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How does the philosophy of martial arts manifest itself? Insights from Japanese martial arts

Submission: 31.03.2013; acceptance: 26.06.2013

Key words: metaphysics, Jigoro Kano, Musashi Miyamoto, Munenori Yagu, Kenji Tomiki

Abstract:

A martial art can be briefly defined as a set of knowledge about body movements that is intended to help an individual wound, kill and/or capture opponent(s) and/or defend himself against any type of physical attack. Universal laws, for example the concept of force, the concept of the atom, etc. were produced by being abstracted from physical phenomena by metaphysical thinking. A philosopher can consequently hope to understand universal characteristics and fundamental principles by observing natural phenomena. Thus, martial arts can be thought of as abbreviated methods for presenting the nature of the truths related to the best methods to win a fight. These truths are presented to us in the phenomenon of fighting. Judged according to the perspective of Plato's metaphysics, martial arts have very low intrinsic value when thought of as an instrument that serves the purpose of winning. The philosophical samurai's method of practice — of attempting to move from art to the way, of attempting to discern universal truths from their natural manifestations in combat — was taken up and refined by Jigoro Kano, who consciously desired to further develop the philosophy and pedagogy of the Japanese martial arts. Apart from Kano there were also the theories of Musashi and Munenori. All these theories were intended as general theories, which were probably too broad. At least one attempt has been made to create a general theory that encompasses all of the possible techniques, motions, and actions that can be taken in a fight. This is the inclusive theory of martial arts by Tomiki. It explains the relationship between kenjutsu, jujutsu, etc, but is not widely known. It also gives practical advice in any fighting situation and thus encompasses all possible fighting systems and all existing fighting traditions. Since the time of Plato, metaphysicians have seen the world as the existing of essence. Even modern science is a type of metaphysics, and the same goes for modern technology, as well. On the other hand, the metaphysical thinking about Japanese martial arts has evolved as “the metaphysics of Asian martial arts” and it is believed to deconstruct the binary opposition of life and death or victory and defeat.

Introduction

The question of what the philosophy of martial arts can be considered as following two parts: 1) What is the essence of the martial arts as a generalized notion by reality; 2) What is the spiritual essence of each of martial arts. In brief, the question which should be addressed is “How does the philosophy of martial arts manifest?”

1. Definition of martial arts

A martial art can be briefly defined as a set of knowledge about body movements that is intended

to help an individual wound, kill, and capture opponent(s) and/or defend against any type of physical attack. The martial arts is on one occasion a personal instrument for surviving or winning a fight or a brawl, on another occasion a legally sanctioned method that the police can employ to restore order, and on yet another occasion a system to kill and wound in battle.

Two premises are crucial to analyzing the philosophy of the martial arts and then discussing how that philosophy manifests itself.

1. Because a martial art provides methods and strategies to win fights, its fundamental nature as an art form must be consistent with that purpose (winning fights).
2. Because an art form is defined by a theory, an art form must have the features of a law or universality (because theories attempt at general

¹ Source of support: This study is partially supported by the Japanese government subsidy for scientific research ©. Grant Number: 23500704.

guidance that extends beyond any particular set of local circumstances).

Thus, we can see that martial arts must provide universal theories about how to win fights. We are then confronted with the following question: how does one judge any particular martial art's theory? One answer is that the value of a theory can be judged by its practicality, by the quality of advice it gives in terms of which actions to take under specific circumstances. To the extent that this standard was applied by practitioners to the development of the theoretical apparatus of each martial art, we may assume that the theory of each specific art has been developed with the intention of producing practical guidance, practical law. On the other hand, the definition of martial arts given by the English-language edition of Wikipedia gives no hint about a universal theory that might give practical guidance about how to win fights. Rather, the Wikipedia definition is ethnographic and shows the various non-theoretical aspects with which contemporary society views martial arts: “**Martial arts** are codified systems and traditions of combat practices, which are practiced for a variety of reasons: self-defense, competition, physical health and fitness, as well as mental, physical, and spiritual development.”² Wikipedia’s definition excludes any mention of theory and instead focuses solely upon the reasons that motivate practitioners to participate in martial arts. Martial arts possess underlying theories that are not concerned with the motivations of practitioners, but with producing practical guidance about the most efficient methods by which an individual may wound, kill and capture opponent(s) and/or defend against any type of physical attack. It is that underlying theoretical and philosophical apparatus that will manifest itself in the world through its practitioners.

