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Educational Ideals in Pre and Post-War Japan: From Imperial Subject to Deweyan Democratic Citizen¹

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of educational philosophy and ideals in Japan. Japan's recent educational reforms have been criticized as a "return to imperialism" or as "undemocratic." In order to clarify the content of ideas/ideologies like "imperialist education" and "democratic education," this essay examines the relationship between Japan's imperialist philosophy of education, as articulated in the *Cardinal Principles of Japan's National*

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Polity (1937), and democratic education, as represented by John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916). Usually, these two are considered to be opposed, with the former prevailing during Japan's imperialist expansion, and the latter prevailing after Japan's fall. However, this essay argues that while there are key differences between these imperialist and democratic philosophies of education, they do have their points of continuity. Thus, in order to pursue democratic education, it is necessary to criticize imperialist education without going overboard and criticizing the moral elements shared by both democracy and imperialism. This issue is relevant not only to Japan but to all Asian countries—like the Philippines—that are struggling to build their own forms of democracy.

Key words: *Kokutai, ethics of relation, ethics of education, solidarity*

Introduction

The slogan “Japan is back” has recently been making global news. This is due among other things to the economic improvements of the country, the Tokyo Olympics, the expanded capabilities of the Self-Defense Forces, and the increasing nationalism among both politicians and citizens.

Some countries see these improvements as a welcome sign of growth in a strong ally, but for some countries like China and Korea, these bring back bad memories and raise fears of the return of a militaristic, fascist Japan.

One lens through which to understand these phenomena is education. Extensive educational reforms do accompany the “return” of Japan. There are debates on how to make the Japanese education system (more) competitive, on remaking history textbooks to tell a story that can allow children to “be proud of their country’s past,” and on the move to make moral education part of the required national curriculum again—for the first time since it was banned by the occupying allied forces. Amidst these reforms, people both inside and outside Japan are voicing their concerns about the return of “imperialistic education” and the “failure of Japanese democracy.”

It is easy to bandy about terms like “imperialistic” or “fascist” or “undemocratic,” so long as these words point to vague feelings that remain unarticulated—allowing them to be used to stoke fears and various feelings of allegiance. But what is imperialistic education, really? And what is democratic education? I think the only way we can be critical of our own criticisms (to take a Deweyan phrase) is if we clarify what these terms really mean, how they are opposed, and what concrete changes might constitute a return to imperialistic education.

In this article, I wish to focus first on only the most abstract part of education—educational philosophy and ideals. I wish to focus on two texts: First is *Democracy and Education* by John Dewey, a book that became the bible for the democratization of Japanese education. Second is the *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*—technically a propaganda piece published by the Ministry of Education, but written by a committee composed of quite a few top-notch philosophers. This infamous book can be said to represent Japan’s imperialistic education.

By comparing and contrasting these two texts, I hope to show where precisely the differences lie, and where we might see a return to imperialism. But also, I wish to highlight some fundamental similarities that show how Japan sought a form of democracy that might have some continuity with their own culture. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the understanding, not only of Japan, but of the difficult relationship between democracy and nationalism in education in general—a problem that is relevant to many countries in Asia, particularly the Philippines.

1. Japanese Education and Dewey

Let me begin by introducing Japanese education (and the *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*), John Dewey, and their intersection.

Japanese education is one of the stars of the educational world, a consistent high-performer in international tests despite relatively low spending on education. Japan was once the apple of America's eye (see Ezra Vogel's *Japan as Number 1: Lessons for America*²). But with various problems, among them student psychological health, Japan is no longer the brightest star—Finland takes that spot—but Japan still remains a solid performer in the world of education.

The history of modern Japanese education is usually divided into three phases of reform. The first great reform was the attempt to modernize Japan in order to “catch up” with the western powers. Japan in the Meiji period borrowed much from France, Germany, and the United States (OECD,³ 181), but this quick modernization was met with strong conservative resistance (the culmination of which was the 1890 *Imperial Rescript on Education*), and the result of this clash was that modernization was restricted to western science and technology, with an attempt to maintain Japanese values.

In the aftermath of this clash, as the “Greater Japanese Empire” began to grow under the ideology of *wakon yōsai* (Japanese spirit, western techniques), the Ministry of Education published the *Cardinal Principles of the National*

² Ezra F. Vogel, *Japan as Number 1: Lessons for America* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1980).

³ OECD, *Lessons from PISA for Japan: Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education* (OECD Publishing, 2012).

Entity of Japan (*Kokutai no honji*, heretofore *Cardinal Principles*, 1937). Allow me to examine this book in some detail.

The *Cardinal Principles* was first drafted by Hisamatsu Sen'ichi, Professor of Japanese Literature at Tokyo Imperial University. It was then revised by a compilation committee of 14 professors, which included, among others, Watsuji Tetsurô, the most famous ethicist of Japan, and Ui Hakuju, who was then one of the greatest Buddhist scholars. The final rewrite was by Itô Enkichi, chief of the Bureau of Thought Control. It was published by the Ministry as a school textbook, studied, by teachers, that aimed to expound on the *Imperial Rescript on Education*. It was reprinted until 1943, and a total of 1.9 million copies were sold. (This gives a ratio of more than 1 book for every 40 people in the population then.) This propaganda piece joined Japan's march to war, the fate of which is well-known to all.

