Introduction
Ethics and the Universal
in Meiji Japan

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.
—Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology

Moral universalism is a contentious idea. The theory of “moral universals”—the idea that all humanity or all those of a particular national or cultural community share certain common moral sensibilities, or that one’s own moral perspective is in fact a timeless moral truth—has in some form long been a central feature of moral discourse. Those who accept this theory may disagree over what “our values” are, or what foundation verifies the truthfulness of these values, but that such values exist is widely presupposed. But can any moral claim ever transcend its own historicity? Given that any morality asserting its validity across time and space can make such an assertion only through the specific language and cultural resources of a particular time and place, moral universals do not appear to be universal at all. Rather than timeless truths that have been revealed to us—whether through an examination of the natural world, society, or our innermost “human nature”—moral universals appear from this historicizing standpoint to be contingent products of the epistemological and normative context out of which they emerge.¹ It matters, for example, whether a moral claim is put forward by a Shin Buddhist monk in nineteenth-century Japan or by a philosopher in twentieth-century France; knowledge and value for each will be understood differently. If moral truth is produced rather than revealed—and this project will show that in some cases
Introduction

it most certainly is—then the question of how it is produced becomes crucially important. This is a study of the process by which the good as a contingent perspective is recast as a timeless truth or universal principle. It sets aside the question “What is the good?” (a question basic to the way the discipline of ethics is conceptualized) and asks instead, “How is the good produced?”

To address this question, I inquire into the shifting epistemological conditions for moral truthfulness in Meiji Japan (1868–1912) and call attention to the role of the universal in legitimizing the moral claims of this time. That is, I examine the underlying presuppositions about nature, humanity, society, the nation-state, and culture that shaped what was possible to think and say about how one ought to think and act. Can nature tell us what is moral, or should we ground our moral claims in what we know of humanity? Should our focus be social relations in general or something more specific: the culture, traditions, and character of a given nation or “people”? Different answers to these questions held sway at different times in modern Japanese history. Moreover, those espousing moral perspectives sought legitimacy for their views by grounding them in a supposedly universal foundation: the laws of nature, natural law, the human personality, or the timeless Way of the Japanese people. Thus, universal values conveyed, in some cases, moral sensibilities common to all humanity; in others, the values of Japan’s particular national or cultural community.

Morality was at the forefront of intellectual debates in late nineteenth century Japan. In the Social Darwinist “survival of the fittest” atmosphere of this time, the Japanese state sought to quell uprisings and rebellions and to overcome all manner of divisive social disruptions so as to produce national unity and defend its sovereignty against Western encroachment. Morality became a crucial means to attain these aims. Moral prescriptions for reordering the population came from all segments of society. Buddhist, Christian, and Confucian apologists, literary figures and artists, advocates of natural rights, anarchists, women defending nontraditional gender roles, and others put forward moral views designed to unify society. Each envisioned a unity grounded in its own moral perspective. It was in this tumultuous atmosphere that the academic discipline of ethics (rinrigaku) emerged.

The first departmental chair for ethics at a Japanese university was established at Tokyo Imperial University in 1893, thus conferring official recognition upon this newly formed discipline. But preliminary studies of morality associated with this discipline began more than a decade earlier. A New Theory of Ethics (Rinri shinsetsu, 1883), a work by philosophy professor Inoue Tetsujirō (1856–1944), marked the emergence of this discipline in the early 1880s and signaled the role rinrigaku was to play as an apparatus of the state. Scholars of ethics, together with state bureaucrats, pursued social unity and order through
the cultivation of common moral sensibilities. At the same time, they provided philosophical justification for the oftentimes violent suppression of socially disruptive or “dangerous” thought and action that ran counter to the needs of the state. Thus, these two goals—producing moral unity and suppressing dangerous thought—were closely intertwined. Yet the more rinrigaku and the state struggled to produce and regulate a common hegemonic morality, the more resistance they encountered. Indeed, the pursuit of moral hegemony itself, I argue, sustained the violence and moral dissension it aimed to overcome.2