2. Metaphysics of martial arts

The previous section argued that the martial arts are best understood as theories for winning fights efficiently. Along those lines, it is possible to explain how to throw an opponent by utilizing the theory of physics to help understand that particular physical phenomenon (throwing an opponent). But, at the same time, universal laws, a concept of force, a concept of atom, etc. were produced by being abstracted from physical phenomenon by metaphysical thinking. A philosopher can consequently hope to understand universal essences

and fundamental principles by observing natural phenomena. Heidegger [1973: 48] considered in his *Being and Time* that “Those entities which show themselves in this and for it, and which are understood as entities in the most authentic sense, thus get interpreted with regard to the Present; that is, they are conceived as presence (*oὐσία*).” Heidegger thought that entities which are conceived as presence must be that we can say they are here and there undoubtedly. He insists in the introduction of the *Being and Time* that thinkers recognize, in the tradition of metaphysics since Plato, the world as the existing of essence and think that the truth always manifests itself observably in nature [Takahashi 2006: 78-79]. Seen from that vantage point, the arts (Gi/Gei in Japanese) can be viewed as abbreviated methods for presenting the nature of the truth that is understood to exist in nature. Thus, martial arts can be thought of as abbreviated methods for presenting the nature of the truths related to the best methods to win a fight. These truths are presented to us in the phenomenon of fighting. Judged from the viewpoint of Plato’s metaphysics, martial arts have a very low intrinsic value when thought of as an instrument that serves the purpose of winning. But is it appropriate to believe that the life of a Japanese philosophical samurai (who finds mental improvement in the process of strict training and who hopes to realize “*ku* (*Śūnyatā*)”, or enlightened emptiness) is inferior to the life of a philosopher who meditates on God or Ideas and who hopes to realize Truth? If both have as their goal to further their understanding of a theory aimed at understanding truths manifest themselves in nature, are they not equal? And, if so, what did the philosophical samurai think about, and how did they think about those things?

3. Speculation on early-modern Japanese fencing (*kenjutsu*)

Musashi Miyamoto was a prominent swordsman (*kenjutsuka*) who survived Japan’s final Warring States period. He wrote about the details of techniques and the use of mind to win in battle. He did this in a famous document, *Gorin-no-sho*, written in 1645, a book of secrets on *kenjutsu* (swordsmanship) and tactics at the beginning of the Edo era. Much of the document is philosophical and concerned with the meaning of life or of a life assuming a combat. Musashi’s *Ku* is the same as the concept of *Śūnyatā* in Mahayana Buddhism whereas *Ku* with its normal meaning in Japan is a state of emptiness. While discussing *Heiho* (*kenjutsu* and tactics), he explains that *Śūnyatā* is a confident mind or a state released from all earthly desires. It can

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martial_arts (Access: 25/3/2013)

