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Japanese Behavioral Patterns and Groupthink

I. Letter from a Japanese legal philosopher and the premises of Japanese legal values

For this study (Legal Values in Japan and Hungary), we requested Dr. Kazuyuki Kobayashi, a well-known Japanese philosopher, to write a paper. He rejected our offer but wrote back an interesting letter provided below:

“Regarding my book, *A Theory of Justice for “Fools”* (Kobayashi: 2004), some readers said, that “justice” was unexplained in it. Certainly, I did not clearly explain what justice was, though I approached the problem of justice from various points of view in the first and second chapters.

I dare say that “justice” is a harmony of values. It is not an arithmetical compromise, but a dynamic process of balancing various values as much as possible and of making new values that we can no longer take apart. Metaphorically speaking, if values are single tones, “justice” is a symphony that integrates them in time and space.

It is not necessary to write such a definition; I feel it would be open to misunderstanding. Moreover, there is something that may be misunderstood, which I did not explicitly state. The “symphony” as a metaphor of justice is something more than a tool of explanation. “Justice” for me is music.

I am sorry to have made this ambiguous. However, this leads me to the next question.

Why is this music Western?

Why does Western-style music move me and why do I think this music is my sound, while I feel that Japanese traditional music is strange?

Do Western theories of justice have universality, and are others simply cultural particularities?

Obviously, it would be a major problem if I took the Western theory of justice for granted, but I feel Western mathematics and natural sciences to be universal.

Although Western theories of justice are culturally particular, there seems to be universality in them; they are more than just a cultural particularity. This problem would be easy to resolve if I was found to have an inferiority complex.

However, I feel this state of affairs has the following possibility.

There are some parts of the theory of justice that Western people cannot see because of their cultural particularities.

On the other hand, those who belong to other cultures can clarify this and make a more universal theory that Western people could not construct.

For instance, when I read studies on Japanese “mediation” written by Western researchers, I and not a few others see that there are some important parts that Westerners do not understand. This problem can be solved by those who are local, but due to this problem, I feel the possibility of constructing more universal theories.

I am sorry that I cannot write a thesis on this theme. However, it appears I must take some steps toward it. If I write a paper that opens a new stage, I would be able to contribute to your project.

I have thought about this in various ways, but it is quite difficult for me to even find the way to go.

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I must grope in the dark a bit more.”

Dr. Kobayashi’s letter includes many aspects that we intend to address in our study. He allowed us to include his letter as an introduction to this study.

His letter demonstrates how difficult it is to discuss justice. Is it possible to formulate a universal theory of justice?

Western concepts and theories of justice were derived from the Roman law, and they have developed in the Christian culture. Thus, are there nothing but local rules in the world, similar to how Japanese law is one of them?

Is there any idealistic justice behind/over the local rules in the world?

As Dr. Kobayashi stated, there seem to be universal elements in Western music and even more so in mathematics. As far as we can address the problems of law and justice, we can take neither a relativistic standpoint nor a religious one. But we cannot deny the presence of idealistic justice.

As he said, “justice” is a harmony of values.

The issue here is whether there can be a universal value among local values. Generally speaking, the Japanese are not good at deciding the universal value.

Nowadays, under the influence of modern relativism, many Japanese seem to think that there are no universal values in the world. It also appears to be a type of Post-Modernist manner of thinking, but for a long time, the Japanese have been in different cultural-historical situations than the Europeans.

In spite of a modern relativistic way of thinking, we believe that spirits or ghosts reside within everything in the universe. We have had limited idea of God or the absolute truth.

This attitude has been the stumbling block for understanding Western legal concepts and its religious-cultural background. At the same time, it illustrates the religious-cultural background in Japan.

II. The Japanese sense of religion

The Japanese sense of religion is quite complicated. Most Japanese do not have a strong sense of religion and often call themselves “irreligious.” However, the Japanese are not necessarily atheists. They are spiritual and actually participate in many religious rituals including Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, and Christianity.

