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Globalization and the Need to Reconstruct Moral Education in Higher Education

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After the decades of globalization that left such a deep imprint on the twentieth century academy, the need for a new kind of learning that provides generic skills has recently achieved widespread recognition in Japanese higher education. The term “generic skills” (or “soft skills”) has now become one of the key concepts of “cooperative education”, especially for those who seek a new role for higher education in the twenty-first century. In the case of Japan, this movement was launched by the country’s business elite; from as early as 1989, and with greatly increased frequency from the mid-1990’s, the Japan Business Federation (KEIDANREN), an overarching economic organization with a membership of 1,285 of the nation’s foremost companies, started making educational proposals for the development of global human resources. The Japanese government, appropriating this policy line that had originated in business circles, has made similar educational proposals through the Cabinet office, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and other bodies, although each of these organizations uses particular terms of its own when dealing with the issue. For example, in 2010, METI included the development of global human resources as one of its industrial policies, proposing “Fundamental Competencies for Working Persons”, a concept that sought to encapsulate the basic and generic skills required for a person to work successfully with a variety of others in the work-place or local society. The proposal emphasized abilities in three key areas: 1) action, where one needs the ability to step forward, to try to move in a positive direction even after failure; 2) thinking, i.e. the ability to ask and answer meaningful and significant questions; and 3) teamwork, where the ability to cooperate with others as a member of a diversified group to achieve a goal is essential.

It is obvious that in Japan the government, the business world and society at large consider these competencies vital if individuals are to become good citizens and effectively functioning members of an organization. This reflects a shared conviction that education is the primary tool for society in the global age to renew itself, which explains why Japan is now looking to its universities to lead the effort to improve society by developing global human resources as well as the generic competencies described above. As a result, developing global human resources with generic skills is today one of the most important public policies as well as one of the primary educational goals of Japan, and this obviously necessitates much stronger collaboration than heretofore between government, the industrial sector and the world of higher education.

Among the characteristics of these competencies and skills common to the proposals of both business corporations and government ministries, the following two have particular relevance for the realm of higher education and so require our attention here:

- 1) These competencies include not only cognitive abilities but also ones that are holistic or essentially human in their totality, such as the requisite skills for effective personal relationships, as well as moral and ethical sensibilities.
- 2) These competencies have a prominent place as educational objectives as well as constituting components of the educational evaluation of universities, which is why they are required elements for incorporation into university curricula.

The abilities mentioned above, especially those linked both to action (stepping forward and trying even after failure) and to teamwork, need to be developed through character

education or moral education that is practical in nature, rather than through the traditional and academic curricula of universities. For example, in order to be able to “take a step forward and try even after failure”, we need the virtue of courage, which allows us to act in spite of our fears, to overcome our inner doubts and negativity, and then to “do the right thing”. If we remember that such positive behavior is a function of character, or of the dispositions that make up our moral personality and the culture that infuses our social environment, what is most needed in higher education today is *the nurturing in our students of the moral integrity and good character* required for our present-day globalized society. In this way our students will be able to contribute to the enhancement of our culture and even of our civilization, for as Alexis Carrel (1873 –1944), a French surgeon and biologist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1912, remarks in his *Man the Unknown*, “much more than science, art, and religious rites, moral beauty is the basis of civilization.”

Nonetheless, with respect to how these competencies can be achieved through higher education, it pains me deeply to have to say that I see little sign that the Japanese people have really reached any concrete conclusions on the matter, nor can I discern much of a sustained or constructive dialogue between universities, business circles and the government about this key issue. On the contrary, generally speaking, the idea that universities have a civic responsibility to teach their students morality and ethics has been met with scepticism, suspicion and, on occasion, outright rejection. The reality is that moral and ethical education is not especially common at university level in my country, partly because it is generally thought in Japan that such concerns are the province of the home, and of elementary and junior high school instruction where moral education is a requirement under the Ministry’s official guidelines for teaching. The fact of the matter, though, is that even elementary and junior high schools do not always seem to achieve satisfactory results in moral education when tackling a variety of problems. In its 1993 survey of the circumstances surrounding the promotion of moral education, MEXT asked elementary and junior high schools the following question: “What do you think are the most important tasks which your schools will tackle from now on in seeking the enrichment of their moral education?” The first and most widespread answer was “to raise teachers’ awareness concerning moral education”. This response reveals that some teachers had not yet fully accepted moral education as one of their responsibilities, though it is supposed to be one of their most rewarding and satisfying tasks, something they should feel compelled to take on and enjoy, primarily on their own initiative. We may easily extrapolate from this situation to arrive at an understanding of the lack of enthusiasm that characterizes the attitude of Japanese universities to moral education, which is not even an officially required element of their curricula. As I argued above, though, it is obvious that moral education is indispensable for any development of “Fundamental Competencies for Working Persons”, since without it, any proposals that are made exist in name only and, in the worst circumstances, will never come anywhere near fruition or even perceptible growth.

Of course, it is not especially easy to identify the nature or kind of morality to which students should be exposed during the course of their higher education. In general, morality usually refers to various codes of conduct put forward by society or some particular group within it, or accepted by individuals as a rule for their own behaviour. Morality can, however, be acknowledged to possess a wider meaning, and to include “relationships with

others". From this point of view, therefore, developing one's morality may be said to involve understanding what kinds of mental attitudes and actions one should take in order to achieve better relationships with others. On this view, we do not have to restrict the learning of morality to any particular developmental stage, nor to limit moral education only to the elementary and junior high school level. For relationships rearrange themselves every time our life stages and circumstances change, and on each occasion we are required to open ourselves to new perspectives and prepare to live differently. It goes without saying that learning morality should not be taken as ending the moment one enters university or even upon graduation, for the society that awaits graduates presents them with a mountain of issues, and they must be prepared to deal with a changing world and times of unprecedented rapid transitions.