The second great reform was the attempt to democratize Japan. After Japan's defeat, many nationalist teachers were purged, the *Cardinal Principles* was banned by the occupying forces, and they created a new *Fundamental Law of Education* (1947) that focused on building a peaceful, democratic nation. Japan worked hard to catch up again with the west, both materially and spiritually (democracy, peace, human rights, individualization), and John Dewey's ideas played a key role here. But once again, this westernization met with a conservative backlash, resulting in a focus on economic

development alone (GNP-ism) and a slow return of conservative politicians.

The third great reform had to do with the “end of catch-up,” boldly declared in the 1980s. But with the end of this catching-up, Japan began to turn to its own issues. For a while, there was an attempt to make Japanese education kinder to pupils, to focus on individualization, creativity, and personal growth. They called this “*Yutori kyōiku*,” literally, education for leeway. But this met with a conservative backlash—a repeating pattern—with the Abe administration putting an end to *Yutori* in 2011, and an increasing focus on moral education and historical revisionism. This is where we are today.

John Dewey (1859-1952) needs little introduction. He was part of the golden age of American Philosophy, and along with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Jane Addams, and George Herbert Mead, was part of a movement called “classical pragmatism.” His influences included Georg Hegel and Charles Darwin, but he developed his own dynamic view of thinking to problems in psychology, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, socio-political philosophy, and education. His *Democracy and Education* was published in 1916 while he was at Columbia University. This book was to become one of his most well-known works. His overall influence was so sizable that historian Henry Steele Commager writes, “So faithfully did Dewey live up to his own philosophical creed that he became the guide, the

mentor, and the conscience of the American people; it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.”⁴

John Dewey visited Japan in 1919, but due to the conservative attitude of the time (it was latter half of the first great reform), his ideas made little impact. However, the tide would turn after the war, after the Neo-Confucians and Nativists who held sway in the imperial period were purged, and democracy ceased to be a bad word. In the 1950s, *Experience and Education* and *Democracy and Education* were translated to Japanese, the John Dewey Society of Japan was formed, and Dewey utterly dominated Japanese educational discourses. Even after the occupation forces left, Dewey remained as a critique of conservative forces who were threatening to return to Japanese politics and education.⁵ Today, Dewey is no longer as dominant as he once was, but his voice remains as a champion of democracy and critic of conservatism in both its political and economic forms.

⁴ Steven Fesmire, *Dewey* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

⁵ All details on Dewey in Japan are from Jeremy Rappleye, “Re-Contextualizing Foreign Influence in Japan’s Educational History: The (Re)Reception of John Dewey,” in *The Global Reception of John Dewey’s Thought: Multiple Refractions through Time and Space*, ed. Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jürgen Schriewer (New York: Routledge, 2012). One important point he makes is how Japan altered Dewey’s ideas as well, in order to suit their political and educational discourses. I will not address this complication here.

2. Dewey's Democratic Education

First, let us begin with democratic education, which is more familiar to many readers. What is democratic education? Of course there are many varieties of it, just as there are many varieties of democracy. But the most relevant understanding of democratic education for the purpose of our discussion here is that from the aforesaid *Democracy and Education* (1916) because of its systematic nature and almost biblical stature in post-war Japan. I will focus on the following aspects of this book: First, how does it see the value and place of education? Second, what kind of society does this education support? Third, how does this book depict morality and moral education?

2.1 *The Importance of Education* – First, *Democracy and Education* sets education as one of the most essential aspects of human social life. Dewey's view of human life has a Darwinian ring to it: "Life is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment. . . . Continuity of life means continual readaptation of the environment to the needs of living organisms."⁶ In this back and forth relationship between human communities and their environment, people learn various customs, institutions, beliefs, symbols—

⁶ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), 2.

culture, broadly speaking. This culture is the collective life of the community.

Dewey continues, “Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life. . . . Each individual, each unit who is the carrier of the life-experience of his group, in time passes away. Yet the life of the group goes on.”⁷ This shows a functionalist view of society and education, wherein through education, culture is communicated, and thus despite the limited life-span of individuals, collective life somehow endures.

This notion of “communication” has rich meanings for Dewey. “Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication.”⁸ Rather than seeing society as something that subsists in itself, and then antecedently perpetuates its subsistence by communication, he sees society as a *process* that is in itself identical with communication. Community is its communication, or as Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, its *communification*. Outside of this sharing, this living dynamic of connecting with others, there is no society.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 5.

He continues, “Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative.”⁹ Here we see the importance as well as the breadth of the idea of education. Education is the shaping that allows people to share in social life, and it spans from how parents raise their children, to learning on the playground, to formal schooling, to learning at work and informal settings, to connecting with each other in political practices, etc. Everything that connects people connects in a way that shapes the people involved—and is thus educative. In so far as human beings are relational, human beings are educators and students. And again, there is no community outside of communication, outside of this educative bond.

2.2 *Dewey’s View of Society* – However, despite the seeming breadth of Dewey’s notions of education and social life, there is a particular form of society that he espouses. We see this in Chapter VII, where Dewey examines different kinds of societies, both “good” and “bad.” He examines what they all have in common and tries to derive a standard, a crux of social existence from there:

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Now in any social group whatever, even in a gang of thieves, we find some interest held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?¹⁰

In communication, people connect with each other. But depending on the nature of this connection, their connection may be simple and superficial. The example he gives for this is a despotically governed state where people obey merely out of fear and the rulers and the ruled are fundamentally divided. In such a community, there is no real internal stimulus and growth, due to the tenuousness of personal connections.