Rinrigaku scholars justified the state’s acts of suppression by insisting on the universal status of its particular and perspectival claims concerning “the good.” Seeking to position themselves as the dominant arbiters of the good, rinrigaku scholars projected their claims outward (attempting to universalize a particular form of socio-moral practice) and backward in time (reconfiguring the past to accord with their supposedly “universal” ethical claims in the present) so as to produce the moral unity the state demanded. The claim to universal status was thus a key strategy for overcoming the historical contingency of rinrigaku’s moral position and asserting its changeless quality. Marx alluded to such a strategy when he stated that each new class is compelled to represent its ideas (and this includes its values) as universal, as those of society as a whole.3 But the “unchanging” universal ground for ethics in Meiji Japan changed with the particular historical context.

In the 1880s, for example, the discipline of ethics was central in establishing and defending an “ethics of civilization.” Upheld as a universal morality common to all humanity, the ethics of civilization condemned public urination, mixed-sex bathing, and other “barbaric” practices associated with the “foolish masses.” Scholars of ethics justified the suppressive “civilizing legislation” (kaika jōrei) of the state, which made such practices illegal, through an empiricist, scientific methodology that allowed them to make authoritative moral claims grounded in universal reason. While Japan’s past became a repository of barbaric practices and foolish superstitions, the future promised ever higher levels of “civilization.” Japan would take its place among the more fully civilized nations of the West provided that the irrational and now immoral beliefs and practices of the past could be suppressed and the foolish properly civilized.

By the turn of the century, as many struggled against the idea of a “hierarchy of civilization” because of the inferior position to which it assigned Japan, the discipline of ethics underwent a transition from an ethics of civilization to an ethics of spirit.4 Scholars of ethics like Inoue Tetsujirō, Nakashima Rikizō, FUKasaku Yasubumi, and many others grew critical of empiricism, emphasizing the limitations of reason, observation, and experimentation as avenues for apprehending the good. Instead, by drawing on “national character” and Volksgeist
(folk spirit)—conceptions originally associated with German Romanticism but now powerfully impacting Japan’s intellectual landscape—rinrigaku scholars now posited a unitary Japanese morality informed by a common folk spirit. Japanese folk morality, according to its architects, demanded self-sacrifice and patriotic loyalty to the state. The ethics of civilization common to all humanity had been displaced by an ethics of spirit common to all “true Japanese.” Thus, the universal continued to operate as a basis for moral authority, but in a circumscribed form. Those whose moral convictions ran counter to this emerging Japanese moral spirit (most notably anarchists and socialists) were condemned as dangerous; some were beaten or imprisoned, others—as in the 1911 High Treason Incident involving a plan to assassinate the emperor—executed. Thus, the pursuit of moral hegemony—in both early and late Meiji—involves efforts to strengthen the authority of the state’s moral vision on the one hand and to suppress alternative moral views on the other.

The education system became the primary means for disseminating both the ethics of civilization of early Meiji and the ethics of spirit that emerged at the end of this period. While moral philosophers wrote scholarly works on ethics, they also produced, often in conjunction with Ministry of Education bureaucrats, primary school textbooks through which students pursued moral training (shūshin). Shūshin literally meant “to discipline the body” (mi o osameru), and this was indeed one of its key objectives, both in the classroom where this term was most often heard, and throughout society. Appropriate moral behavior was to be cultivated through the performative repetition of certain daily practices or bodily activities (the recitation of moral lessons in the classroom), through the discontinuation or prohibition of others (mixed-sex bathing, public urination), and through repeated exposure to stories or images of actions to be emulated (shouting out “Tennō heika banzai!” [Long live the emperor!] when struck down by an enemy’s bullet on the battlefields of Manchuria).

Moral training, however, was not just about disciplining the body. Equally important was the disciplining of the mind, and much of the struggle that characterized Meiji moral discourse centered on questions revolving around precisely this issue. At stake here was the human interiority. What is the proper role of the state in shaping the moral lives of its citizens? Should “conscience” be regulated by the state? While religious apologists, socialists, and individualists demanded a space of autonomy for the individual free from state moral intervention, moral training, whether understood as shūshin or as the wide-scale moral reform of society, helped to expand the role of the state in shaping the moral interiority of the individual. Its effectiveness was tied to the level of authority rinrigaku scholars mustered for their moral-philosophical arguments.
and to the degree that the parameters of legitimate moral discourse could be widely naturalized.

