Tatemae and Honne: A Study of moral relativism in Japanese culture.

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Moral Relativism in Japanese Culture

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Japan

Introduction

Moral relativism has been one of the main issues in developmental psychology of morality (Kohlberg,1971; Turiel,1974 ; Fishkin,1984). Recently, Kohlberg (1984) states with reference to Fishkin's study, " Subjectism and relativism will be metaethical positions found in historical and cultural conditions of low consensus on any basic moral norms or on any metaphysical or religious foundation for moral belief." (Kohlberg, p 440). Although his conception may interpret the most of moral relativism of adolescents in some cultures, the author addresses some questions concerning the effects of cultural beliefs of the moral world on the relativism; are there some cultural beliefs which may bring and support some kinds of moral relativism ? , if they exist, what kinds of cultural beliefs are they ? and what kinds of relativism do the beliefs lead to ?

The reason why the author, a Japanese psychologist, raises these questions is that Japanese morality has been characterized as relativistic one, and at the same time it is described as the one demanding members to conform to the cultural standards or the group norms in some effective ways. Given these statements, Japanese culture would come to be the culture in which high consensus on the morality could be found but they would hold relativistic morality in the same time. Thus, at the first glance Japanese morality can not be explained by the explanation of relativism by Kohlberg. The author suggests that some kind of cultural conceptions of moral world may bring peoples a kind of moral relativism. To show and examine the statements, a kind of moral relativism, which is prevailing in Japanese culture and may be called as "domain relativism", is introduced in the first place. Then the cultural concepts of "Tatemae" and "Honne", which may bring or at least support the kind of relativism are described. Finally, the problems in moral education caused by the relativism are discussed with reference to a preliminary study concerning the concepts.

Brief definition of moral relativism in the paper

The issue of moral relativism has been discussed in the fields of philosophy, social antholopology, psychology, etc. (Frankena,1973; Meiland and Krausz,1982; Kohlberg,1971).   Before our discussion, the author should show a general definition of moral relativism in order to limit our discussion. The relativism may be defined as the belief which implies the following three propositions.

(a) The basic moral norm(s) is varied with X.

   The statement excludes the case that there are common basic principles but the situational judgments vary with X caused by the different situational conditions.

(b) The moral judgments to a situation, which derived from the moral principles, may be inconsistent according to X.

(c) There is no rational way to judge which moral judgment is morally right among them.

   The value or the content of the variable X can be "individual", "group", "culture", etc.. According to the content of X, the moral relativism is classified to "moral subjectivism", "cultural relativism" etc.. Also, the variable of X can designate " moral domains" across individuals. For example, a Japanese university student mentioned in our interview:

   "If you want me to tell what we should do, my answer is that we should do it, but if you want me to tell you real feelings as a human being, my answer is No ".

   The response illustrates the position of domain dependent relativism; the moral domain of duty and morality of natural feelings.

   Types of moral relativism suggested as Japanese morality

   Japanese morality has been characterized as moral relativism by some Western Scholars (Benedict,1946 ; Reishauer,1977 etc.). However, their descriptions of the Japanese relativism seem to be compounded by at least the following two types of relativism.

   The first type of relativism may be rather called as particularism or situation dependent morality ; the position that moral rightness depends on particular conditions of situation. The position may be illustrated by the following statements in the chapter titled "relativism" of Reishauer's book of Japanese culture ;

   " ... there can be no doubt that the Japanese on the whole do think less in terms of abstract ethical principles than do Westerners and more in terms of concrete situations and human feelings " (Reishauer,1977, p140.).

   In regard to the situational factors, some research suggest the particular relationships between persons in situations affect moral obligations in Japan (Naito et al. 1990, etc.).

The second type of moral relativism is the position that moral rightness or validity of moral decision making depends on each moral domain which is separated and assigned their own intrinsic criterion. The relativism may be well illustrated in the mile stone study of Japanese culture by Benedict (1946). She suggests that Japanese people make a distinction of moral realms so that the moral adequacy may be judged in the each domain independently. For example, a same moral act may be judged in the domain of "Giri" (obligations to others in formal sense), and at the same time judged in another moral domain of " Ninjo " (in the viewpoint of natural feelings of caring for others).