Also, while the connection may be deep, as in a closely knit religious community, it can be closed off from other groups. However, this can be fatal for a group: “An alert and expanding mental life depends upon an enlarging range of contact with the physical environment. But the principle applies even more

¹⁰ Ibid., 96.

significantly to . . . the sphere of social contacts.”¹¹ Like an organism, a community can only learn and grow if it allows itself to come into contact with the outside, with other communities, with foreign ideas, etc. Dewey sees this growing interconnection as part of the flow of history, and criticizes closed communities as leading to “rigidity and formal institutionalizing of life, for static and selfish ideals within the group.”¹²

In contrast with these two models, he raises the democratic ideal.

The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy. The first signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups (once isolated so far as intention could keep up a separation) but change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, 99.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 100.

Dewey's idea of democratic society is one where there is a rich interconnection between people, many shared interests—economic, political, intellectual, cultural, religious, filial—and an openness to other groups and societies that allows for flexibility and growth. It is not a simple matter of universal suffrage. “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”¹⁴

2.3 *Morality and Education* – Dewey's view of ethics and morality is an outgrowth from this democratic ideal. For Dewey, moral action is carried out by the relational person via a continuum from the person's character, to his actions, to the effects upon his/her environment. He was strongly critical of any attempt to isolate merely one factor, as is done in the usual approaches to virtue ethics, deontology, and consequentialism.

For Dewey, moral education, as it is usually carried out, tends to be a strange combination of fragmentary approaches. Teachers work on the character and intentions of students. But at the same time, regardless of what character and intention calls for, students are required to heteronomously obey

¹⁴ Ibid., 101.

certain given rules and achieve certain things.¹⁵ The result is a loss of this original unity of moral life, and one is left with good intentions that cannot be carried out, good actions with no intention behind them or regard for consequence, and good consequences sought with no connection to character or action.

Part of this fragmentation of character, action, and consequence is the opposition between duty and interest. A person is required to act from duty and not personal interest. But if a person had no interest, why would he/she bother carrying out such an act? Again, this false dilemma arises from a failure to integrate duty and interest—to cultivate a personal interest in doing one's duty, to relish the value in unselfish action. Dewey's view of this "generous" integrated self is instructive:

- (i) The generous self-consciously identifies itself with the *full* range of relationships implied in its activity, instead of drawing a sharp line between itself and considerations which are excluded as alien or indifferent; (ii) it readjust and expands its *past* ideas of itself

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 406.

to take in new consequences as they become perceptible.¹⁶

With this, we see Dewey's idea of a *democratic citizen* and how it morally participates in a "democratic lifestyle"—it sees itself as fundamentally connected with others, it is flexible and allows these connections to grow and change, and it is integrated in that it flexibly seeks actions that can come out from its generous character and intentions to result in good consequences for this growing network of connections. This directly connects to his political ideal of democracy as a rich sense of interconnection within groups, and an openness and flexibility between groups.

While I cannot go into the details of the methodology of democratic education here, it is important to note that due to the above view of morality, Dewey saw all aspects of relational life as fundamentally moral:

Morals are as broad as acts which concern our relationships with others. And potentially this includes all our acts. . . . Morals concern nothing less than the whole character, and the whole character is identical with the man in all his concrete

¹⁶ Ibid., 409.

make-up and manifestations. To possess virtue does not signify to have cultivated a few nameable and exclusive traits; it means to be fully and adequately what one is capable of becoming through association with others in all the offices of life.¹⁷

Simultaneously, he saw all education as fundamentally moral education:

Discipline, culture, social efficiency, personal refinement, improvement of character are but phases of the growth of capacity nobly to share in such a balanced experience. And education is not a mere means to such a life. Education is such a life. To maintain capacity for such education is the essence of morals. For conscious life is a continual beginning afresh.¹⁸

Dewey's *Democracy and Education* is almost 500 pages long, and discusses different aspects of education and the curriculum in considerable depth. While I could not go into specifics, I think the above discussion shows the main features of Deweyan democracy: It sees human beings as fundamentally

¹⁷ Ibid., 415.

¹⁸ Ibid., 417.

relational, and tries to build rich interconnections through shared interests. The focus on education means that individuals are not solid monads but are shaped by and in turn shape others in “formative interaction.” Thus, it is a far cry from liberal, individualist forms of democracy, and is more communitarian in nature. Additionally, this is seen not just as a political arrangement but a way of life, inherently tied with *morality*. Therefore, it refuses the liberal-secular¹⁹ distinction between the “right” and the “good,” or between justice and morality. Rather, in political relationships and discussions on what is “right,” the “good” is always simultaneously at stake. This ties with a view of the good life—of life itself—as adaptive, experimental, and constantly changing with the times.

3. Imperial Education in the *Cardinal Principles*

Next, let me move on to the *Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*. “National Entity,” *kokutai* in Japanese, literally means “the body of the nation,” and points to this sense of Japan as an organic unity with its own

¹⁹ I use the word “secular” in the sense suggested by post-secularists like Talal Asad. I am thus referring to the assertion that religion is separate from politics, separating private belief from public justice. This is more often referred to as “religious neutrality.” Dewey was not a “secularist” in this sense. However, he was likely a secularist in the sense that he rejected the metaphysical leanings of religion altogether, and challenged them both in the public and private spheres.

characteristics. Just like democracy, there are many variants of this theory of *kokutai*, but the *Cardinal Principles* is the canonical, most widespread form.

