

The Ethics of Unity and Difference

Interpretations of Japanese Behaviour Surrounding 11 March 2011

TETSURO SHIMIZU

*Uehiro Division, Center for Death & Life Studies and Practical Ethics
Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology
The University of Tokyo*

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the theory of the ethics of unity and difference and illustrates it with behaviours observed in Japan around the March 2011 tsunami. First, it explains beliefs and behaviours in relation to ‘the ethics of unity’ and ‘the ethics of difference’. The former embodies attitudes of mutual support based on the belief that people are *companions*, while the latter attitudes of mutual non-interference based on the belief that people are *strangers* to each other. Second, it discusses the darker sides of both ethics, how deficiencies of each can be offset by the merits of the other and how the darker side of the ethics of unity appeared when the ethics of difference faded in tsunami-stricken areas. Third, a philosophical hypothesis suggests how these two ethics originated, evolved and developed darker sides from the motive of group survival, which was guided by intra-group and inter-group relationships. Finally, it explores behavioural discrepancies between the rational and emotional aspects of the ethics of unity highlighted by the adage of *Tsunami tendenko*.



INTRODUCTION

This paper presents my theory of the ethics of unity and difference and illustrates it with behaviours observed in Japan around the March 2011 tsunami. First, it

explains beliefs and behaviours in relation to ‘the ethics of unity’ and ‘the ethics of difference’. Second, it discusses the darker sides of both ethics, how deficiencies of each can be offset by the merits of the other and how the darker side of the ethics of unity appeared when the ethics of difference faded in tsunami-stricken areas. Third, a philosophical surmise suggests how these two ethics originated, evolved and developed darker sides from the motive of group survival, which was guided by intra-group and inter-group relationships. Finally, it explores behavioural discrepancies between the rational and emotional aspects of the ethics of unity highlighted by adage *Tsunami tendenko*.

TWO PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL BEHAVIOUR

My ‘ethics of unity’ and ‘ethics of difference’ emerged after observing how the Japanese behave when encountering each other. Ethical codes seemingly vary depending on people’s perception of the closeness of perceived relationships. For instance, friends and acquaintances are keen to help each other, even if they might be thought meddlesome or even self-sacrificing; whereas people whose relationship is not close exhibit mutual non-interference over mutual help behaviours. Most human interactions involve relationships that are neither intimate nor distant, and people’s behaviour falls between extremes.

After a lengthy observation, I formed the hypothesis that the observed behaviours originate from seemingly incompatible principles: the *ethics of unity* (or *togetherness*) and the *ethics of difference*. The former embodies attitudes of mutual support based on the belief that people are *companions* who share lives, values, understanding and feelings. The latter embodies attitudes of mutual non-interference based on the belief that people are *strangers* with unrelated lives, values, understandings and feelings. People gauge appropriate behaviour by assessing the distance between each other and blending the two ethics in proportion to that distance. For instance, I might wonder whether to advise a colleague about disreputable attire. My decision depends on whether our relationship is close or distant. If close, I speak; if not, I choose mutual non-interference.

Several points about ethical principles are relevant to the discussion. First, *Mill’s harm principle*, widely known from *On Liberty* (Mill 1859: 21–22), is the bedrock of ethical and legal codes worldwide. It states, ‘One may do anything freely, so long as

it brings no harm to others'. This principle is the foremost practical expression of mutual non-interference and the distinguishing aspect of the ethics of difference. 'Live and let live' expresses its literal meaning.

A second ethical principle is 'Help others who need your help' and might be termed the *principle of mutual help*. It is a prescription as well, but its imperative is different from the prescriptiveness of Mill's harm principle; the former is a *collective* prescription that prescribes mutual help for people as a group, whereas the latter is a personal one, which prescribes no harm for each member of a society. If I act in contravention to Mill's harm principle, I am ostracised, even if others act according to it. By contrast, if I chose not to help someone when I could have done so, I am not criticised, provided someone else helped him. Nevertheless, if it is known that I never or seldom help others in need, I will likely be criticised by my peers for not respecting the principle. The principle of mutual help is fundamental to the ethics of unity, and 'Live by helping each other' is its essence.