As a result, the possible conflicts between moral values may not be interpreted as a logical inconsistency in a single domain. Rather, it may be interpreted as a conflict between two distinct domains like a conflict between a economical point of view and a ecological point of view. In the most of cases they may produce psychological conflicts between the domains like natural feelings and rational judgments.

In this paper, the author focuses on the latter type of relativism, the domain relativism, while it is plausible that the position can be the bases of the first kind of relativism in the way that each situation requires judgment in a different moral domain.

Concepts of "Tatemae" and "Honne" in Japan

Recently, some cross-cultural psychologists have focusedon the cultural concepts and suggest the ways in which these cultural concepts affect the conceptions of morality and the social interactions (Shweder et al.,1987; Yang and Ho, 1988 etc.).

Japanese peoples frequently use some paired words which define the social world to some distinct areas in moral judgments ; the public and the private, "Omote (outside part)" and "Ura (backside part)", "Tatemae" and "Honne" etc.. it is plausible that the conceptions may be used in understanding the moral world as a metaphor. The concepts have be paid attention by some Japanese psychologists and sociologists, because the words are used frequently in discussing about moral problems by Japanese peoples(Masuhara, 1984; Doi, 1973, 1986).

The author introduces Japanese conception of "Tatemae" and "Honne", which may bring and keep a kind of relativism, that is, the domain relativism. Sugiyama-Lebra (1976) states about the concepts briefly ; "'Honne' means one's natural, real, or inner wishes and proclivities, whereas 'Tatemae' refers to the standard, principle, or rule by

which one is bound at least outwardly." (Sugiyama-Lebra,1976, p136). On the base of the distinction Japanese people seems to think that "adults" should understand the both sides of other peoples and express relevant side in situations(Orihashi,1980).

However, it is problematic whether the kinds of dualism is a culture specific phenomena or not, although the most of Japanese sociologists regard the phenomena as characteristics of Japanese morality by their daily observations of Japanese behaviors. For example, it is plausible that the kind of dualism may be held by the peoples in the cultures where the two distinct moral systems exist by some cultural conditions.

While, some researchers point the cultural difference concerning the dualism. For example, Hall (1986) says, " ....In Japan, the two [Tatemae and Honne] are irrevocably linked in people's minds, ... In the West we know about Honne, which deals with people's true motives, but we must pretend that it does not exist..." (Hall,1986, p. 9). His statements suggests that there may be the difference among cultures in the attitude to the gap between "Tatemae" and "Honne".

With respect to the origin of the concepts, Reishauer (1977   ) suggests that the conception may stem from the old Chinese distinction of the world; "Yang" which literally means a place get sunshine and "Ying" which means a place get no sunshine. It should be noted that the distinction does not necessarily correspond to the distinction between the good and the bad. Rather the world is thought to function in the balance of the power of the two sides.

   Implications of the Conception to the Moral Relativism and Some Features of Morality

The conception of "Tatemae" and " Honne" and the other similar conceptions may bring some kind of moral phenomena in Japanese morality. In this section the author points some phenomena of Japan in considering the relation to the conceptions.

Essentially, the paired concepts provide a way to the domain relativism for understanding and discussing about moral problems. They could imply following phenomena in moral development and morality.

First, the concepts of domain relativism bring the idea of balance between moral domains rather than logical integration by some higher order principles in developmental process. The next instance may illustrate the understanding of moral values in the double structure. A Japanese university student responded to Heinz dilemma used in the Kohlbergian approach. The answer may be scored by 3/4, because

of its intermediate nature of stage 3 and 4.

---Should Heinz steal the drug ?

" In taking the social point of view and also you want me to say "Tatemae", the laws should not be broken in order to maintain the society. Because, societies will exist by the members who intend to obey social rules. However, if I were a husband it would be another problem. The problem will come to be the relation between Heinz and his wife."

---When you were asked to say "Honne" about the problem by a familiar people, what would you answer ?

"It is a very difficult problem.   If Heinz loves his wife,

we can not blame his stealing as human beings, because it is come from human nature of caring " (a male university student).

