

*Type the number of the topic AND the name of the author of the quotation here*

Topic number 4 – Tetsuro Watsuji

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## Environmental Perception and Judgement

### *The environment and the individual*

In order to correctly discuss Watsuji's quotation, the terms that he uses ought to be analysed. Firstly, he discusses an environment that objectifies human existence. This objectification can be seen as a peer evaluation of external traits, both physical and communicative elements. These views concerning an individual accumulate into a mostly superficial image, which is built upon external elements.

Secondly, it is claimed in the quotation that through this peer evaluation, the human or individual can come to understand themselves, and that this is called self-discovery through one's environment. What this means, is that through the judgement made by the environment, the individual human understands how they are perceived by the outside world, be it by close relatives and acquaintances, or by a broad societal public. This view interacts with the self-image of an individual: it can be confirmed and reinforced, or it can be contradicted.

### *Superficial or detailed perception*

The 'environment,' as the term is used in Watsuji's statement, takes on many levels of size. These levels range from a very limited circle of humans that have a fairly detailed view of the individual's personality, thinking patterns, and other more internal characteristics. Up from there, the next levels grow broader and broader until we arrive at the environment as a whole: the entire part of society that comes into contact with the individual, in any possible way. It is logical that the majority of this society does not have a very detailed view on the internal traits of the individual. Quite the contrary: societal perception of an individual is always limited to an acknowledging of notable, external elements. The way a society reacts to an individual is also always simple, and blunt (but not necessarily negative). Here, we find a lack of refined judgement.

This contrasts with the detailed view that close relatives have of an individual. Their judgement is complex, different from the shallow interpretation of a character made by large groups. However, this smaller environment is lacking in size, usually only consisting of a handful of people. From that finding, it becomes clear that the depth of a judgement is relative to the size of the judging group. In the case of a large group, this perception is superficial enough that it can be called an objectification, as it only addresses obvious external traits. Seeing as “objectification” is the phrasing Watsuji uses, the environment will be equated in the rest of this paper to a large societal group.

In addition, the question can be asked how objective a judgement or perception made by the environment is. This brings us to a second reason why the type of environment discussed in the following part of this essay will be a broad society. Even though judgement made by the small group of close relatives is far more detailed than a societal judgement, the selectness of this group makes their judgement more subjective, or at the very least more prone to subjectivity. A societal judgement, while it is blunt and narrowed down onto external traits, is generally more objective than a judgement made by a small group. Mind that the word “generally” is used here, as the societal judgement becomes extremely untrustworthy when it is asked to address internal traits.

### *Justified judgement*

When addressing the unrefined perception an environment has of an individual, it is interesting to ask whether this judgement, in all its bluntness and simplicity, is justified. To what extent can this judgement be taken into account by the individual when evaluating themselves. In his quotation, Watsuji certainly seems to deem it an important element: he claims that it leads to understanding of the self, and a form of self-discovery. According to myself, this societal judgement is indeed important for one’s outgoing personality, but it does not provide a well-argued view of the individual’s inner self. Allow me to elaborate:

First of all, a field in which societal judgement should be taken into account, is the evaluation of an individual’s interaction with the outside world. This is not connected to personal intention behind communication, but to the way receiving parties perceive an individual’s behaviour. Due to certain intentions and a priorly formed self-image always being present behind any form of communication, it is easy for the individual to perceive the way they are experienced differently to the actual experience of the environment. To put it differently, it is easy for the individual to misinterpret their own way of communicating and interacting with the outside world. This is where societal judgement is justified: when the society is broad enough to rule out the coincidence of very subjective reception by a small group, it can form an objective image of an individual’s way of interaction. This is a way in which environment can help the individual understand themselves, like Watsuji says.

