

## Ethics and combat sports

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*The 11th International Symposium JORRESCAM was held on 16 March 2012 at the Université Toulouse 1 Capitol, under the general theme of "Ethics and combat sports".*

*On this occasion, I gave a talk that might be of interest to my students.*

*I therefore am making its contents available to them as my chronicle for this month (April).*

Ethics in sports or in martial arts?

I believe that we should approach the topic of ethics in combat sports and in martial arts from two different angles: ritual and awareness depending on a person's level of practice.

Although there is a uniform ritual aspect to ethical conduct, people's awareness of an ethic varies according to their degree of progress. A beginner will learn the ethic under the form of rituals or rules associated with a discipline. As he progresses, his awareness of the ethic will naturally go beyond the formal bounds of rituals and rules. In the case of an expert, this ethic should be indissociable from his way of living. It is only at this stage that we can speak of philosophy in martial arts.

In this regard, it seems to me that it would be misleading to speak of ethics in martial art as

though it were essentially a uniform code of conduct, since ethics implies qualitative changes as the person progresses.

While the ethical framework remains the same, one's awareness of that ethic will change according to the vision he has of his practice as his level of progress increases. We could compare this to the experience of mountain climbing.

Let me explain.

If you climb Mont Blanc, your vision will change as you go higher and higher. The view you had of the summit while you were still at the foot of the mountain no longer has anything to do with what you can see once you have arrived at the top. You are of course the same person, but what your vision encompasses is now totally different from what you could see when you were below.

If there is no ascension, there is no mountain climbing. Similarly, if there is no progress, there is no sense in speaking of the practice of a martial art that employs the suffix -do, or way. The concept of change in one's practice is clearly expressed here. As you advance along the way, your vision changes. If it does not, it means that there has been no progress along the way, but only practice of a system.

Each discipline has its own particularity, even though many point in a similar direction. Strictly speaking, in ritual form each discipline has its own ethic, which applies to all practitioners. In effect, particularity exists in every discipline, including kendo, karate-do, iai-do, aiki-do, judo, sumo (do), etc. It constitutes both the way of preparing for bouts of combat, and the way of practicing techniques and respecting one's opponent.

While the ritual bounds of an ethic are imposed almost uniformly on all who devote themselves to a discipline, ethics in martial arts has another aspect that must be constituted and consolidated as the person develops in the course of his technical progress. For technical progression means upward progress of the individual, if we are inspired and train at all according to the concept of do, or the way. Because the way is where we walk and move ahead, and that implies development, or evolution. On the way, the vision of a beginner should not be the same as that of an expert, even though the ethical framework remains the same for both.

I think that this evolutionary aspect of ethics is often overlooked when we think about ethics in martial arts.

I would like us to think about this using some examples drawn from the practice of combat sports and martial arts.

More precisely, I will base them on some of the original disciplines of Japanese martial arts. I will not give the names of persons, or the year of the events that have inspired these reflexions.

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During the judo finals at the Olympic Games, a Japanese fighter injured his ankle. Despite this handicap and his resulting limp, he fought courageously and ended up winning the match. It

was a moving spectacle. Everyone congratulated him on his courage and his qualities as a fighter. His opponent vanished from the scene. Obviously, no-one congratulated him on his performance, for he had lost against an injured opponent. As soon as the Japanese winner took his place in the spotlight, his opponent slipped away into the shadows. We can easily understand the reason why.

However, if we examine this fight situation from a different angle, we see that the loser could have fought the winner by using leg sweeps, which are techniques that are allowed in rules-governed combat sports. But if he had used them, he would certainly have further devastated his opponent's already injured leg. However, he would have been able to conduct the fight to his advantage and would probably have won. But he didn't, and so he lost the match.

If the Japanese fighter had a handicap because of his injury, his opponent also was handicapped due to his voluntary acceptance of an important moral constraint, because out of fear of further damaging an already injured opponent, he preferred to not take advantage of a technique that would have allowed him to win. In a way, we could say that he agreed to accept this moral handicap. For a qualified fighter must spontaneously find his opponent's weak spot. If he follows the logic of combat, he must be able to use that weakness to his own advantage, but to do so went against this fighter's ethics. By disallowing himself this advantage, he voluntarily assumed a handicap that led to his defeat. Personally, I think that this is the fighter who deserved praise.

A question arises: what should be the place of ethics in the rules of sports?