The answers did not show the orientation to integrate the interpersonal relations from the "viewpoint of society". He understood the morality of "society as a whole" (stage 4 in Kohlberg 's stage) but he accepted it as a matter of another domain from that of the interpersonal relations (Stage 3).

Second, it is interesting to suggest that the concepts may provide a framework to accept the two moral orientations of justice and care. Recently, Gilligan (1982) suggests the two moral orientations and their underlying concepts of self and morality ; the justice orientation and relation-based morality. The problem addressed is whether the two orientations can coexist in a mind, if possible, how they are held in a mind. It is plausible that Japanese people hold the two orientations in the way of the domain relativism; the justice orientation as the domain of "Tatemae" and the caring and love orientation as the "Honne". In the manner they hold the two orientations in each mind avoiding the logical inconsistency.

Third, in contrary to the fact that Japanese morality is characterized as relativism by some researchers, general principle or virtues can be also found especially in social contexts. For example, the general principles or virtues can be found in the traffic slogan and the Constitution of Japan etc.. Then, we may raise a question ; how do the Japanese people hold the general moral norms and situational ethics in same time ? The author suggests that the second type of relativism prepares to accept the incongruence between them.

However, it should be noted that the domain relativism tends to bring

psychological conflicts between the domains and the idea that the conflict can not be resolved by logical arguments but only the subtle sense of balance. A university student's answer to the questionnaire may illustrate the psychological conflict between the "Tatemae" and "Honne";

--- There is a opinion that it is natural that we hold both "Honne" and "Tatemae" in the mind and we must make differential expression of them. What do you think of this opinion ? "

"I feel sad but we should accept the two in order to live in the society. However, if I could, I want live according to "Honne"."

The distinctions may affect moral education. The author will change the attention to Japanese moral education in the next section.

Implication to Japanese Moral Education

When we suppose the domain specific relativism as the Japanese morality and also one of the goals of moral socialization, what kinds of moral education should be needed and do the schools, family and community now function to foster the Japanese morality sufficiently ?

First, the dualism seems to brings rather problems in moral education in Japan. The moral education classes set in the Japanese curriculum have been criticized as too idealistic and bring boredom to students (Usami, 1987). In considering the domain relativism in Japanese culture, we can easily understand why the students feel boredom in the moral education classes in Japan. In the most of the classes only the "Tatemae" are presented to the students, so the students would feel boredom, because they may understand gaps between the ideal and the actual situations. The students may feel rather necessity to learn how to treat the "Tatemae" and "Honne" in their interaction with others in the society.

Second, the family and community, which have chances to teach informal and traditional morality, are weakening their functions of moral socialization (Shimizu,1983). It means that the opportunity to learn the situational decision makings or how to balance the "Honne" and "Tatemae" in actual situations is decreased. It is plausible that in the conditions the students learn the principles or "Tatemae" but have a few opportunities to learn the practical morality. As a matter of fact, "meism", moral subjectivism or relativism has been pointed as the problem of children and adolescents in recent Japan (Ministry of Education,1989). Assuming the situations in Japan, the

status of the concepts of "Honne" and "Tatemae" is a complex one in adolescents' morality. In the conditions, the author set tentative and working hypotheses for a preliminary study. First, Japanese society demands the "adult" members to accept the dualism in order to hold the main value of social harmony. Second, the adolescents know that in order to adapt to the society they should accept the conception as "adults". Third, the adolescents do not have confidence in behaving in the society, because such a kind of moral interactions are not taught in moral education in school settings and family and community in recent years. Thus, some students may feel moral skepticism on Japanese moral system, that is, moral relativism.

A primary study of status of the concepts of "Tatemae" and "Honne"

In this part of the paper, the author presents a preliminary study, which was design to investigate the status of the concept of "Tatemae" and "Honne" in Japanese university students. The main purpose of the study was to show the relations among the student apathy, the attitude to the dualism of "Tatemae" and "Honne".

Method

Subjects:

The subjects were 96 undergraduate students of Keio University in Tokyo, including an equal number of males and of females. The subjects were given one set of questionnaires, consisting of the following items, in a 90-minute class on Educational Psychology.