According to The Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan is one of the largest Buddhist countries with approximately 96 million adherents. But Japan is not a Buddhist country. In Japan, Buddhism was thoroughly transformed, and it has transformed into something that cannot be termed “Buddhism” in the proper sense of the term (Sakata: 1975, Hiro: 2010). For example, we visit Shinto shrines and pray when a child is born, and marriage ceremonies are also held according to Shinto rites. Not a few Japanese citizens marry in the church even though they are not Christians. Almost all funerals in Japan are held at Buddhist temples.

Although there are numerous religions in Japan, it is noteworthy that Christians comprise one percent or less of the total population. Christianity appears to have limited influence on Japanese culture since it was strictly prohibited in the beginning of the 17th century.

With regard to Shintoism, it has coexisted and amalgamated with Buddhism for 1,465 or 1,479 years in the form of synchronization between the two. Similar to how Buddhism has witnessed a transformation in Japan, Shintoism was greatly influenced by Buddhism, and it vastly changed from its original form.

“State Shintoism” was created following the Meiji period. It was forced on the people and controlled them. Authorities forced the Japanese to believe that the emperor was not a human being but “a living god.” The Japanese harbored a dislike for “State Shintoism” and, by extension, came to dislike religion in general. (Hiro: 2010).

Currently in Japan, many people do not have a strong sense of religion, and they are regarded as being irreligious. They are nonetheless involved in various ritual ceremonies and festivals in daily life, which lead foreigners to believe that they are quite religious. The same person who pays his or her respects at a Shinto shrine or at a Buddhist temple during the beginning of the year, visits a Buddhist temple during the Festival of the Souls in summer, and celebrates Christmas at the end of the year. It can be remarked that the Japanese religious emotion defused into various religious rites (Shimada: 2011).

These examples help to describe what the Japanese sense of religion is. The highlighted aspects are as follows:

- 1) On the surface, the Japanese do not have a strong sense of religion.
- 2) They regard themselves as irreligious.
- 3) They believe not only in their souls after death but also in many spiritual things.
- 4) They voluntarily participate in ritual ceremonies and festivals nearly every month.
- 5) They exhibit tolerance for all religions and do not discriminate against people because of their religion.
- 6) They dislike Christianity, or more precisely, dislike religions that are said to be revealed religions including Judaism and Islam, regarding which they have limited knowledge.

The Japanese have a strong sense of religion, but they are unaware about what they believe in. This sense of religion has probably been on everyone’s mind in Japan since prehistoric times. Shintoism as a primitive folk religion still commands strong belief.

This type of Shintoism is neither Sect Shinto nor Shrine Shinto and much less State Shinto, but it still exists and dominates the Japanese unconsciously.

In the terminology of the philosopher Henri Bergson, the Japanese sense of religion belongs to “static religion” in a “closed society” (Bergson: 1932).

It is rare that a prehistoric sense of religion, which has often disappeared in history, still exists in a modern state. This is probably because Japan has never been conquered.

That is why the Japanese sense of religion has remained, but it subconsciously exists; moreover, we regard ourselves as irreligious, rational, and modern without any doubt.

It is noteworthy that the Japanese dislike Christianity because the revealed religions come into collision with the Japanese sense of religion. But most Japanese are unconscious or unaware about it.

Consequently, the Japanese are generally indifferent to religion. They do not superficially discriminate by reason of their religion. The Japanese sense of religion appears to be similar to the basso continuo, the lowest-pitched part of their way of life, but it seems to arise when they behave in groups.

III. Japanese behavioral patterns in group lives

Evolutionary anthropology indicates that Homo sapiens lived in small groups that consist of less than 150 members for about 1.9 million years. Further, this was until agriculture was invented 10 thousand years ago.

Our ancestors chose this way to survive in a group. It was important that the maximum number of people could survive. Priority was accorded to a group over an individual. Needless to say, it was not an ideal world.

With a world population of exactly four, that works out to a homicide rate of 25 percent, which is about a thousand times higher than the equivalent rates in Western countries today (Pinker: 2012. p.7).

In fact, our ancestors were far more violent than we are. Rather, the so-called struggle for life indicated a struggle for existence against other groups and against other members of the group who did not live in harmony with it.

Japanese group-oriented behavioral patterns have developed simultaneously with the sense of religion. Even in modern times, there are many groups organized as a community (Gemeinschaft), not as an association (Gesellschaft) in sociological terms (Tönnies: 1887).