be acquired by improving mind and will through the practice of kenjutsu, and by training how to utilize eye contact in both far and near conditions (“Kan-ken-no-metsuke”). Musashi who knew the relativity of a technique described the necessity to remove fear and skepticism that the relativity bears. The way of *Sūnyatā* is the same as a state of enlightenment in Buddhism. Musashi, who strove to serve his liege in his last years, was not able to attain a state of *Sūnyatā* in life. But he perceived that *Sūnyatā* would have usefulness in a fight because the warrior armed with *Sūnyatā* would be completely unemotional and thus incapable of indicating to his opponent when or how he might strike. Munenori Yagyu was another famous kejutsu master who lived in almost the same age with Musashi. In his 1632 document, *Heihō-kaden-sho*, he expressed the state of *Sūnyatā* in “mu (Abháva)” and referred to the importance of the mind of *Abháva*, *Byojoshin* (*Tsune-no-kokoro*) or the usual frame of mind. How do you do when you have no sword? It is good not to worry about your sword but use anything as your sword. But you would need a mind to capture the opponent’s weapon with a mind prepared to die, namely, to confront your life. Munenori was a student of Zen Buddhism. So in the latter half of *Katsu-nin-ken* (The Life-Giving Sword) of the document he says that this mental attitude can be referred to as *Mu-to* (No-sword). Thanks to their theories being written down and then gradually published widely, many eminent samurais living in the peaceful centuries that followed built their training upon the ideas of Musashi and Munenori. These successors kept to pursuit *Ku* and *Mu* in mind while diligently practising various techniques to win sparring matches in exercise halls. Through their collective efforts, martial arts were refined into the way of life in Japan. The process of their practice was thought of as a way of understanding and attempting to achieve the goals of *Ku* or *Mu*. It came to be distilled into the philosophy of life referred to as “*jutsu kara michi e*” (“from art to the way”). This philosophy of life and the discernment of essential truths by the physical practices of fighting methods was succeeded in modern Japan by Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo.

4. Philosophical theory of modern judo

The philosophical samurai’s method of practice — of attempting to move from art to the way, of attempting to discern universal truths from their natural manifestations in combat — was taken up and refined by Jigoro Kano. Kano flourished during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Japan had abandoned feudalism and was attempting to make

its way in post-feudalism, constitutional monarchy. Kano consciously desired to further develop the philosophy and pedagogy of the Japanese martial arts. We can understand both of Kano’s innovations — the technical and practical on the one hand and the philosophical and pedagogical on the other — by reflecting upon two slogans that Kano invented to convey to his students Judo’s philosophy with regard to these two spheres of essential, universal knowledge. The first slogan is *seiryoku-zenyo*, or, “Maximum Efficiency with Minimum Effort.” This was Judo’s guiding principle as to how all physical combat motions should be undertaken. Under this definition, Judo should offer the very best theory of how to win fights, and Judo should be the best martial art. Kano thought of the efficacy of martial arts training not only in terms of producing effective fighters but also effective human beings, or not only of the best ways to fight but also of the best ways to associate with other human beings. Kano’s beliefs in this aspect are captured by his second slogan, *jita kyoei*, or, “Mutual Welfare and Benefit.” He added this second slogan because martial arts that are pursued and applied only with the guidance of *seiryoku-zenyo* could be used not only by the good but the bad. It is because efficiency in combat does not imply combat pursued for a worthy goal. Thus, it is not enough for a philosophical samurai to become an effective fighter by gaining knowledge of the universal truths and essences of combat by observing its natural manifestations in fighting. The philosophical samurai should also be directed toward proper actions by knowledge of the universal truths and essences of the moral life. In this way, Kano strove to generalize “from art to the way”. *Jita kyoei* could be applied in all spheres of life after having been understood by close observation of their manifestation during martial arts practice sessions and tournaments. Kano, who lived during a period when Japan was consciously attempting to modernize and move past the feudal system, wrote, “Jujutsu did not adjust to the modern times because it is a martial art that was only focused on the outcome of a battle. Judo, however, is a method of character-building that works by discovering *genri* or “principles” through studying the reasons of the outcome, and by using the way of the principles that were applied during successful techniques”. This is a very modern and insightful remark on judo and jujutsu deduced from an old saying, “from art to the way”. Furthermore, once the principles are discovered, it can be understood that since the training techniques are inseparable from character-building, the training techniques become character-building in it and of themselves and thus the principles wear morality. It