Measures:

Four main measures were included in the questionnaire;

A. Apathy scale,

B. Questions to tap the attitude toward the differential

expression of Tatemae and Honne, and

C. Questions concerning relativism.

D. Kohlberg's Moral Stages("Heintz" Dilemma" and "Joe's

Promise")(Kohlberg, et al,1983)

A. The apathy scale: This was made up of both items taken from The Apathy Scale

(The Prime Minister's Office, 1981) and newly constructed items. It consisted of 14 items with a 5-point scale each. As a result of a factor analysis, three factors were found to make up the simple structure: these first three factors were named "personal apathy," "social alienation1," and "social alienation2" respectively. The apathy scale was divided into three subscales by the values of the factor loadings. The three subscales and their items were shown in Table 1.

The analysis was conducted with these three subscales as independent variables.

B. Questions about Tatemae and Honne: the questions were as follows.

B-1. Cognition about "Honne" and "Tatemae" ; "As you know the terms "Tatemae" and "Honne", in formal situations (for example, discussions between strangers) "Tatemae" is the only "right answer", although most people hold a different opinion as Honne as a fact. Do you think that the opinion is true or not ? " (3 multiple choice answers were offered; "Yes", "No", "D.K.").

B-2 (T-H). Attitude to differential use of them ; The question inquired as whether the subjects would affirm the differential expression of Tatemae and Honne in free answered form i.e., "There is a opinion that it is natural that we hold both Honne and Tatemae in the mind and we must make differential use of them. What do you think of this opinion ? "

Because 78.1% of the subjects answered "yes" to B-1 question, this item was omitted from the cross analysis. The answers to the second question (free answer type) were finally classified into three categories, "positive attitude" (P), defined as chose responses which insisted upon the rightness of the differential expression use of "Tatemae" and "Honne" ("It's right, and we must make this distinction"), "passive-positive response" (Pp), defined as those responses which denied the rightness of the distinction but which expressed a sense of its necessity (eg. "It's not right, but we cannot help make this distinction"), and "negative response" (N), defined as those responses which denied both the rightness and the necessity of the distinction ("It's not right, and we should deny this distinction"). The responses were coded into the three categories by the author in the form of masking. For a reliability check, another psychologist coded 30 randomly sampled responses and gained a 93.3% inter-judges agreement. The results of the sorting of answers into categories was as follows; The distributions of the response of P, Pp and N were 38.5%, 25.0% and 36.5% respectively and no sex difference was found in the distribution.

C. Relativism : General questions about two types of relativism were included, cultural relativism and personal or subjective relativism (3 choice scale for answers). The questions were as follows.

C-1. Personal relativism: "Morals and values are subjective matters, and differ from person to person, so we cannot say that 'You should do something'. Do you agree with this opinion or not?

C-2. Cultural relativism: "There is opinion that morals and values are different in different cultures, so that even if an act is correct in our society we cannot say that same act is correct in other societies. Do you agree with this opinion or not ?".

Results and Discussion

The results of the research were summarized as follows. The subjects who held a positive attitude towards the differential expression of "Tatemae" and "Honne" (group P) get higher "social alienation scores1" than those in the passive response group(Pp) and the negative response group(N) ($t=2.33$, $df=59$, $t=2.72$, $df=70$ for each). They also received higher scores for "social alienation 2". ($t=3.59$,$df=.70$). However, on the subscale of personal apathy, the student who showed negative attitude to differential expression of "Tatemae" and "Honne" tended to lead to higher apathy scores or lower one than the subjects who get intermediate scores ($\chi^2=7.01$, $p<.05$).

The tentative interpretation of these findings is as follows. The students who approve the dualism of "Tatemae" and "Honne" may accept the idea that the society could function on the bases of the dualism but not logical arguments in a single domain. Thus, students, who may not feel enough confidence in treating the dualism outside of schools, may feel social alienation of their status. While the subjects who rejected the dualism may keep social commitment, but the some of them may feel helplessness in the actual society and the others may keep naive reliance on the society as the one functioning on the bases of justice and formal logical arguments.

However, it should be noted that close examination of subjects' free answers suggested the individual difference of cognition of the conception. Some students answered about their attitude to the conception in the case of concrete interaction, whereas the others thought the conception in the context of society such as a political world. Thus the conception may provide a general and broad cognition of morality but for more detail understanding of the functions of it, we need more precise framework for study.

