) 20 volumes (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten)

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