should also be understood that Kano believed that his two slogans were intertwined. Both fighting truths and moral truths could be determined by observing the same set of physical manifestations in the training hall. The physical and moral truths manifested simultaneously. Thus, on the one hand, a technique could be valued from the standpoint of *seiryoku-zenvyo* in terms of its fighting efficacy. But at the same time, its ability to deliver mutual welfare and benefit could also be ascertained by applying *seiryoku-zenvyo* as a methodical principle to rate the moral good and bad of an action. Kano urged his students to search for ethical principles by observing the moral reasons behind the outcomes observed in the training hall and in tournaments. But why did Kano develop the goal of forming character-building by the determination of ethical principles? It is because he believed that mutual welfare and benefit manifest themselves during the egoless states of *Śūnyatā* and *Abháva* — which also happen to be the mental states that are most conducive to victory in combat. Kano grasped the procedure of martial arts ascetic practices under the influence of traditional teaching to be summoned from “from art to the way”.

5. The evolution of an inclusive theory of the martial arts

The theories of Musashi, Munenori, and Kano were intended as general theories and that nobody has ever accused their theories of being too narrow. The problem is that they are very likely too broad. All of the three did describe many concrete methods in their writings. But those particular concrete methods are not by themselves joined together with an inclusive theory of martial arts. Thus, it is commonly believed that no such inclusive, general theory exists. This is a mistake. At least one attempt has been made to create a general theory that encompasses all of the possible techniques, motions, and actions that can be taken in a fight. I will refer to this theory as *the inclusive theory of martial arts*. It explains the relations among kenjutsu, jujutsu, etc, but is not popularly known.

To see why the inclusive theory is useful, let us examine the limits of Kano's noninclusive theory and its further development under the inclusive theory of Kenji Tomiki, one of Kano's students. Kano uncovered the principle of *Ju* (flexibility) in his study of many jujutsu documents. But since he found some combat situations for which he was not able to explain the best action to take by use of *Ju*, he theorized *seiryoku-zenvyo* as a universal principle of action. But *seiryoku-zenvyo* is too general. It fails to give specific guidance about,

for instance, dealing with an opponent striking with a fist or using a particular type of weapon in a given circumstance. It urges the student to maximize by being efficient, but it does not define what efficiency is in any particular circumstance. Kano certainly emphasized the importance of *shizen-tai* or natural-posture when fighting, and he analyzed techniques by applying *kuzushi* or the theory of mechanics. Kano noticed the importance of *atemi-waza* or striking and kicking techniques, and he recommended that judoka should practise how to avoid being stabbed by sparring with a rubber knife from their childhood. But Kano had not discerned a general principle that united the various fighting systems, though he figured out many methods and had bold conceptions regarding the further evolution of judo—such as a judo that incorporated kendo.

It was Kenji Tomiki who gave an answer to the questions regarding specific situations that were not addressed by Kano's theoretical apparatus. Tomiki [1959] did so by positing the concept of *Judo-genri* or the principle of judo as including the three subordinate principles of *shizen-tai*, *ju*, and *kuzushi*. They had been studied by Kano individually but not brought together by Kano under a single theoretical apparatus.

Tomiki's contribution was to interpret each of them by concrete reference to kendo tactics and movements. There were explicit directions as to how to cut or punch or kick as if using a sword; how to properly engage in eye contact in all fighting situations; and specific guidance as to exactly how to maintain proper *maai* (distance, position, timing) in any particular situation involving any combination of armed or unarmed combat. Thus, Tomiki provided an inclusive theoretical system that could give practical advice in any fighting situation and which thus encompassed all possible fighting systems and all existing fighting traditions. Tomiki [1973] also thought deeply about the proper life goals of the philosophical samurai, and summarized the state of mind of the person who completed character-building and achieved *Śūnyatā* or *Abháva* in two short words: *mu-shin*, or imperturbable frame of mind, and *mu-gamae*, or natural posture. A person whose actions and thoughts demonstrated *mu-shin* and *mu-gamae* would have reached the highest possible level of achievement both as a fighter and as a spiritual being. By building upon the theoretical achievements of his martial arts forefathers, Tomiki made a sublime and substantive advancement in the history of Japanese martial arts. He moved from a general slogan that could apply in a very general sense to anything in life (Maximum Efficiency with Minimum Effort!) to

a general theory of the martial arts that could give specific guidance in concrete situations.