The *Cardinal Principles* was written with the aim of expounding on and reinforcing the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, a short document decreed in 1890 that would become an object of ritual veneration in every school until the end of the war. (Until today, it remains on the altar of some Japanese people.) Let me quote the *Imperial Rescript* in full:

Know ye, Our subjects: Our Imperial Ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting and have deeply and firmly implanted *virtue*; Our subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have *from generation to generation* illustrated the beauty thereof. This is the glory of the fundamental character of Our Empire, and herein also lies the source of Our *education*. Ye, Our subjects, be filial to your parents, affectionate to your brothers and sisters; as husbands and wives be harmonious, as friends true; bear yourselves in modesty and moderation; extend your benevolence to all; pursue learning and cultivate arts, and thereby develop intellectual faculties and perfect moral powers; furthermore advance public good and promote common interests; always respect the

Constitution and observe the laws; should emergency arise, offer yourselves courageously to the State; and thus guard and maintain the prosperity of Our Imperial Throne coeval with heaven and earth. So shall ye not only be Our good and faithful subjects, but render illustrious the best traditions of your forefathers. The Way here set forth is indeed the teaching bequeathed by Our Imperial Ancestors, to be observed alike by Their Descendants and the subjects, infallible for all ages and true in all places. It is Our wish to lay it to heart in all reverence, in common with you, Our subjects, that we may thus attain to the same virtue.²⁰ [Emphases mine]

We can see several key features here that are highlighted in the *Cardinal Principles*: The moral foundation of human relationships, the relational view of persons (in different kinds and levels of community), the eternal and divine continuity of the Japanese people, and how education lies at the base of all of this.

The content of the *Cardinal Principles* can be roughly divided into two: A philosophical part (on ethics, politics, culture, and education) and a mythic part (on the sacred

²⁰ [Japanese] Ministry of Education, *Kokutai No Hongi: Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan*, trans. John Owen Gauntlett, ed. Robert King Hall (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 192.

history of Japan). The main focus of this paper is the *philosophical* side of the *Cardinal Principles*. Specifically, I will explore the following philosophical themes: First, Japan and modernity, second, the relationship between subjects and the nation, and third, culture and education.

3.1 Japan and Modernity – In the introduction and the conclusion of the *Cardinal Principles*, we get a glimpse of the difficult situation Japan was faced with at that time. On one hand, the authors acknowledge that modernization had contributed much to Japan. In “god-handed” Japan, the old cultures of China and India (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) fused with the modern cultures of Europe and America, allowing for Japan to break away from feudalism through the Meiji Restoration.²¹ But at the same time, the authors lament how the rapid absorption of western modernity resulted in a “cultural indigestion” so to speak.

The two main issues they criticize are individualism and abstract universalism, both of which, they claim, come from the “ideologies of the enlightenment.”²² They write, “Paradoxical and extreme conceptions, such as socialism, anarchism, and communism, are all based in the final analyses on

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² *Ibid.*, 52.

individualism . . . Now they are about to do away with traditional individualism, which has led to the rise of totalitarianism and incidentally to the upspringing of Fascism and Nazism.”²³

They argue that democracy, socialism, communism, anarchism, all western regime types are focused on the individual and maximizing the individual good. (The “individual” can mean an individual *person* or an individual *group*.) “As a result, there have arisen types of mistaken liberalism and democracy that have solely sought untrammelled freedom and forgotten moral freedom, which is service.”²⁴

This analysis is quite astute, I think, and is similar to Ian Shapiro’s point on how these regimes all share the “workmanship ideal” (what I make is mine, be it goods or community). The *Cardinal Principles* carries this analysis over to economic regimes such as laissez-faire capitalism and class warfare, which are extensions of individual or group egoism. (As a side note, I find their criticism of fascism and Nazism interesting, because many, even in Japan, see Japanese Imperialism as a form of fascism. Perhaps at least this version of *kokutai* ideology did not want to be fascist or totalitarian.)

²³ Ibid., 54.

²⁴ Ibid., 180.

Additionally, the authors criticized the idea of abstract universalism, arguing that people are not merely rational beings (in the philosophical or economic sense), devoid of context, thrown into the world in direct relation to desire, *logos*, or god. Rather, people are “correlated existences. That is to say, their existences are ordained by a national spirit based on history.”²⁵ They thus argue for a view of human life that is relational, contextual, and open. Consequently, this requires a more contextual, culturally particular view of morals, rather than moral universalism. Their criticism of international law²⁶ presages the various Confucian and Islamic counter-declarations to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.²⁷

How then should Japan respond to this stress of hyper-modernization? The response they called to however was not a simple retreat to nativism:

We must return to the standpoint peculiar to our country, clarify our immortal national entity, sweep aside everything in the way of adulation, bring into being our original condition, and at the same time *rid ourselves of*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 180-181.

²⁷ For more on this, see William M. Sullivan and Will Kymlicka, eds., *The Globalization of Ethics: Religious and Secular Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

*bigotry, and strive all the more to take in and sublimate Occidental culture . . .*²⁸ [emphases mine]

They called for a dynamic but critical and localized modernization, not a refusal of modernization.

For example, they pointed out that the analytic and intellectual qualities of western science have much that Japan can learn from. But at the same time, these natural and human sciences include a certain worldview (that is individualistic and universalist) and thus needs to be adapted to Japan.²⁹ Similarly, while Japan has learned much from western models of education, Japan has to be careful to avoid the separation between the intellectual world and the practical world, and maintain the coherence between learning and social/moral life.

