EDITOR'S FORUM

The Japanese Way of Debate

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For at least the past two thousand years, Japan has been a highly sedentary society, growing rice in the same places and patterns every year, with only sporadic contact with the outside world, and even less geographic mobility within its own borders. Japan faced almost none of the stimuli which rocked Europe through the centuries - invasion of few creeds and races, trade and commerce with different cultures, or even the uncertainties of nomadic life - any of which might have militated for more flexible values and world-views. In a sedentary and largely illiterate, rice-growing culture, the repository of knowledge is the one who remembers more harvests than anyone else-the elder. The average Japanese equates age with knowledge and authority in a way unthinkable in an America still steeped in the individualistic mythology of the westward movement.

Early in any conversation, the Japanese person is compelled to ask the age of the person to whom he is speaking, especially if the other person is of the same sex and approximately equal class. For it is incredible to the Japanese that any two people could be exactly equal, and age is the prime discriminator. In fact, the Japanese language almost demands a deference in the use of words towards anyone as little as a year older than oneself, and one cannot feel comfortable speaking in Japanese unless he knows that the politeness level of his language is suited to the age of the person he is addressing. This attitude is reflected in the home training of children, of whom is demanded strict obedience to elders. More than once have I been shocked to hear mothers telling their young children, "If your sempai [any older child] tells you two and two make five, agree with him, and if he tells you to carry his books, (you) carry them." If such deference is true even of children a year apart, how much more so is it true toward parents. The only answer permitted from a child in such a situation is "Hai!" (yes, I understand). It should be clear from the outset, then, that what is important in traditional Japanese society is not the truth of propositions nor the value of

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ideas, but the authority of the person who utters them.

This attitude and hierarchical system is inevitably reinforced during the child's school education. In the course of 10 to 12 years of school education, the child must learn at least 2000 characters, each of which has several pronunciations and innumerable compounds. The characters themselves are stylized hieroglyphs - pictures of what they represent. One need not translate the picture into language in order to grasp its meaning, and written sentences are sometimes more like murals - strings of pictures - than like logical formulae. In fact, recent studies tend to indicate that Japanese sort language into different hemispheres of their brains than westerners do. The character for river looks like a river, and the character for fire looks like fire. But how, then, do you envision characters for words like assumption, premise, or argument? Some of these words did not even exist, especially with the nuances they have in English, before the 1860's, and even those which did cannot be explained pictorially. So, in a basic and pervasive, continuing part of his education, the schoolboy learns that there is no asking "why?" - he simply must memorize the character and its readings without question. Of course the same is true about the letters and spelling rules of any western language-but the point is, that by the time a western child is 8 or 10, he has learned all the letters by heart, can find new words for himself in a dictionary, and can read a wide range of material from baseball cards and cookbooks to the Declaration of Independence. The Japanese child, by contrast, can read only books written specifically for his age level, with 200, or 400, or 600, or however many characters he has learned - certainly not a newspaper or an adult cookbook. What this also means is that the school system sets up an unbridgeable gap between students of different grade levels, and those even one year more advanced have access to information which those one year inferior do not. Again, the system works to defend the Japanese presupposition that age equals authority - and again, the possibility of argument between younger and older becomes almost nil.

Debate, argument, even questions such as "why" or "how" are taken frequently as attacks upon the position or authority of the person rather than innocent appeals - if there were such a thing. It is sufficient that the leader direct and the inferior follow; if he knows the how and why himself, he is certainly under no obligation to share or argue that knowledge. It is legitimate for superiors in Japanese, therefore, to respond to "why" questions with answers which translate literally as "that's okay," "you fool," or "there is no *why!"* I was cautioned by my seniors at my university that I should not ask so many questions, because the professor would downgrade

me for doubting his authority. Similarly, I had the American habit of including reasons within my apologies for things. So when I apologized for entering a room late, I might explain that I had had another errand, or my bus had been slow. After a few such incidents in the course of the year, a superior took me aside and said, in effect, "Dammit Becker, why do you always have to defend yourself? Your reasons don't matter to us. If you're late, it can't be helped. Just bow your head low, apologize humbly, and keep quiet. Understood?" I shall not soon forget the rebuke - although I admit I was pleased that he thought I was Japanese enough to criticize, as he would never criticize a foreigner.