Since the time of Plato, metaphysicians have seen the world as the existing of essence. Metaphysics works as a technique to disclose those essences and truths. Thus, even modern science is a type of metaphysics, and the same goes for modern technology, as well. On the other hand, the metaphysical thinking about Japanese martial arts has evolved as “the metaphysics of Asian martial arts” and it is believed to deconstruct the binary opposition of life and death or victory and defeat. Martial arts, which are far from the philosophy of competitive martial arts are expected to be studied minutely on the basis of Japanese culture, custom and a sense of value.

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W czym przejawia się filozofia sztuk walki? Spostrzeżenia dotyczące japońskich sztuk walki

Słowa kluczowe: metafizyka, Jigoro Kano, Musashi Miyamoto, Munenori Yagu, Kenji Tomiki

Streszczenie

Pytanie dotyczące filozofii sztuk walki może być podzielone na dwie części: 1) Pytanie dotyczące istoty sztuki walki, 2) Pytanie dotyczące duchowej istoty konkretnego rodzaju walki. Sztuki walki można krótko określić jako zbiór wiedzy na temat ruchów ciała, który ma na celu pomoc w zadaniu ran, zabiciu, schwytnaniu przeciwnika i / lub obrony przed wszelkiego rodzaju atakami fizycznymi.

Uniwersalne prawa, pojęcie siły, pojęcie atomu itp. zostały stworzone przez oderwanie od zjawiska fizycznego przez myślenie metafizyczne. Filozof może w konsekwencji mieć nadzieję zrozumieć uniwersalne treści i podstawowe zasady, obserwując naturalne zjawiska. Stąd sztuki walki mogą być traktowane jako skrócone metody prezentacji charakteru prawd związanych z najlepszymi sposobami wygrania walki. Te prawdy są przedstawione w zjawisku walki. Oceniane z punktu widzenia metafizyki Platona, sztuki walki mają bardzo niską wartość samą w sobie, gdy traktowane są jako instrument, który służy jedynie wygranej. Filozoficzna metoda praktyki, próba przejścia z techniki na drogę, z próbą odróżnienia uniwersalnych prawd od ich naturalnych przejawów w walce — została podjęta i udoskonalana przez Jigoro Kano, który świadomie dążył do dalszego rozwoju filozofii i pedagogiki japońskich sztuk walki. Oprócz Kano były też teorie Musashiego i Munenori. Wszystkie te teorie były przeznaczone jako ogólne teorie, których zakres był prawdopodobnie zbyt szeroki. Istniała przynajmniej jedna próba stworzenia ogólnej teorii, która obejmuje wszystkie możliwe techniki, wnioski i działania, które można podjąć w walce. To globalna teoria sztuk walki przedstawiona przez Tomiki. Wyjaśnia ona relacje między kenjutsu, jujutsu itp., ale nie jest powszechnie znana. Daje ona także praktyczne porady, w każdej sytuacji walki, i tym samym obejmuje wszystkie możliwe systemy walki i wszystkie istniejące tradycje walki. Od czasów Platona, metafizicy widzieli świat jako istotę spraw i prawd. Metafizyka działa jako technika ujawnienia owej istoty i prawdy. Tak więc, nawet współczesna nauka jest rodzajem metafizyki i to samo dotyczy nowoczesnych technologii. Z drugiej strony, myślenie metafizyczne o japońskich sztukach walki ewoluowało jako „metafizyka azjatyckich sztuk walki” i uważa się, że demonstruje binarną opozycję życia i śmierci lub zwycięstwa i klęski.

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