Third, Mill insisted that the harm principle is the only ethical principle and that other ethical codes can be reduced to or comprehended by it. Grounded in the ethics of unity and difference, however, I believe Mill's harm principle alone neither encompasses all ethical codes nor satisfies ethical common sense. The principle of mutual help must complement it.

Fourth, the *illocutionary* forces (Austin 1975: 148–57) of Mill's harm principle and the principle of mutual help vary with the relationships of people involved. If our relationship is remote, the prescriptive, or *exercitive*, force of Mill's harm principle is strong and we feel as if we are coerced to observe it strictly; while in case of a close relationship, the force of the harm principle is weaker and we occasionally think we are permitted to cause annoyance or mild harm to our colleagues, expecting their tolerance. By contrast, in remote relationships, the prescriptive force of the principle of mutual help is weak and we feel as if it is a kind of recommendation; while in closer relationships, it is stronger and we consider it a personal prescription, thinking that 'I, and not others, have to help a certain person'.

Finally, the ethics of unity and difference coexist in society and constitute a fundamental social structure. Liberals seek to balance them, whereas libertarians stress the latter and relocate the obligation for mutual support from the social to the private domain. The balance between the two also differs between countries and cultures.

DEFECTS OF THE TWO ETHICS

In blending the ethics of unity and difference, the Japanese ethical system counterbalances the defects of one with the merits of the other. The ethics of unity emphasises an attitude of mutual support, a cooperative intent grounded in the perception that people share important similarities. This description hints at its defects. First, it promotes meddlesomeness. People undertake behaviours that they believe benefit people they care for but ignore the preferences of those people because the group must be united in its preferences. Second, and in contrast, the ethics of unity may sacrifice unwilling persons for the group. Third, it may ostracise ‘the odd one out’ as insistence on group uniformity excludes those who seem different.

The ethics of difference are noted for mutual non-interference and the belief that people are strangers. Accordingly, it is unlikely that people would assist others if they observed only the ethics of difference. Human interactions would be *give-and-take* propositions. Reciprocity would dominate behaviour, and few would sacrifice themselves for others.

Adopting the ethics of difference offsets the defects of the ethics of unity and *vice versa*, for the two are complements. Normally, the former’s live-and-let-live spirit functions alongside the latter’s cooperative spirit. People try to cooperate with others in daily life and generally tolerate those who think and act differently. In a crisis, however, the balance between the two ethics may collapse. One or the other dominates, and the defect of the dominant ethic emerges. I witnessed that occurrence in the aftermath of 11th March 2011.

WHEN THE ETHICS OF UNITY DOMINATED

The seacoast district near my home in Sendai, the largest city in the northeast district of Japan’s main island, suffered extensively from the tsunami following the 11th March 2011 earthquake. After 11th March, Japanese media promoted nationwide cooperation to assure the survival and reconstruction of disaster-stricken areas and Japan as a whole; but Sendai’s residents had been helping each other long before the campaign, sharing water, kerosene, boiled rice, canned foods and other necessities. Little self-centred behaviour was evident, and Japanese media reported that foreign countries were applauding the behaviour of the Japanese in disaster-stricken areas.

However, the cooperative spirit underlying the ethics of unity had a dark side.

For example, as reported in *Asahi Shinbun* (a Japanese newspaper) on the morning of 27th March 2011, inland resorts invited refugees in evacuation centres near the disaster area to stay with them. Some accepted the invitations, albeit reluctantly. One elderly woman regretted leaving while others remained and expressed hope of living again at the centre when she returned to salvage her house. However, one left-behind refugee replied, 'I would not like them to come back here again and stay; they left here and abandoned us.' In another example, a relief volunteer told me that many who had suffered considerably from the tsunami resented—and discriminated against—those who suffered only slight damage.

I argue that victims' sense of—or desire for—unity prompted both behaviours. In the darker instances, the will for unity expressed itself by excluding people who differed from the majority—'the odd man out.' Admittedly, the crisis required a cooperative spirit for survival and reconstruction, but people might have done better had they observed the edict 'Live and let live'—that is, had they adopted the ethics of difference toward lesser-suffering fellow victims.

ORIGINS OF THE TWO ETHICS AND THEIR DEFECTS

Why do people act according to the ethics of unity and difference and blend their behaviour in proportion to the distance between them? How did each ethic acquire its distinguishing defect? To answer these questions, I offer a narrative about the development of ethics in human culture based on a philosophical surmise. I speculate that, starting as a genus of primates, humankind adopted ethical positions *logically* required for individual and groups of *Homo sapiens* that yielded ethical structures we now have.

