

# On the Purpose of Japanese Education and its Problem:

## Individualism and Contextualism

HIRATA, Toshihiro

( Graduate School of Teacher Training, Yamagata University )

The Amendment of Japanese Fundamentals of Education Act in 2006 still advocates the idea of individual dignity and defines the purpose of education as the full development of personality. This individualistic discipline at school has clashed ever since World War II inevitably with the traditional anti-individualistic one at home. As a result Japanese people till now has not been able to get rid of an ethical problem with their public education and the public spirit. In this paper I would like to find a clue to solution for this problem through the conceptions of Confucian contextualism and of Kant's categorical imperative.

[Keyword] full development of personality, public spirit, Kant's categorical imperative, Japanese personalism, American individualism, Confucian contextualism

### 1 Introduction

The Amendment of Japanese Fundamentals of Education Act in 2006 still, no less than the old which was enacted in 1947 under the American occupation after World War II, advocates the idea of individual dignity and defines the purpose of education as the full development of personality. However, in the Japanese language, there was originally neither a word for the individual nor a word for the personality; the idea of individual dignity was quite alien for the traditional Japanese culture.

From a Confucian point of view, a human being should always stand within definite human relationships such as a parent-child relationship and can be called "human" only through the existence of such relationships. If isolated, he is considered equal to birds and beasts and no longer deserves the name of "human being". In this sense he should be called rather *contextual than individual* because an isolated individual human being is considered inhuman, just as an individual atom is only recognized as it interacts with other atoms. As a result Japanese people can not get rid of an ethical problem with their public education and the public spirit.

### 2 On the Japanese Personalism and its Problem

'The full development of personality' is the *purpose of the Japanese public education* consistently in the post-World War II era. It has usually been interpreted from the viewpoint of individualism based on the idea of the *individual dignity* and *the fundamental human rights*. However, originally the words of 'personality' and 'person' have their origin in the West. The Japanese "jin-kaku" was devised as an equivalent of English 'personality' in 1889. Afterwards the Japanese personalism was built up according to the interpretation of the English version of Kant's categorical imperative and advocated as a new education ideology in the established term of the modern emperor system state in order to sublimate the conflict between the *British and American individualism* and the *German nationalism*. But because of the exclusion of the transcendent God the *Japanese personalism* has turned out to be secular, pragmatic, non-individualistic and intersubjective.

It is not easy for non-Christians, especially for non-Protestants, to comprehend the concept of the personality in accordance with the idea of individual dignity. To a Japanese it means merely selfishness, while none other than self-denial or

self-control is traditionally to be the purpose of education based on the Confucian contextualism.

### 3 The Purpose of Old Public Education in Japan and the Japanese Traditional Culture

The wet-paddy rice cultivation method has been used in Japan for more than 2000 years. The method made it necessary to work in groups and have a system of joint co-operation. The people in an area had to band together during the regular periods of intensive work involved in the planting and harvesting of the rice, and it was also necessary for these groups to organize the distribution of the water for the paddyfields. All this instilled in most Japanese a consciousness of belonging to their localized farming communities.

Also, with the spreading of Confucian ethics since the first half of the 17th century, there was a strengthening of the concept of belonging to a family group, and among the warrior class by the name of "Bushi" of belonging to a Japanese clan named "I'e". Confucianism taught people how to behave. For instance, it taught that people should respect their superiors and elder persons; and therefore, younger people should be obedient to elderly people, and children to their parents. It further taught that any behavior running counter to such a social order was most ignominious. The spirit of Confucianism was mirrored in the prewar Japanese family system. In Japan, where three generations — parents, children, and grandchildren — lived under the same roof, greater importance was placed on family or I'e than on individuals. The custom has been to avoid the use of personal names out of politeness. That is, when addressing someone elder or of higher rank, it is considered rude to utter his name. Even in the home, one does not call one's parents or elder brothers and sisters by their names; instead, they are addressed as "father", "(elder) brother" or "(elder) sister". Under such circumstances, in Japanese family life, the father had absolute power as head of the household. The family was organized as a hierarchy with the husband and father at the apex.

In the very same spirit, sovereign power was

vested in the Ten'nou, the Japanese Emperor, in the old Constitution introduced in 1889, because he was to be the Father of the Japanese nation. Therefore the purpose of education was to bring up people as loyal subjects and dutiful children. Selfless devotion to the Ten'nou and his country was valued above everything else.

Against this historical background, the modern employee's sense of belonging to his company was further strengthened by the systems of lifetime employment, ranking according to the number of years of service and internal welfare schemes, which were features of company management in postwar Japan.