Learning from but sublimating the west and thus building a “new Japan” would have consequences not only for Japan but for the rest of the world. The authors wrote, “This should be done not only for the sake of our nation but for the sake of the entire human race which is struggling to find a way out of the deadlock with which individualism is faced. Herein lies our grave *cosmopolitan* mission.”³⁰

²⁸ Ministry of Education, 54.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

3.2 *The Subjects and the Nation* – In the *Cardinal Principles*, the refusal of western universalism and individualism resulted in a refusal of the idea of “citizenship” altogether:

We subjects are intrinsically quite different from the so-called citizens of Occidental countries. . . . When citizens who are conglomerations of separate individuals independent of each other give support to a ruler in correlation to the ruler, there exists no deep foundation between ruler and citizen to unite them. However, the relationship between the Emperor and his subjects arises from the same fountainhead, and has prospered ever since the founding of the nation as one in essence.³¹

Finding the Hobbesian idea of social contract too thin to bind a people, the authors suggested an “essential connection” between subjects and the Emperor. They articulated further:

This relationship is an “essential” relationship that is far more fundamental than the rational, obligatory relationships, and herein are the grounds that give birth to the Way of

³¹ Ibid., 79.

loyalty. From the point of individualistic personal relationships, the relationship between sovereign and subject in our country may [perhaps] be looked upon as that between non-personalities.³²

The idea of “non-personalities” here points to a Buddhist/Confucian idea of selflessness, whereby one lets go of self and fundamentally becomes one with the other. This notion of mystical union is supplemented by a more concrete view of family: “Our country is one great family nation, a union of sovereign and subject, having the Imperial Household as the head family, and looking up to the Emperor as the focal point from of old to the present.”³³

In response to this parental emperor, who in his “august virtues” loves his subjects dearly, his subjects are loyal to him. This loyalty begins in the family. “The basis of the nation’s life is in the family and that the family is the training ground for moral discipline based on natural sympathies.”³⁴ But a key point here is that loyalty and filial piety are considered to be one—as we love and are grateful to our parents, we

³² Ibid., 81.

³³ Ibid., 83.

³⁴ Ibid., 88.

feel and act so toward the emperor. “In our country, there is no filial piety apart from loyalty, and filial piety has loyalty for its basis.”³⁵ This is considered to be a point of superiority over India and China, for in the latter, while filial duty is emphasized, it is disconnected from the state.³⁶

Additionally, relationships strive toward the ideal of harmony—harmony between human beings and the gods, between human beings and nature, and between each individual. They argue that harmony must be maintained in growth—or more essentially, that it is harmony that powers growth.³⁷ I find the next two passages particularly interesting:

Through each one fulfilling his portion is the harmony of a community obtained. To fulfill one’s part means to do one’s appointed task with the utmost faithfulness, each in his own sphere; and by this means do those above receive help from inferiors, and inferiors are loved by superiors; and in working together harmoniously is beautiful concord manifested and creative work carried out. In our country, differences of opinion or of interests that

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

result from one's position easily [merge] into one through our unique great harmony which springs from the same source.³⁸

Harmony is thus seen in a (sociologically) functionalist sense, is established hierarchically, and results in the resolution of differences in opinion or interest.

3.3 *Culture and Education* – The view of *national* culture is in keeping with the discussion above. The basic theory of culture the *Cardinal Principles* suggests is not of universal ideas manifesting in the material world, but of the relationship between a nation, that has a concrete environmental and historical context, and its relationship with the context that surrounds it. Thus, each culture is seen as particular in content. But at the same time, due to changing historical contexts, culture is seen as maintaining the balance between change and continuity. “Our national culture is consistent in spirit and at the same time brings to view characteristics differing with every stage of history. Hence, creation always means union with retrospection, and restorations always become the generative power behind reformations.”³⁹ In other

³⁸ Ibid., 97-98.

³⁹ Ibid., 150.

words, a culture must constantly adapt to changing times, but at the same time, maintain its own continuity and avoid revolution.

This attitude is manifest particularly in learning and education. The authors stress that scholastic pursuits in Japan have always been supported by the Emperors, and were thus always part not only of individual learning but of the intellectual growth of the nation.⁴⁰ Considering this, the rush to learn from the West in Japan's modernization is seen as having its dangers. While Emperor Meiji decreed: "Seek knowledge throughout the world and greatly add to the life of the foundation of the Imperial regime,"⁴¹ scholars may lose this objective and learn for learning's sake.

Similarly, education (or basic education, in contrast to higher education and research described in the previous paragraph) must also be focused not merely on individual learning but on the growth of the nation. The *Cardinal Principles* sees education as part of the natural and selfless relationships of man:

Just as the word *osbi* signifies "to love," *oshie* (to teach) means "to rear tenderly"; and it means the rearing of mankind in compliance

⁴⁰ Ibid., 151.

⁴¹ Ibid., 153.

with the Way on the basis of man's natural affection. . . . Hence, this is entirely different in its essence from the mere development and perfection of oneself such as is seen in the idea of self-realization and perfection of one's character as set forth in individualistic pedagogics.⁴²

Education is education toward the way—a moral education—and is the task of preparing people for a life that is social and contextual, as subjects of the emperor.