Another problem with "why" questions is that they tend to be answered by causal or historic accounts, as opposed to solution-seeking directions. Thus, when I ask a friend why my rice is sticking to the fry pan, he first responds with "rice sometimes sticks that way when it's fried." When I repeat my question, he says something about rice gluten being like glue - which is all too obvious, but does not improve my frying any. Finally, as my rice is about to burn (and I to expire in frustration), he turns down the fire. Such a case might sound cute in an anthology of Zen masters' tales, but it points to the reluctance or inability of many Japanese to constructively analyze and verbally find solutions to problem situations. Even sadder cases may be found in the interminable faculty meetings — sometimes lasting six or seven hours on a single issue-to which the concluding summary is, "It certainly is a difficult problem." Difficulties, in the minds of many Japanese, call for endurance, even long-suffering, but not necessarily solutions. Such a fundamental assumption embedded in Japanese thought and speech also tends to stifle debate. When problem issues have been identified, many people are content to agree on the difficulty in preference to disagreeing over its possible resolution.

Given this socio-cultural context, then, it is not surprising to learn that the very words which refer to thinking - logic, debate, and communication - have different nuances than their so-called English equivalents. The word commonly used for "think" (omou) is not to reason, but to *feel,* and the Japanese conceive of the mind as centered in the heart and not the head. To say yes (hai) or even "I understand" (wakatta) does not mean that the speaker understands anything in a cerebral sense, but rather that he will follow the dictates of the superior insofar as he can, without question. The word for argument, *giron,* suggests the opposite of the Japanese ideal of harmony; it points, not to resolution, but to irresolvability. The word for debate, *benron,* is composed of two characters which may be interesting to analyse briefly. The first is the character for

word, or saying, surrounded by two characters meaning bitter or distastefully salty or spicy. The second is a compound of the same word for saying, coupled with ideographs for the gathering of many books or pages. The connotation, particularly of the word *ben,* is not wholly favorable. The self-justification for which I was criticized is this same ben *(benkai),* and lawyers are *bengohshi.* But a person studying law calls himself a scholar of law, and lawyers avoid courtroom debate as far as possible. Such is the current concept of "argument" in Japanese society.

True, there have been serious attempts to introduce democratic debating principles to Japan, both in the 1870's and 1880's, and again in the 1950's, when free speech had been re-established. However, these movements did not spread widely, and for several reasons. First, the importance of argument had not yet been recognized in either law or government, much less business circles. Similarly, there were not yet enough educated Japanese to overcome popular prejudices against any forms of confrontation, to make the idea of *amicable* argument comprehensible. Both Confucian *Analects* and Buddhist *sutras,* the "Bibles" of the Japanese society, looked with suspicion and distrust at silver-tongued rhetoricians. Finally, the Japanese language itself favored vague rather than blunt denials, and tended to become highly fettered with honorifics so that the central points were often lost. There are still advocates of debate in Japanese, and the language use is rapidly changing, so in another couple of decades we may find interscholastic debates in Japanese as well. For the present, 99% of all such activity is in English.

Japanese who have visited the states have been shocked not only at the speed of American debaters' speech, but at the technical jargon used in debates, of the sort that only a highly trained judge can make sense of the language, much less evaluate the legitimacy of the argumentation being done. In Japan, if argumentation is not communicated and persuasive to an audience which understands but a modicum of English, it is drifting away from the purposes of interscholastic debate.

Those suppositions which may be taken as self-evident or acceptable without proof also differ considerably between American and Japanese debaters. Americans might be much more inclined to assume the value of individual rights and freedoms or to challenge their opponents' assumptions about anything at all that might be considered a value. Among the common Japanese assumptions are that war should be avoided at all cost, that America is an ally - or at least that Russia is an enemy (as it still holds Japanese territory and constantly violates Japanese air and sea space). There is also

the tendency to assume that the Japanese Constitution, and certain aspects of its socio-economic system, such as the control of the government by certain major banks and industries *(zaibatsu)* are incapable of changing and not the sort of thing, therefore, about which we may profitable debate. In recent years, some teams have come to realize that *any* aspect of the status quo can indeed be analyzed and challenged, but this draws mixed reactions from audiences which sometimes feel that debate should be constrained within the realm of the possible or feasible, rather than becoming a purely academic argument without relation to probabilities and social realities. So the assumptions about what constitutes a legitimate argument, and its premises, are still firmly Japanese.