These are reasons why people talk about Japanese groupism. It is also why Japanese are poor at asserting themselves individually. They tend to speak and act only after considering the other person's feelings and point of view so that they can avoid conflicts. Also, most Japanese tend to avoid doing anything that sets them off from others. They worry about what others think and change their behavior accordingly.

### 4 The Purpose of Recent Public Education in Japan and Its Problems

After World War II, the traditional system and laws were abolished with the New Constitution in force since 1947, which guarantees personal liberty and equality of human rights. Sovereign power was yielded to the people and the Ten'nou became only a symbol of the State. Also the education system underwent a major reform, and it now closely resembles the American system. The new purpose of education is the full development of personality. Children are encouraged at school to be independent, take individual responsibility, develop their imaginations and creativity, and complete their personalities. They are trained to learn how to express their own thoughts and opinions.

However this new purpose imported from the United States has had difficulties in taking roots on the Japanese soil. The new individualistic discipline at school had inevitably to clash with

the traditional anti-individualistic one at home. The only way to get around the conflict has been to work a lot from early morning till late at night, because the custom of diligence is common to both. For Confucianism as well as for the American frontier spirit, work itself has an ethical value and wealth, as the fruits of one's own labors, can be cordially accepted. As a result, Japan has grown out of the ashes of the war to become one of the world's strongest economic powers, but leaving a great many workaholics behind.

Meanwhile Japan has been transformed from an agrarian nation into an industrialized power. Accordingly the old Japanese family system has disintegrated and so-called nuclear family households, comprising husbands and wives only, have increased sharply as a result of their children living away from home after reaching adulthood. Losing the traditional basis of its own culture, Japanese people begin to drift about aimlessly.

### 5 Contextualism and Individualism

The behavioral tendencies of Japanese are generally termed as collectivism or groupism which sharply contrasts with what is called individualism. But such description of Japanese ethnic characteristics is superficial and, to be exact, very doubtful. If the description is true, it would be difficult to explain successfully why Japan could achieve such a rapid modernization. This is because modernization is conventionally considered synonymously with westernization and achievable only through individualistic acts.

However, according to Prof. Hamaguchi of Osaka University (1988), the overall principle in Japanese systems should be termed as 'corporativism'. This is a sort of symbiotic relationship and differs clearly from the group-orientedness which can be characterized as totalitarianism. The corporativistic principle is to cooperate with others as well as to participate voluntarily in group activities so as to gain due share. Therefore corporativism is not always anti-individualistic. The Japanese society is not necessarily one devoid of individualism. In order

to fully comprehend the dynamics of the human systems, the 'corporativism' level is requested, as it is higher in the order of analysis than the 'individualism' level.

Such inter-relatedness as corporativism, where the maintenance of interpersonal relations is concerned, is termed 'contextualism' by Prof. Hamaguchi. This includes three attributes: 1) Mutual dependence; 2) Mutual reliance; and 3) Regard for interpersonal relations not as a means but as an end in themselves. These attributes of contextualism contrast with the following three properties of individualism, where the maintenance of self-integration is concerned: 1) Ego-centeredness; 2) Self-reliance; and 3) Regard for interpersonal relations as a means to an end.

The 'contextual' means human beings as coexistence, that is, 'between-people' and refers to a person who recognizes the interpersonal context as the core of himself/herself. The contextual is what may be called a social molecule in which mutual interaction between ego and others serves as a 'connecting link' in the molecular structure formula.

The model-shift from individualism to contextualism corresponds with the current ethical crisis. Lacking the kind of communal orientation where people are considerate of others and assist each other, the individualistic ethics as promotive factor of modernization has caused numerous socially pathological phenomena. Such as the increase of depressives and suicides.

### 6 Conclusion

On account of the loss of the traditional cultural basis, the United States as well as Japan has begun to drift. It is now evident that self-centered individualism and coercive groupism are distortions present in both societies and not the exclusive property of either one.

Americans have valued autonomy too much, while Japanese not enough. Americans have stressed individual rights to the point where they neglect responsibilities. Japanese have stressed responsibilities to the point where the need for individual rights has sometimes been ignored. It

is curious enough, although starting from opposite points, that both now face the same problem: the growth of selfish individualism and the need for a certain principle. This is for Prof. Bellah of University California Berkley School (1985) ethical individualism, for Prof. Hamaguchi contextualism, and for me Kant's principle of personality with the categorical imperative. Especially the following imperative in "Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals" is important:

"Act in such a way that you always need humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end." Karl Mannheim (1950) found there "the archetype of the democratic behavior".

For the present in this paper I would like to find a clue to solution for the recent ethical problems with Japanese public education in the conceptions of Kant's categorical imperative.

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