(i) *Intra-group codes of behaviour*

Humans lived in groups long before our ancestors became *Homo sapiens*. In our primitive state, people lived by the *principle of group survival*, as we might easily conclude by observing other animals and even insects that dwell in groups. Groups promoted collaboration and mutual support as behaviours that enhanced group survival and rejected behaviours that did not. Where such rationality and behavioural disposition prevailed, groups survived; and we, their descendants, share it. We also share

their emotional confirmation from the unity and sharing that further enhance group survival. It joined a rational disposition toward group survival as constituents of a *cooperative spirit*.

Another emotional disposition advantageous to group-survival was *compassion*. Our group-dwelling ancestors, having acquired the disposition, became able to efficaciously help others in suffering or need. Moreover, a negative disposition arose alongside compassion: *hatred* for those who would not cooperate in group survival or assist others. That negative disposition sponsored an associated behaviour: ostracism. Ostracism became the origin of *guilt feelings*. These emotional dispositions were based not on reason but on intuitive apperception. Cooperative feelings, hatred for uncooperative members and feelings of guilt originated in humankind's encompassing perception of togetherness, not rational evaluation.

Among the defects of the ethics of unity, meddling and unwilling sacrifice come from its primary characteristic: homogeneity of thought and will inherent in group unity. By contrast, the 'odd-one out' comes from the constitution that the negative emotions seeking for cooperation are set in motion by an apparent heterogeneity, not by rational recognition of actual affairs.

Rational, behavioural and emotional dispositions advantageous for group survival were the germination of present-day ethical beliefs and behaviour alongside recriminations against the uncooperative and self-centred.

In my conjectural narrative, respect for the individual was not logically required for mutual supportiveness to secure group survival, but totalitarianism or communitarianism (they are indistinguishable in the primitive state) was required. Members need not have respected—might not have been aware of—companions' personal wills or preferences. Only the will and judgment of the group presided, which all were required to share.

Groups accept members to the extent they acknowledge the group's will. Thus, when one group member was in need, others would do what they thought best for him without seeking his consent, assuming he must consent to judgments that facilitate group unity. Individuality could not flourish in this situation.

Although I have presented the ethics of unity through a historical supposition, it plausibly explains Japanese behaviour following the earthquake and tsunami. The ethics of unity has crucial defects, and the ethical system we admit differs substantially from it. How, then, has our ethical system arisen from the ethics of unity? To answer, consider a second historical wellspring.

(2) *Inter-group codes of behaviour*

Along with intra-group relationships, groups interact with other groups by observing *rules of demarcation* and *visiting courtesies*. For example, consider neighbouring groups that occasionally fought over territory but generally coexisted peacefully by acknowledging the boundaries of each other's domains. In following *rules of demarcation*, they practised mutual non-interference in others' affairs, including mutual nonaggression—literally '*Live and let live*'. Rules of demarcation eventually became dominant among humans because they promoted peaceful coexistence and mutual survival.

Second, trade is an inter-group activity, and when one group's traders visited another group, they honoured its culture under the adage '*When in Rome, do as the Romans do.*' Conversely, they respected, or tolerated, cultural practices of foreigners among them unless they were incompatible with their own. In this way, different groups again practised mutual non-interference. Inter-group relationships were characterised not by mutual assistance but by willingness to *live and let live*. That is how reciprocity between groups should be understood.

From the preceding description of inter-group demarcation and visiting, it can be concluded that the ethics of difference originates in inter-group relationships in which people recognise others as different from themselves.

(3) *How have the two ethics comingled?*

We have examined discrete ethics that apply to intra-group and inter-group relationships, but nothing could force their comingling because people inevitably adopted one or the other once they realised another person belonged to their group or another. In other words, they decided whether an intra-group or inter-group relationship governed their encounter. Today, by contrast, we comingle the two ethics in complex cultural proportions.

Imagine several groups living on an island, sharing related languages and cultures and trading together, but also trading with distant groups having unrelated languages and cultures. This situation prompts feelings of unity with fellow islanders. The ethics of difference and unity governs their behaviour with fellow islanders somewhat. Conversely, they feel different to non-islanders, and the ethics of difference governs their behaviour. This illustrates a case in which the ethics of unity and of difference are concurrently at work.