The pattern of education shows in the view of art:

The Way manifests itself on the one hand as a spirit of esteem for tradition and on the other as creative or progressive activities. Thus, our artistic pursuits, ever since the Middle Ages, have been practiced by first keeping to the norms, and by later laying emphasis on cultural methods of getting away from these norms. This means that they taught that artistic pursuits should be materialized along one's personality only after one has personally found the Way by casting aside one's untoward desires and by

⁴² Ibid., 155.

first following the norms in keeping with tradition.⁴³

This is popularly known as “*shu ha ri*”—protect, destroy, distance. To learn any cultural form, one must first suppress one’s individuality and adhere to the set forms (*kata*). When one has successfully “emptied oneself,” and mastered the form, one can then break off from it and create something new. Here, one’s “uniqueness” is expressed not as the uniqueness of ego, but of an “emptied self.”

Above, I have covered around half of the *Cardinal Principles*. In these alone, we see a picture of a tightly bonded Japanese people, learning and adapting to modernity, with harmonious subjects constantly endeavoring to empty themselves of the egotism that prevents unity and progress.

4. Analysis

In the previous section, I have focused on the socio-cultural and ethical *philosophical* aspects of the *Cardinal Principles*. And perhaps one has noticed that it is not as nefarious as a banned book ought to be. Later in this chapter, I will discuss some positive aspects contained in this philosophy. However, that is *half* of the *Cardinal*

⁴³ Ibid., 157.

Principles. The other half is the *mythic* content that envelops and marbles all the discussions of society, culture, ethics, and education, and finds itself directly expressed as a particular (mythic) view of history and politics. While I will not focus on this mythic side, allow me to briefly sketch some elements that we must bear in mind even as we consider the merits of the philosophical side.

The mythic aspect is primarily contained in “I-1. The Founding of the Nation.” In this chapter, the unbroken line of emperors in Japan, the eternity of the Japanese polity, and the divine origin of Japan, its imperial house, and its people, are presented as *facts*. This divinity is used to assert the superiority of Japan⁴⁴ and its political systems⁴⁵ over all other nations in the world.

In “II-1. The Spirit that Runs Through History,” “2. The Homeland and the Life of the People,” and “3. The Inherent Character of the People,” the mythic view of divinity is used to recast history. It argues that there is no such thing as revolution in Japan (an attempt to demonize dissent),⁴⁶ defends Japan’s wars with China and Russia and invasions of Korea and Manchuria as “radiating the grace of the Imperial Throne,”⁴⁷ and asserts the superiority of Japan’s

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 66-67.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 105-106.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75. Also see Walter Edwards, “Forging Tradition for a Holy War: The ‘Hakkō Ichiū’ Tower in Miyazaki and Japanese Wartime Ideology,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 29, no. 2 (2003): 318-319.

land⁴⁸ and language.⁴⁹ Furthermore, in “6. Political, Economic, and Military Affairs,” it strictly asserts the direct rule of the emperor, the divinity of that rule, and the uniqueness and superiority of the various institutions of Japan’s state, economy, and military.

While I will discuss the merits of the philosophy of the *Cardinal Principles*, one must also bear in mind that the sense of creativity, change, and learning from others in that philosophy is greatly confounded by the *mythic* focus on changelessness, divinely founded statism, and national superiority.

In addition to the dangers in *content* are dangers in this book’s political and educational *uses*. Politically, the *Cardinal Principles* must be situated in the long quarrel over Japanese modernization between those who were liberal and more open to western ideas and those who were more traditional in a Confucian and Nativist sense. This conflict is clearest in the clash between Itô Hirobumi (1841-1909) and Motoda Eifu (1818-1891).⁵⁰ As a support of the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, the *Cardinal Principles* would politically entrench the anti-western, Confucian, divine/absolute monarchic views of the successors of Motoda Eifu’s camp.

⁴⁸ Ministry of Education, 129.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 134-135.

⁵⁰ Yoshimitsu Khan, *Japanese Moral Education Past and Present* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997), 59-64. Also see Morikawa Terumichi and Kodama Shigeo, *Kyôikushi nyûmon* (Tokyo: Hôsô Daigaku Kyôiku Shinkôkai, 2012), Chs. 10 & 12.

Educationally, the *Cardinal Principles* had very centralizing, statist, and fascist uses as well. Historian Byron K. Marshall writes:

The main purpose of these official pronouncements was to provide teachers and students with answers to the type of questions that appeared in the final examination of a 1941 ethics course: “Why are loyalty and filial piety united in our country? . . . Discuss the necessity for overseas expansion. Why is Japan’s constitution superior to those of other nations? What kind of spirit is required to overcome the present difficulties facing the nation?”⁵¹

For all the talk on learning new things and transforming culture, ironically, the ideas and the myths in this book were taught as unshakeable facts that one was to be tested on. This propaganda may have had effects that we feel even today. For example, several scholars consider this publication to be a part of the creation of the persistent Japanese self-image of superiority and uniqueness, as one of the early beginnings of the much-criticized but nevertheless recurrent *nihonjinron* discourse.^{52, 53, 54}

⁵¹ Byron K. Marshall, *Learning to be Modern: Japan’s Political Discourse on Education* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 133.

⁵² Kenneth B. Pyle, “The Japanese Self-Image,” *The Journal of Japanese Studies* 5, no. 1 (1979): 3.

⁵³ H. H. Smythe, “Note on the Racial Ideas of the Japanese,” *Social Forces* 31, no. 3 (1953): 260.