The Relativism and Japanese Moral Education in Future

In general, moral education in Japan now has the tasks to foster the ability and morality of international interactions in the students now. There has been the information revolution by new media. It has brought Japanese peoples opportunities to interact with persons in foreign countries easily and to know foreign events in vivid way by TV network in short delay. In addition many peoples come to go to foreign countries for the purpose of business, travel, etc.. Given the situations, the conception of "Tatemae" and "Honne" in the Japanese has some problems. Although the style of communication itself may be useful for maintaining social and psychological harmony in homogeneous community, it will bring also some failures of communications to peoples from outside culture.

First, the communication or interaction based on the conception of "Tatemae" and "Honne" may not be easily acceptable to the peoples especially who hold the morality based on the overt statements or contracts. It is probable that some of foreign peoples can not understand the dualism so that the moral discussion may not function sufficiently like" a ideal speech acts" (Habermas,1977).

A female student suggested one of a direction of their morality to interact with foreign cultures in my interview with opportunistic tone.

---If you meet foreign peoples who do not accept the conception of "Tatemae" and "Honne", how do you talk with them ?   " In the case, first of all I should make my honesty to them so I will try to make them understand my honesty in any ways. I want to explain that the differential expression of "Tatemae" and "Honne" is rather based on humanity and honesty in Japanese context. I think that I may find some way to make foreign peoples to understand my honesty."(a female student).

Second, even if foreign peoples understand and accept the dualism, there may be a problem to infer the "Honne" from the situations. The persons to whom both "Tatemae" and "Honne" are expressed overtly are limited to the familiar person such as families, best friends and other closely related person. While the interaction between unfamiliar persons or foreign peoples tend to be conversations of "Tatemae" or formal statements. In theses cases "Honne" must be inferred from their overt statements and situations and so on.   However the peoples from foreign cultures may face with difficulty to infer the true mind, "Honne", of Japanese people.

Third, in addition, the conditions of closeness which determine the interaction

pattern of the Japanese become changing. For example, recently the concept of closeness of relationship seems to be changed in Japanese adolescents. In traditional society of Japan, the relationship of family was the prototype of relationship: a company as a family, a school as a family etc.. Once they joined to the company and so on, it meant that they became a member of the close relationship like a family. However, the recent adolescents tend to reject the deep commitment to the community. This is consistent with the fact that the young peoples who change their employment has increased in these years in Japan. They seem to seek for a new type of commitment and also new type of community to commit themselves.

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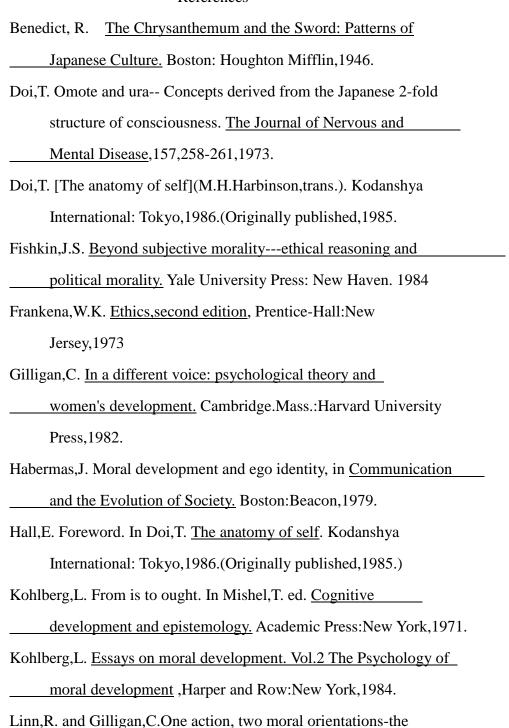
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Finally, Japanese moral education may have a general task. It is to foster international morality in Japanese students. We have some directions to achieve it. The one is to make them understood relationship among peoples in other cultures just according to Buddhist teachings ; everything in the world can exist in relation with others in some ways. The other is to teach them to interact with unfamiliar or "unrelated" persons in the way of rational discussions.

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