

Living in A Great Land of *Kotokushin*
(Public Morality)

Foreword

Generally speaking, we call a person with socially respectable character or with superior human quality a man of virtue or a virtuous man. However, I see no mark of absolute value branded on such personal reputation, for the recognition of “virtue” is more or less situational, depending on the objective or significance of each occasion.

In my view, different people with different geographical, religious or other backgrounds have different standards of virtue. Thus, there always exists someone reputed for great virtue in any confrontational situation even over irreconcilable racial or religious conflicts. Thus, we always find people with extremely opposing views of justice in any racial dispute or religious war but each considered virtuous in their own ways. This contradiction stems from the fact that there exists no unified measure or standard for virtues.

In this regard, Daniel C. Russell aptly refers to two different positions on virtue in his “The Cambridge Companion to Virtue Ethics.” One is Mencius’s view that virtue is a mark of excellence about human fulfillment, the other being Wang Yangming’s view that virtue is a social inclination toward better communication with fellow human beings, while Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) says:

Autonomy of the will is that property of it by which it is a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition). ... But that the principle of autonomy in question is the sole principle of morals can be readily shown by mere analysis of the conceptions of morality.

(from “Fundamental Principles of the
Metaphysics of Morals”)

Then, we also note that in his “An Inquiry into the Good,” Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) refers to the great Greek philosopher as follows :

“Aristotle said virtue is found in the middle. For example, courage is between rudeness and cowardice, or thrift between parsimony and wastefulness.”

The above are just a few examples of many views or arguments expressed by scholars and thinkers in the East and in the West. Before going on any further, let me make it clear that in my text here, I am set to discuss “公德 (public virtue or social morals)” from a different viewpoint than those. So, strictly speaking, what is meant by the ethical term, “公德心 (*kotokushin*)” (civic virtue or public spirit), differs from what is generally or collectively dealt with as “virtue.” As for its English rendition, it can simply be Romanized as “*kotokushin*” or in my personal lexicon, it could be translated as “unbiased harmony,” though it may sound rather awkward.

Anyway, I am fully convinced that it is of universal value for humanity to acquire *kotokushin*, as I believe that the basic idea of public virtue signifies “和 (wa)” (harmony) for mankind and that this “wa” embodies moral excellence especially for Japan as an integral element of our national identity, transcending the ubiquitous conflicts among people. “Wa,” in fact, is the prime idea upheld in Article 1 of the Seventeen Article Constitution promulgated by Prince Shotoku (574~622) in 604, which became the first

constitution of Japan and as such the ethical background for the Japanese people. So I think “wa” is one essential asset of the social capital of Japan, drawing on the national spirit passed down in Japan over the generations. Thus, the tenderness or the hospitality of Japanese people, as amply recognized by foreigners, is closely related to this spirit of “wa” (harmony).

Meanwhile, I understand that among ethics practiced so far, there exist certain deeds and thoughts that are to be recognized as public virtues or can be categorized as such, without being defined as public virtues. So when we talk about public virtue in terms of ethics, we must keep in mind we cannot deny the fact there have been moral principles or tenets in each era and each chapter of human history. Namely, there exist ethics of feudalism, ethics of capitalism, ethics of socialism, or even ethics of religious supremacists, with no standard of ethics shared by all.

In addition, there are some people who claim for the apparent cause of continuity of the collective human ethics that their own or their group’s ethical principles are the only legitimate and permanent ones in the world. That’s an undeniable reality facing the world even in our present

age. As Protagoras (BC500~BC430) once stated in Greece, “Man is the measure of all things,” it is undeniable that ethics exists for each group or aggregate of people in the recognition of its own standard or yardstick. Infected thus with such a contradiction, the international community today puts lofty expectations on man for building a sustainable human society, which is more or less the actual state of things as we see it today.

Supposing we take a bird’s-eye view of the present situation in East Asia, we see many things in common to Japan and the neighboring countries, but there exist quite a few serious dissimilarities, too. As a good point in case, Japanese citizens behaved so discreetly and resolutely in the aftermath of the Great Eastern Japan Earthquake (on March 11, 2011), joining forces to cope with the chaos in the spirit of cooperation, each person not losing self-control, that this collective action moved and impressed the international community as our remarkable national identity. And indeed, we can be proud of this wholesome identity to the world as a superb national asset, well based on the “wa” and “*kotokushin*” instilled in the hearts of Japanese people for generations, against the contrastive

international environment tainted with abominable events in various places, triggered by grave acts of egoism, populism, fast-spreading nationalism, or expansionism.