Perhaps due to these dangers, the SCAP directive, “Abolition of Governmental Sponsorship, Support, Perpetuation, Control, and Dissemination of State Shinto,” explicitly banned the circulation of the *Cardinal Principles*. In his introduction, the editor Robert King Hall calls this book “obvious, blatant, official propaganda,” comparing it to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*. He disparages the Zen elements in it, saying its notion of self-denial fed into ultranationalist philosophy.⁵⁵ He ends his introduction ominously, writing, “The *Kokutai no Hongi* is presented here as a historical document. May it not become a prophecy.”⁵⁶

However, even though the *Cardinal Principles* is indeed propaganda, and despite the danger of its content, I think the *philosophy* contained within it still deserves our attention. Amidst all the harping on the divinity of Japan and its emperors, there is an important theory of modernization being put forth here, as well as a view of citizenship, culture, and education.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Michael Haugh, “Native Speaker Beliefs about Nihonjinron and Miller’s ‘Law of Inverse Returns,’” *The Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* 32, no. 2 (1998): 29.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Education, 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁷ In Japan, positive appraisals of the *Cardinal Principles* are scarce, perhaps owing to them being somewhat taboo. There are some journalistic writings on it. For example, see Satô Masaru, *Nihon kokka no shinzui* (Tokyo: Fusôsha, 2009). However, it is important to note that my focus in this paper is very different from Satô’s, and I am generally critical of the mythic aspect of the *Cardinal Principles*. And as I will show towards the end of this section, there are philosophical parts that I am critical of as well.

The “Policy for the Revision of the Japanese Educational System” (1947), approved by the Far Eastern Commission, opens as follows:

Education should be looked upon as the pursuit of truth, as the preparation for life in a democratic nation, and as a training for the social and political responsibilities which freedom entails. Emphasis should be placed on the dignity and worth of the individual, on independent thought and initiative, and on developing a spirit of inquiry. The inter-dependent character of international life should be stressed. The spirit of justice, fair play, and respect for the rights of others, particularly minorities, and the necessity for friendship based upon mutual respect for people of all races and religions, should be emphasized.⁵⁸

Dewey was one of the tools for this “democratization” of Japan. But while the differences between Dewey and imperial education are often stressed, I would like to point out their *similarities*.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Ministry of Education, 44.

⁵⁹ While the academe, which tends to be predominantly “left-wing,” has deep disagreements with conservative, right-wing thought, I believe there are points in which the two sides can agree. However, a refusal to engage these points of agreement academically results in, 1. Alienating conservative readers from academic discourse, and 2. Making it impossible for the left to politically dialogue with the right in a fair and balanced way. It is because of these reasons that I endeavor to explore these “democratic” aspects of conservative political ideology.

First, Dewey's view of life was fundamentally relational, and was intrinsically opposed to the liberal-secular-capitalist order. He did not see individuals as closed onto themselves with their own interests and rationality. This is something that the *Cardinal Principles* fundamentally agreed with. Furthermore, the stress of this propaganda piece on the social-historical context of a people is something that the Darwin-influenced Dewey would not disagree with—he saw culture (and morality) as a response to concrete situations that are by their nature particular to a place and time. And similarly, they both saw society as functional wholes—the continuity of the society going beyond the short-lived individual. (The theory of democracy is not restricted to conflict theorists, after all.)

Second, Dewey's view of democracy was concretely built around inter-group and intra-group connections. He felt that societies needed to be tightly connected, open to others, and open to change. The *Cardinal Principles* agreed with this on many points. The entire multi-dimensional, educative tethering Dewey suggested was at the very heart of the propaganda piece. Furthermore, to a certain extent, the *Cardinal Principles* did celebrate cultural exchange—both in the past with China and India, and modernity with Europe and America. The idea of modernization as having a “cosmopolitan mission” shows that there was an urge to connect Japan to other nations. Finally, change was an integral part of the *Cardinal Principles*, and the whole point of it was how to make a *new* Japan, rather than just crawling

back to an old one. The idea that change had to maintain continuity is not necessarily “conservative,” but was something Dewey himself espoused: “Such a [democratic] society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes *without introducing disorder*”⁶⁰ (emphasis mine).

Third, the political order Dewey and the ministerial committee envisioned was a *moral* order. It was not a secularist one that separated right and good. But while acknowledging for the differences in people, it tried to “sacralize” every aspect of communal life and its education—from family relationships to the interdependence of a town to the unity of a nation and to the destiny of a people in the international sphere. While Dewey’s wording was always free from “religious intoxication,” his call for a “generous self” at the foundation of democratic practice was quite similar to the religious call to “empty the self” that was at the root of learning and harmony in social life.

The unification of morality and politics is a very contentious idea, and Maruyama Masao for instance very strongly criticized how the unification of inner morality and outer politics made any real freedom impossible.⁶¹ But the

⁶⁰ Dewey, 115.

⁶¹ Maruyama Masao, “Theory and Psychology of Ultra-Nationalism,” *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1-24.

important point is that such a criticism would include not just things like the *Cardinal Principles* and Japanese ultra-nationalism, but Deweyan democracy and a few other communitarian views of democracy as well.

However, I am not suggesting that the philosophy contained within the *Cardinal Principles* is entirely democratic. While it does have a lot of points of continuity with Deweyan Democracy, and even sans its problematic mythic content, this book has its clear shortcomings.

First, the focus on an “essential” connection between citizens/subjects is important as a critique of egoistic relations. But it is dangerous in that it potentially becomes racially exclusive. Japan is not racially homogenous—Koreans and Chinese have lived in Japan since the beginning of their civilization, not to mention minority groups.⁶² If the connection of a people becomes of “blood and soil,” it closes up the group to the participation of others.