In contrast, as was mentioned before, societal judgement can hardly be trusted when it comes to the discerning of internal traits like intentions, characteristics and motivations. This is because it is virtually impossible to uphold intimate connection with a group the size of a society. It is also very important to note that societal judgement, unless the group is exceptionally broad, will always be influenced by societal norms and values on a lot of fields. This goes most strongly when the subject of environmental perception is the physical traits of an individual (this can be tied to media as a form of environment, but this is a topic that will be discussed later on in this essay). Although, when we say this, we ought to consider whether these societal norms are necessarily subjective in a bad way. In many popular modern ideologies it is typical to state that being self-comfortable is far more important than any judgement society imposes on an individual. It is a trend, especially in western societies of young adults, to vouch for a disregard of peer evaluation and for the notion of “just being yourself, no matter what other people think.” This is a form of thinking that deems most, if not all forms of environmental judgement unjustified. However, I find it to be unconvincing. For instance, laws suppressing criminal activity are a type of societal judgement that is enforced upon all individuals within its collective. In this case, adherence to societal judgement on the field of ethics preserves order and prevents harm. However, this societal judgement can be corrupted. In an extreme example, societal judgement of the Jewish population in Nazi Germany during the second world war was far from justified. To conclude here, societal judgement can be used to enforce or apply constructive values onto its individuals, but must always be subjected to critical thinking, and in terms of ideological values subjected to moderation, as it is far from infallible. In the example of law, it is also apparent how objectification of the individual by the environment is necessary for an equal treatment of all individuals: favouritism has no place there. In other types of environmental perception, mainly the ones concerning communication in the way I have discussed earlier, this objectification boils down an individual to a certain essence: a purely physical object, or a purely communicative object. This view automatically has a sense of justified objectivity to it, as the essence it describes is left uninfluenced by other aspects of an individual. However, just like lawful societal judgement it requires critical thinking from the receiving party. Even though this essence is not influenced by familiarity, it can be influenced by societal norms and/or media.

### *Acknowledgement of external perception*

After having discussed the justness of judgement exacted by the environment, I would like to address the receiving end of Watsuji’s “objectification.” How well can we trust the environment to grant us correct a understanding of ourselves?

For starters, in order to experience correct ‘self-discovery,’ we ought to make sure our view is broad enough and not narrowly focused on a single opinion, or a single judgement made by another individual. In that case we would wrongfully generalise a very narrow perception

to be representative of a broad, societal one. We must also make sure not to forget our own judgement, and the judgement of those close to us (albeit with the necessary critical thinking, which applies to all forms of judgement, from personal to societal).

When these criteria are met, it is possible to draw meaningful conclusions about the self from an environmental perception. More so, the environment can overcome subjective aspects of a self-image that may be incorrect, either overly positive or overly negative. All in all, societal judgement can provide a very general and usually fairly objective view of communicative traits, amongst others. The environment can tell us, as individuals, how we are experienced by others, and as who we are experienced. In that way, we discover the self that others perceive us to be, and from there we can draw conclusions on how this correlates to the self we experience ourselves to be. When putting this self-understanding to use, we gain access to the possibility of changing our outward self in order to make both ourselves and the environment we value more comfortable with it.

However, this is a point where, figuratively speaking, a lot of accidents happen. It is a very common occurrence that societal judgement is over-valued, and either personal comfort or even personal well-being is neglected in favour of making a broad society more comfortable with the outward self. In this case, the outward self dominates the inward self and we could call it "obsessive conformity." This lack of balance between societal and personal adherence is one often discussed in contemporary debates surrounding media influence.

The opposite could also be true: When neglecting or actively ignoring all forms of societal judgement, I speak of "obsessive reclusion." This extremum is not directly harmful to the individual's personality, like obsessive conformity is, but it is harmful to their connections with the environment, which can lead to many forms of harm that do affect the individual directly.

### *Modern media as an environment*

Today, especially in the western and westernised world, media is an omnipresent element in everyday life. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to discuss it as another way to see an environment that communicates to individuals, and in a way 'judges' them. While a societal environment is comprised of a multitude of individuals, media can be called an impersonal representation of specific societal judgement. I say specific, because it is not the representation of an entire societal group, but rather a more select society with a certain intention, which communicates to the rest of their society. For instance, advertisement media originates in a societal group with specific economic interests. Film, poetry or prose originate in a societal group with the intention of entertaining their public. This ought to always be taken into account when exposing oneself to media, as in this regard it differs substantially from normal societal judgement, which does not have such a specified intention. This very concept is the reason why most media cannot be taken into account when assessing oneself:

it is not directed at specific individuals, but rather at an objectified society, and it has a specific intention in mind that makes its judgement inherently subjective.

### *Summary and conclusion*

All things considered, I certainly do agree with Watsuji's quotation. A large environment, due to its broad view, can give an objective judgement of how an individual interacts with their surroundings. It has a tendency to be more objective than a narrow environment, but also more blunt and unrefined. It can also be manipulated, or warped by peer pressure, so critical thinking is always required to utilise it in a healthy way. When we do the latter, we can understand the way our environment experiences us, and we can decide whether we are comfortable with the current judgement or whether we desire change. When exacting this change, it is important not to become severely overadapted to society, but when deciding not to change we must also heed against being severely unadapted. In addition, we must be careful what we consider societal judgement: subjective media or overly narrow judgement groups do not have a broad society's advantage of objectivity, nor a close relative's advantage of a refined opinion.

As I have said multiple times in this essay, I believe that we can find an understanding and discovery of our outward self in the judgement and opinions made by our environment, but we must use critical thinking to maintain our personal integrity.