One final problem is the absence of a strict sense of contradiction in Japanese argument. A cross-examination in a practice debate I observed illustrates this vividly. The proposition had to do with the teaching of ethics and social responsibility in the schools which has been outlawed (or at least suppressed) since the American occupation because of the travesties it incurred before the war. One side had built a case on the premise that religions are essentially good. The cross-examination went something like this:

"Are you asserting that all religions are essentially good?"

"Yes, that is our stand."

"Yet surely some religions have advocated practices ranging from cannibalism to the waging of war on non-believers."

"Yes, we know that."

"But you still say that all religions are good?"

"That's right."

"Do you favor war over cannibalism?"

"Of course not."

"Yet you say that even religions which advocate such things are good?"

"Yes, they are good for the people who believe in them."

"Even if the religions lead these same believers to wicked or destructive actions?"

"Yes. I fail to see your point."

At this point the questioner lost patience and changed the subject altogether. Midway through the argument, as I listened, I was thinking, "Good, here's a clear contradiction which should indict the answerer." But as I kept on listening to the rest of the entire debate I became increasingly flabbergasted at the contradiction which seemed to be tolerated. Of course I am aware that western debaters or logicians could escape from this apparent dilemma through any

of a number of tactics: in the ways they defined "good," in claiming that the social coherence provided by the religion outweighed its apparently negative influences, or even by arguing the relative merits of war or cannibalism in certain geographic and historic contexts. But the Japanese team here clearly had none of these ploys in mind as I confirmed in discussing the issue with them after the debate. This is simply one example of a situation in which the laws of contradiction seem to make no impression on some Japanese. Such occurrences are frequent enough to upset an analytically trained logician.

The western observer is tempted to conclude that something downright unethical is going on here. He insists that the Japanese can't have it both ways: he cannot admit contradictions within his linguistic system without fearing the relativization or even destruction of his whole value structure. Yet, as scientists have recently pointed out, there are ways in which physics itself seems based on paradoxes, and in some cases Japanese language may mirror the paradoxical nature of the universe better than the non-contradictory Aristotelianism of western language. So we must refrain from imposing hasty value-judgments on even so different a language system as Japanese.

Debate in Japan has grown from a handful of "eggheads" in Tokyo in 1950, to several dozen schools in the sixties, to over a hundred schools and thousands of students in the eighties. But debate still faces major handicaps within Japan in the sense of being contradictory to the Japanese world-view and way of doing things. A man who cultivates debate and logical argumentation, it is feared, will be more likely to become a rabble-rouser or a malcontent, and will lose his abilities of respecting elders and traditions. Worse yet, some of the better debaters in Japan have themselves admitted that they feel less comfortable in Japan, or less able to mutely intuit the intentions of their fellow men, after lengthy training in analysis and argumentation. I should like to believe that argumentation is a skill which can be cultivated and applied to certain situations without warping either the sensitivity or the Japanese-ness of the practitioner, but, at the very least, this requires care in the educational process.

The case is even more strongly put when it comes to women. Japan is in many ways among the least "liberated" of Asian societies, and argumentation of any kind violates the much treasured stereotype of a silent and obedient wife. When two women from the University of Hawaii debate team demonstrated their skills in front of a large audience in Tokyo, one Tokyo debater (male) told them, "You are very beautiful and I admire your

skills - but I could never live with women like you." This is of course a question of culture and taste, subject to change. But as long as Japanese men prefer servants to intellectual sparring-partners, the market for women debaters is likely to remain slim. In the more rural areas of south and west Japan, would-be women debaters feel pressure from parents and even teachers to stay away from debate even if their peers will admit them on the team.

Liberated American women may feel outraged at the role- and status-differences which make it less possible for women to debate in Japan than men. Here, again, we must refrain from self-righteously imposing our own values on a culture which has a longer history of peace and prosperity than any we can claim in the west.

In the past, the Japanese values of age-authority, group harmony and the aesthetic preferability of vague over specific statements have led to a distrust of precisely those speech communication skills most prized in the west. In recent years debate and forensics have begun to make some headway in Japanese society. But as we have seen, the practice of forensics in Japan requires not merely the mimicry of a western verbal sport but the revision of a whole realm of standards concerning the nature of "good" communication. By the same token, the viability and success of the Japanese communications systems over many centuries should serve as a warning against premature or categorical judgments of Japanese speech communication as "unethical" or "inferior" simply because it embodies value assumptions very different from our own.