**What lessons can we draw from these three examples?**

As far as ethics in practice is concerned, the examples that we've just seen show that we cannot talk about ethics without taking into account the relative awareness of a person depending on his level. Ethics in martial arts is not comparable to the traffic code, which everyone must obey in the same manner. Ethics in martial arts has to do with a person's level of progress in the discipline. In a way, one's awareness of ethics is on a par with his level of practice.

There is no sense in expecting a beginner to understand, and then to act in the same way as prescribed in the third example.

This is something that is difficult to systematise in the form of rules. Which poses a certain difficulty for practice in the West, where people seem to want to systematise everything according to a set of rules.

For example, in the first case, the fighter who suffered defeat could have been the winner, if he had fought as hard as he could within the established rules, and without concerning himself over the state of his opponent's leg. He lost because he was sufficiently advanced to realise the seriousness of his opponent's injury, and his conscience kept him from using techniques that would have enabled him to win, but which went against his ethics.

In the second case, the winner didn't need to strike a blow to win, because his opponent had been pushed out of bounds. Those who were sufficiently advanced in the discipline were able to appreciate the quality of this combat and could say, "That was a magnificent fight!"

But I wonder how the spectators would have reacted if this type of fight had taken place in a

venue where people go mainly to see a spectacle!!! Most probably, there would have been lots of booing because no strikes had been made.

The third example further explains this type of situation and the quality of combat thanks to the words of the Master, who explains why one should not strike. When he said “That strike was useless and amounts to an act of cruelty”, his words expressed not only the quality of combat to be sought, but also the ethics underlying kendo. But this ethic is far from being obvious to a beginner, who must persevere and learn to strike with all his energy.

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I think that these three examples can help us to reflect on what is meant by “ethics” in Japanese martial art. Ethics in martial art, but also in combat sports, cannot be compared to the traffic code, because a combat discipline does not involve only cultural roots; one’s awareness of ethics has to evolve with the person’s technical level, as these last examples drawn from kendo show.

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I’ll finish with some thoughts on the cultural aspects of ethics.

For while ethics should be found in the quality of practice in combat sports and martial arts, it is also expressed in their code of gestures, as for example in their opening bows or salutes.

On this point, there is a major misunderstanding concerning the martial arts from Japan.

Normally, in serious clubs, before a training session, when the most senior practitioner gives the command “seiza”, students line up facing their teacher and facing the wall where there is often a photo of the founder of the karate, judo, or aiki-do school. On hearing the command, “Shomen ni rei”, everyone bows to him.

Then, the teacher faces the students and, when the command “Sensei ni rei” is given, teacher and students bow to each other.

Then sometimes, on the command, “Otagai ni rei”, all the students bow to each other.

This ritual is considered “traditional”, and therefore serious practitioners apply it as the basis of their ethic in martial arts. In a way, they live the traditional authenticity of Japanese martial art.

However, a large part of this ritual that they consider “traditional” is not traditional at all.

Japanese martial arts continued to be transmitted within the strict social context of the samurai until the 19th century. Therefore, if we wish to speak about the traditional aspect of their ethics, we cannot avoid referring to the culture and tradition of the samurai.

However, the samurai never made this type of bow.

Quite simply, this form of bow or salute comes from the Western military system and not from Japanese tradition.

If students line up on hearing the command “seiza”, which is a Japanese word, it is because this act is a transposition from how soldiers line up on hearing the command “Fall in”. The samurai didn’t line up in this fashion either before or after their martial art workout. They did line up to

face their feudal lord, but not to train.

Saluting the photo of the founding master is a transposition from the military, when soldiers salute the national flag. The samurai never made this type of salute. Together they bowed before their lord, but their salute to their martial arts master was more individual in nature. The collective action model forms part of military efficiency, but the Japanese samurai didn't learn it until very late. We can say that they learned it to put an end to their existence as samurai, as this model became effective in the period when the samurai class was replaced by modern armed forces based on the European model. The models that you think of as "traditional" were introduced to Japan from Europe in the 1860s to 1870s through the military system.

In the 1850s, several hundred sword schools (kenjutsu) were counted in Japan, and each of these schools had certain particularities in their ritual of practice. So it would be false to consider that the way of bowing that we saw earlier was the only one of its kind.

A question to conclude:

Why should we refer to tradition when we practice so-called traditional martial arts, when their content and way of practice have evolved so considerably? Why not reflect on ethics from the standpoint of the quality and the form of our contemporary practice, which have changed so much both in technique and in the objectives pursued within the framework of sports?

*To be continued...*