Early in the Meiji period, rinrigaku established the terms, issues, and limits of “legitimate” moral discourse: the importance of social unity, the survival of the state, loyal self-sacrifice for the social good, fulfilling one’s duties as a subject of the state, knowing one’s “station” and proper role in society, preserving “our” traditional values. Debate could (and did) take place concerning how unity was to be attained, what loyalty demanded of state subjects, and which values were “traditional,” but these terms were established with sufficient authority and broad interpretive potential so as to allow the state to maintain control and effectively negotiate contingent historical changes unforeseen in the early Meiji period. Such changes included the emergence of new social classes and subject positions, industrialization and rapid urbanization, and economic and social mobilization in times of war. In this sense, much of the resistance to rinrigaku took place within a space of discourse where prioritizing the good of the state was already accepted. With rinrigaku’s success in establishing authority for its own modes of moral inquiry, religious apologists, advocates of anarchism and individualism, and others found themselves with little authority to speak for “the good.” I investigate how and with what success these various groups resisted the discipline of ethics and the state.

This study begins with an examination of the morality of “civilization” (out of which rinrigaku emerged) and that which was to be civilized—the barbaric or “foolish” thought and actions of the “masses.” Civilization (bunmeikaika), in the sense used here, was a complex discourse on hierarchy according to which societies progress from barbarism to an enlightened stage of development epitomized by an imagined space called “the West.” I argue that Inoue Tetsujirō’s New Theory of Ethics reflects the norms of civilization and that it was the first comprehensive attempt to objectify the good in accordance with the new modes of moral inquiry that came to be called rinrigaku. Rinrigaku scholars like Inoue called for the civilizing of the “unenlightened masses,” commonly referred to as the “foolish people.” That civilizing was necessary, and indeed urgent, was the starting point for these scholars. Thus, although they claimed to objectively seek the foundations of “the good,” they were rather constructing an ethical foundation with which to legitimize a set of values to which they (and the state) were already committed. An examination of several works of gesaku (literature of play) provides an example of how this discourse on civilization was contested. Gesaku writers satirizing the seriousness of “moral civility” subverted the authority of rinrigaku and the state and thus marked the limit of civilization’s authority.
After an examination of the broad moral space of “civilization,” I turn in the second chapter to the dominant moral theories of early Meiji and the underlying epistemology that shaped and authorized them. Rinrigaku scholars of the early 1880s defined “the good” in terms of state power and social order. While they claimed to speak from a value-neutral position, a position from which to inquire into and apprehend the good, their methodologies and ethical theories were invariably rooted in culturally and historically specific epistemological presuppositions. I approach rinrigaku as a discourse on the good emerging out of a modern epistemology. My concern here is with “modernity” not as a point in time but as having to do with a particular set of authoritative and fundamental presuppositions about knowledge and truth that (re)shaped thought, action, and (of particular concern in this work) the good. A marked opposition between subject and object, between, for example, the observer and what he or she observes, was a central presupposition that characterized this epistemology. Other presuppositions included the view of truth or the good as essential (possessing an essence that makes it what it is) and revelatory (capable of being revealed through the application of instrumental reason). This framework for knowledge, which I call an epistemology of representation, informed rinrigaku and—as it grew in authority and engaged with competing normative positions—other views of the good as well. An examination of this epistemology is a useful task because it helps to reveal the contingency of rinrigaku’s ethical claims, it facilitates our interpretation of moral texts from this period, and it allows us to explore the formation of moral subjectivity—a moral position or intellectual space shaped by, but also constituting or shaping, discourse and material practices.