Second, the related idea of the state as a family is dangerous. As we see in Vickers and Kumar, in China and Mongolia, speaking of the nation as the family and the state as parents sets up a strong dichotomy between insider and outsider, as well as martyr and traitor. It becomes very difficult for outsiders to criticize a country because it is like

⁶² For more on this, see Ryoko Tsuneyoshi, Kaori Okano, and Sarane Boocock, eds., *Minorities and Education in Multicultural Japan: An Interactive Perspective* (Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

having one's parents criticized. (In Rowena Xiaoqing He's article, the idea of China as a family makes it so that only Chinese can criticize China, and only far away from non-Chinese ears and eyes.)⁶³

Third, while the *Cardinal Principles* strongly recognizes the connection between Japan and other countries, this connection is fundamentally skewed and not open like Dewey suggests. Nations like China and India are seen as past teachers, and it is constantly asserted that Japan is now superior to them and has nothing to learn from them. Is that really the case? Furthermore, the West is seen as something to learn from, but this learning must be "sublimated." This sublimation was eventually re-read to mean "Japanese spirit, western technology," and confounded learning from potentially positive spiritual aspects of the west (like Dewey).⁶⁴

These three non-democratic elements are made much worse by the mythic component of the *Cardinal Principles*, but it is important to note that the philosophical component already bears these dangers.

Fourth, we need to think about to what extent fixed hierarchies are compatible at all with Deweyan democracy.

⁶³ Edward Vickers and Krishna Kumar, eds., *Constructing Modern Asian Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁴ Rappleye and Kariya make this exact point, and I am in debt to them for it. However, they did not connect it to the *Cardinal Principles*. See Jeremy Rappleye and Kariya Takehiko, "Reimagining Self/Other: 'Catch-Up' across Japan's Three Great Educational Reforms," in *Reimagining Japanese Education: Borders, Transfers, Circulations, and the Comparative*, eds. David Blake Willis and Jeremy Rappleye (2011).

To some extent, hierarchies and roles stabilize a social organization. Also, in Dewey, the idea of “formative relationships” always includes some degree of asymmetry. But part of Dewey’s dynamic experimental learning is that this asymmetry is fluid and shifting. Often, it is the students who teach the teacher. Hence if societies are fixed into hierarchies, where subordinates obey and superiors love their subordinates, a lot of the opportunity for cross-learning is lost. The same holds true internationally. If Japan alone is the “land of the gods,” (the same holds for “White Man’s burden” and all that imperialist gloating by the west) this sets up an inflexible hierarchy that precludes constant learning and growth.

Finally, while harmony is essential to social cohesion, the *Cardinal Principles* makes a whole slew of philosophical errors here. First, is harmony a goal or a reality in Japan? It is spoken of as if it was a constant in Japanese society, but this is in contradiction with the assertion that Japan is in a state of “disarray.” Why do the Japanese need to strive to empty themselves and be watchful of the dangers of egotism if they are already born into a state of constant selfless harmony? Second, if one has harmony and an unshakeable hierarchy, how are people supposed to make the advances necessary to transform Japan? Introducing new ideas, new approaches, necessarily upsets the previous order and meets resistance, at least momentarily, from the status quo. With no notion of universal reason to appeal to and all individual differences explained away functionally, the whole idea of “constructive

criticism” becomes impossible. I think there are differences between “discourse ethics” (Habermas) and “critical communication” (Dewey), but the *Cardinal Principles* has space for neither.

5. Conclusion

I have raised five key points of difference between imperial education and democratic education, at least between the *Cardinal Principles of Japan’s National Polity and Democracy and Education*. To know if indeed Japan’s education is becoming “imperialistic” again, perhaps we can ask: Are the bonds between citizens being reshaped in racial terms or any other essential, non-negotiable category? Is the nation being cast as a family with a clear (emotionally delineated) inside and outside? Is the connection between the nation and others limited to particular nations or to particular facets? Are the hierarchies of society non-negotiable? And finally, is the idea of harmony precluding constructive criticisms of the social order?

While keeping this in mind, however, I do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rather than entirely dismissing the *Cardinal Principles* as purely fascist propaganda, perhaps we can take a more balanced stance toward it—careful of its fascist elements but at the same time open to its rich moral content. While this applies to all countries trying to build a strong nation, I think this applies particularly strongly to the Philippines, which according to Mark Maca and Paul Morris is the only country in Asia that

has simply failed to build a strong sense of national identity. While other countries seem to be struggling with too much national identity that it leads to national chauvinism, the Philippines seems to have neither⁶⁵ (although that too may be quickly changing).

Taking a hint from the democratic parts of the *Kokutai* (ironically), perhaps we can ask: Are we able to awaken our citizens to their relational existence, and to stimulate an interest in deepening and enriching their connections with other people, other families, other social groups, and other classes? Are we able to awaken all stakeholders in a society to the fact that by virtue of their residing in a particular place—despite their differences in race, social class, religion, and ideologies—they are morally and politically bound to each other in unique ways? Are we able to show people thus bonded the value of a sense of solidarity and mutual trust—and harmony to the extent that it does not preclude change? And finally, are we able to lead such a group to relate with the international community with a sense of openness that is at the same time critical, and without merely going with the trends and the whims of global powers, to consider what would allow this group to grow without destroying the continuity of its internal bonds?

While I raise this as merely one stakeholder's personal suggestion, I suspect that this sort of an Asianized

⁶⁵ In Vickers and Kumar.

democracy might function better in a state like the Philippines' than more liberal-secularist, rationalist, or agonist models.

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