Bureaucratic organizations and private companies in Japan have the structure of an old village community ruled by traditional superstitions and beliefs. Many Japanese dislike expressing their opinion in front of many people, and they are always willing to be in agreement with the unanimous opinion of the group they belong to.

What is the unanimous opinion of the group?

Who suggests the opinion at first?

Finally, how do the Japanese make decisions?

This decision-making is as fair and democratic as it appears. The Japanese have no reason to complain with respect to this process because “everyone” decides it. More precisely, one is not allowed to object to the others because of strong peer pressure.

Japanese decision-making also commits mistakes similar to other societies in the world. Generally speaking, decision-making is not infallible, even though the Japanese decide this “democratically.” Nonetheless, in Japan, it is ideal that everyone decides everything.

This is Japanese peer pressure. This is natural just like the air they breathe (Yamamoto: 1977). It is a type of religious phenomenon and if it were an axiomatic system, it would be termed a “Shinto axiom” (Sakata: 1975). No one in the group reasonably thinks about the problem due to peer pressure.

IV. Japanese leadership and middle-level managers

In relation to peer pressure, we indicate other two beliefs about Japanese justice.

1) The decision taken by everyone is correct.

2) The political leader is one of the equal members in the group, and a strong leadership is not necessary.

The first belief demonstrates that the Japanese do not accept the idea of God and the absolute truth as observed before.

The second belief 2) indicates that the Japanese dislike a strong political leader. In Japan’s history, the emperors have acted as spiritual governors rather than dictators. Even the Japanese warriors (samurais) disliked a strong ruler as soon as the war was over. If a dictator ruled Japan, he would be killed by his men just like Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). In the Edo period, the feudal lord was confined to a room in the castle, where he acted arbitrarily without consultation. The safety and existence of a group should be the highest priority. In Japan, the weaker the leader of a group is, the more popular he is. At first sight, the Japanese system appears democratic, the opposite of a totalitarian system. In Japanese history, however, there have been many people who have had complete control over an organization but not as strong leaders. We intend to refer to other two points at the end of this paper.

IV.1. Political leaders and authority

All over the world, it is not rare to distinguish power from authority. In Japan, while the emperor was the highest authority on spirituality, the political power was held by the Fujiwara family (Heian Period, 794–1185), the shogunate (1192–1868), and the Meiji Restoration leaders (Meiji Period, 1868–1912).

In general, the emperors have continued as religious-spiritual authority without seeking worldly power. The family tree of the Japanese Imperial Family dates back to the mythological age. Japanese Emperors have been akin to priests who prayed to the gods during the mythological age.

The political leaders took official jobs within the central government. But, decision-making is neither an act of the leaders nor of the political fixer. This is the next point.

IV.2. The omnipotence of middle-level managers

Japan also exhibits the universal and inevitable problem of “groupthink” in terms of social psychology, which not only discourages creativity or individual responsibility but also leads to false decision-making. As a result, no individual in the group feels responsible for their mistakes. Even if a mistake were serious, the person in charge feels as if it were a type of natural disaster.

In addition to the weakness of groupthink, the middle managers create an atmosphere. The weaker a leader of the group is, the stronger the mid-level manager becomes.

In Japan, a mid-level manager or a section chief occupies an intermediate position in management and often prepares a draft as the first action plan of the organization. If the leader had no power, the managers would consider themselves as being omnipotent and would tyrannize the organization. When the atmosphere was dominant, even the emperor could no longer resist it.

This is one of the ways in which the Japanese ultra-nationalism and militarism came into existence. The Japanese atmosphere with strong peer pressure is apt at causing groupthink. It has been fatal in the political field, and it will also be so in the future.

These signify the Japanese behavioral patterns in organizations. They work beyond the rule of law in modern society, especially when the organization is in crisis.

There are various behavioral patterns in every society and culture. The Japanese cultural deviations need to be known before law and justice can be discussed. It is not easy to modify Japanese behavioral patterns. In any case, understanding how we behave during crises is the first step of liberation from the spell of them. I hope this study will assist in discussing the problems that we intend to address in future studies.

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