Nations arose. Their inhabitants developed a shared identity. Within nations, groups resemble each other or differ, and the ethics of unity and difference inter-mix intricately. As we contemplate the concept of humankind—a global relationship among all persons—we feel some human commonalities, and somewhat observe the ethics of unity through public services or international aid. Yet simultaneously we perceive our differences and act according to the ethics of difference, maintaining the live-and-let-live attitude that shuns dominating others.

At the other extreme, the family is the core unit in most cultures. It has been difficult for inter-group ethics to penetrate families or to overcome intra-group ethics because there has been little logical motivation. In the West, the ethics of difference obtruded into families under the values of individuality, personality and autonomy. It has been introduced somewhat in Japan, but the ethics of unity still presides in daily life. In other words, the proportion between the ethics of unity and the ethics of difference varies among cultures.

DISCREPANCY BETWEEN DICTATES OF REASON AND EMOTIONAL CONTEXTS: TSUNAMI TENDENKO

I report a final interpretation derived from my encounters in tsunami disaster areas: a dilemma arising from the ethics of unity supported by rational and emotional human dispositions. *Tsunami tendenko* is an old adage in northeast mainland Japan's Tohoku District, which was overwhelmed by the tsunami. *Tendenko* denotes a context in which people act in their own interests disassociated from others. *Tsunami tendenko* is advice about behaviour. It means 'When the tsunami approaches, escape as quickly as possible without regard for others'. Encoding wisdom from millennia of experience, it declares you will neither succeed nor survive if you try to help others as a tsunami approaches. Yet Japanese media reported many instances of self-sacrifice as the tsunami approached. A home hospice nurse working under my doctor friend tried to move a bedridden patient to a higher floor and was overtaken by the tsunami. Many died giving in to their humane impulses to help others. On the other hand, many who saved themselves suffer 'survivor's guilt', believing they could have done more for others. Thus, ethical feelings accompany ethical thoughts.

Some interpret *Tsunami tendenko* as endorsing selfishness amid catastrophe, but its significance lies in promoting behaviour that promotes group survival. *Tsunami*

tendenko effectively declares ‘When the tsunami comes, saving yourself is the best you can do for your group and your individual colleagues’. It advises a rational choice to preserve your group by saving yourself. As such, it serves the ethics of unity.

However, people defied that rational choice. Perhaps they did not comprehend that such a devastating tsunami was approaching so rapidly. More likely, the cooperative spirit and compassion that accompany the ethics of unity moved them to help others. Although impulses towards mutual help generally serve group survival, they threaten it during catastrophes. That *Tsunami tendenko* remains a contemporary expression indicates how strongly the emotional context surrounding the ethics of unity has functioned as a drag. Here the dictates of reason and the emotional context conflict. The former shows a rationally correct choice based on the ethics of unity; the latter shows the emotional correctness of the ethics of unity. The dilemma illustrates the discrepancy that is inherent in the ethics of unity.

CONCLUSION

As presented in this paper so far, the theory of the ethics of unity and difference explains at least ethical beliefs and behaviours of Japanese people fairly well, especially those beliefs and behaviours surrounding the huge earthquake and devastating tsunami. Each of the two ethics has defects in itself and both complement each other. Especially, some defects of the ethics of unity originate from the discrepancy between their rational and emotional bases. Such a situation is appropriately illustrated with the plausible conjecture concerning the development of human ethics. Although instances in this paper are taken only from Japanese behaviours, the theory, in my opinion, can be applied to universal human beliefs and behaviours in human relationships. In fact, using this theory, I have already interpreted ethical affairs in medical activities (Shimizu 2010: 152–66, 188–99, Shimizu and Aita 2012: 21–24, 31–32), but unfortunately in Japanese. In English, based on the theory, although without mentioning it, I have argued why ‘respect for human beings’ rather than ‘respect for autonomy’ is appropriate as ethical principles in medicine (Shimizu 2012: 330–34). Aita applied the theory to explain the sense of fairness of the Japanese concerning the family-oriented priority organ donation policy (Aita 2011: 489–91, Aita 2012). However, there remain many other issues to which the theory can be well applied. I will address these issues in another study.

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