When we speak of "others", we cannot limit ourselves to particular individuals such as our children, other family members, close friends or important people close to us. We must also include local communities, our nation, other countries, all humankind and, beyond even that, all that exists on earth and in nature. If we take the example of our relationship with nature, we need to grasp how all the phenomena of nature are related to one another. Scientific research has demonstrated that nature or the universe constitutes a unified system, and that human beings are only one of the many phenomena within it. If we look at the natural world, we find there are approximately one million, seven hundred and fifty thousand known biological species on the earth, of which about six thousand are mammalian. Of all of these, none on earth is more blessed by nature than humankind. To take the basic example of food, no other creature feeds on so many kinds of animals and plants as does a human being. Here, though, we begin to become aware that environmental problems have assumed a serious aspect because of our anthropo-centric idea of nature. Rather than exploiting all the benefits provided to us by nature selfishly and thoughtlessly (as we are doing at present), we need to accept all we are given with a sense of gratitude, viewing everything from a bio-centric perspective. That will engender within us the basis of a caring attitude that can permeate all our relationships with the natural world that helps to sustain our lives.

Of course, human beings are different from other animals and plants in that we live in what is called "society". One of the characteristics of human society is that it consists in essence of interdependent relationships on a mental and spiritual plane as well as on a physical one. In addition to this, since our human lives are linked with people in the past, present and future, we need to examine our ways of life so as to extend our thinking about morality to take account of this framework in its entirety. We need to kindle an awareness that these relationships extend across time as well as space, for we are connected with all that has existed in the past as well as with all that will exist in the future. This moral perspective is especially important today since we live in the so-called age of "democracy", where all eligible citizens have an equal say in the decision-making. Some people tend to restrict "all eligible citizens" just to those who live in the present, but this definition of democracy may be termed a narrow or limited form of government. G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), the British journalist, essayist, and novelist, says in his *Orthodoxy* that "tradition is only democracy extended through time". By "tradition", he means "the democracy of the dead". If we accept the term "horizontal democracy" as signifying a system of group decision-making only by those presently alive, the democracy that Chesterton defines as "tradition"

may be termed “a vertical democracy”, which requires us to respect the will of our ancestors and the traditions that they treasured,

In summary, then, we can say that we live enmeshed in a comprehensive network of interdependence. In this context, our fundamental attitude towards the whole world is embodied in the spirit of benevolence, which encourages us to treat all relationships with the maximum of care, which at the same time enriches their quality. Cultivating a benevolent spirit is the primary goal for us as human beings and members of the network of interdependence, from which it follows that the acquisition of the spirit of benevolence is the core concern and ultimate objective of moral education.

The first step toward benevolence lies in overcoming our self-centered mentality, simply because, as is well-known, the self-centered nature of the thinking and activity of human beings is the major factor underlying almost all the problems of society. It is very important for us to try to remedy our shortcomings here, for we stand at a watershed. Looking forward, we see the prospect of humankind ushering in a new era of global co-operation and interdependence; if we turn our backs on this, though, only a slippery slope lies before us, where we face the danger of letting the power of capital run riot, as globalization continues to render it more powerful and uncontrollable. If the reckless pursuit of individual interests is globalized, the lust for self-centered satisfaction will come to dominate, and this will inevitably involve the sacrifice of others, leading to the decimation of the environment and of the diversity of cultures. That is why we need to advocate the construction of a sustainable society and CSR across the entire globe.

As we try to overcome our selfishness and renew our perspectives in a moral way, we will gradually come to understand how the greatly nurturing power of nature supports our lives and how in human society we also owe so much to others who have contributed, and continue to contribute, to the progress of this society. To them we owe the existence of the safe and orderly social life from which we benefit, and through them we have the possibility of a meaningful and satisfactory spiritual life. When we realize the extent of our debt to such people, a sense of gratitude and a willingness to follow in their path and return their favours will grow in us.

Once we understand the great debt we owe to our important benefactors, we will begin to see that we still have much more to do in respect of the global network of interdependence, rather than being obsessed by the selfish pursuit of our own satisfaction. This recognition, together with a sense of gratitude, will implant in our minds a willingness to act in accordance with the sense of duty we should feel as members of an interdependent network. Through the accumulation of such efforts, the world will become a truly rich network of spiritual interdependence. This is the ultimate goal of moral education, which can only be acquired by examining all our relationships in a serious and radical manner.

In conclusion, let me say a few words about our experience of recent events in Japan and the lessons we have drawn from them. Rejoicing in the peace and prosperity of our country, we used to think these were givens, taking it for granted that we would be able to continue to live our lives as we had always done. We blindly believed that “the sustainability of Japanese society” was guaranteed. The East Japan Great Earthquake that struck on 11th

March, 2011, and the Fukushima nuclear accident that followed it, absolutely shattered this “sense of life as a matter of course”. The magnitude of this double catastrophe forced us to realize that we cannot take the sustainability of our society for granted; and the timing was symbolic, for there has been no period in which the echo of the truth contained in the word “sustainability” has been so appealing as the present. We came to recognize, too, that social sustainability can only be fully realized in a global network, and that it cannot be maintained without an enormous amount of effort and mutual support by many organizations of various kinds. So I would like to close my remarks today by expressing the wish and the hope that we all, not just each of us in our own countries, but co-operating together throughout the world — in seeking to create a richer network of spiritual interdependence — that we all will, in the words of William Shakespeare, “strive to do better”.