In chapter 3 I focus on the fluidity of moral subjectivity (the constantly shifting nature of the norms to which we are subject and how we apprehend, resist, or practice them) by juxtaposing rinrigaku texts with moral writings by religious apologists. According to rinrigaku scholars of early Meiji, religion (shūkyō)—and Christianity most of all—posed a threat to social order. At this time, rinrigaku and religion struggled for the authority to speak on what is ethical. Rinrigaku academics sought to expel religion from “legitimate” ethical inquiry. In an effort to defend their views, religious apologists internalized many features of the epistemology that grounded rinrigaku, but changed them in the process to accord with their own theories and understandings. In the hands of defenders of religion, key terms and concepts that informed rinrigaku’s style of moral inquiry were transformed and redirected to new ends unforeseen by those who first insisted upon them. Buddhists, for example, linked the idea of karma with the scientific law of cause and effect, while Christian thinkers explained “evolutionary progress” as the gradual unfolding of “God’s plan.” But
this internalization of science and progress also transformed the moral space of religion. This discursive exchange between rinrigaku scholars and defenders of religion reflects the way the production of the good and epistemological preconceptions were inextricably bound to one another. Moreover, despite the efforts made at this time to speak on behalf of some timeless, moral universal truth, it attests to the fluidity of moral subjectivity and the contested and indeterminate nature of its production in Meiji Japan.

By the beginning of the 1890s, moral philosophers in Japan had begun to reshape their discipline. Moving away from the empiricism and utilitarianism of the prior decade, scholars of ethics now placed “spirit” at the center of ethical inquiry. They posited the good as intuitively apprehended, not rationally verified. Thus, intuition replaced reason, metaphysics replaced empiricism, and “spirit” (whether God, individual consciousness, or the “spirit of the nation”) became the basis for explaining and defining moral action. I examine this shift in my fourth chapter through the works of two thinkers, each deeply involved in the ethics of spirit: Inoue Tetsujirō, mentioned above, and moral philosopher Nakashima Rikizō (1858–1918), first to hold the chair of ethics at Tokyo Imperial University. The shift rinrigaku underwent was part of an effort to resist the civilizational hierarchies associated with “civilization.” But this required not merely the critique of assertions of Western superiority in the realms of knowledge and virtue; it also required the destabilization of the epistemology that grounded and enabled civilization. This epistemology of representation linked truth with the observable, the rationally verifiable, and the measurable. “Spirit,” the unobservable and intuitively apprehended, provided a means to contest civilization and its underlying epistemology and transformed the topography of moral thought in 1890s Japan.

In the final chapter of this volume, I examine the national morality movement (kokumin dōtoku), its close association with the state, and its opposition to what its proponents deemed “dangerous thought.” From the 1900s, a state-sponsored national morality came to dominate moral discourse in Japan. This morality of the national folk posited as a moral ideal a morally homogeneous society of dutiful subjects all equally loyal to the state. Competing visions of the state, the individual, and the good were represented as “dangerous thought” and violently suppressed—the most vivid example being the execution of twelve anarchist activists in the High Treason Incident of 1911. I argue that the pursuit of the national morality ideal required the eradication of obstacles in its path, hence the suppression of dangerous thought. Yet, the state’s violent tactics engendered violent resistance. Anarchists, for example, redefined the meaning of moral action so as to defend an “ethics of terrorism” with which to directly contest the authority of rinrigaku and the state. Thus, rather than producing
dutiful subjects and a morally cohesive society, national morality proponents merely sustained the violent social dissension they sought to overcome. In this section, I inquire into the potential violence inherent in the pursuit of moral ideals.

Finally, in the epilogue, I seek to position this study in a longer stream of history by outlining some of the conceptual linkages between the Meiji and later periods. A conceptual vocabulary, a constellation of semantically variable terms and ideas like kokumin, minzoku, the morality of self-negation, and dangerous thought, emerged by late Meiji and prefigured many of the most pressing concerns of interwar and wartime moral discourse. The epilogue also provides a summation of the major questions raised and arguments made concerning the discipline of ethics and “the universal” in Meiji Japan by turning briefly to contemporary Japan. A particular focus here is the emergence of a new discourse on national morality. I draw attention to social critic Nishibe Susumu’s recent publication, National Morality (Kokumin no dōtoku) and its critique. Although Nishibe’s moral program differs in many respects from early twentieth century statements on national morality, his desire to resuscitate the “moral spirit” common to all Japanese carries the same potential dangers and warrants the same careful scrutiny as the national morality of the Meiji period.