Applying Watsuji's Concept of Interpersonal Relations to Inter-State Relations: Rethinking Sovereignty Through Relational Ethics

Ruben von Twickel

Campus Fryslân - Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Bachelor thesis - BSc Global Responsibility & Leadership

Supervised by Friso Timmenga

Word Count: 9.800

June 6th, 2025

Abstract

In an era of deepening global interdependence, the traditional Westphalian conception of sovereignty, grounded in Western individualism and the autonomy of separate, self-contained states, has proven increasingly inadequate for addressing transnational challenges such as climate change, economic complexity, and humanitarian crises. This thesis proposes an alternative model of sovereignty inspired by the ethical philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō. Grounding this notion on key concepts such as *ningen*, *aidagara*, *rinri*, *sonzai* and *yononaka,* I argue that sovereignty should be reimagined not as a static, absolute authority, but as a dynamic and relational construct emerging from mutual recognition and interstate interdependence. The thesis critically engages with traditional sovereignty theory, highlights the limitations of dominant frameworks through thinkers like Krasner and Morgenthau, and applies Watsuji's ethics to real-world examples, including the European Union and the Paris Climate Agreement. While acknowledging critiques regarding idealism and procedural vagueness, I defend Watsuji's approach as a normative compass for a more cooperative and ethically grounded international order. This project introduces a non-Western philosophical framework that prioritises relational ethics over rigid autonomy in international relations theory.

Table of contents

Introduction

In the era of intensified global interdependence, the foundational legal concepts which define state sovereignty in international relations demand a critical reexamination. The current dominant models, which use the traditional Westphalian model and are shaped by Western political thought, have so far treated states as autonomous, self-contained entities, meaning states are legal subjects acting independently within a system of anarchy. This framework, influenced by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and others, privileges the individual as the primary ontological unit, projecting this logic onto the state. In a world that faces global challenges such as climate change, transnational security threats, economic interdependence, and complex humanitarian crises, this paradigm increasingly reveals its limitations as the current models cannot accurately describe the current state of affairs.

In this thesis, I argue that the ethical philosophy of Watsuji Tetsurō offers an alternative foundation for understanding sovereignty. Watsuji's relational ontology, is centred around the concept of *ningen* (人間), which means "human being", but more literally "person-between". This concept challenges the individualistic premises of both Western moral theory and traditional state sovereignty. In his ethics, human beings are not isolated agents but fundamentally relational, embedded in a dynamic web of social, cultural, and historical connections. Ethics, for Watsuji, arises not from abstract principles or individual rights but from our situated existence with and through others.

By extending Watsuji's ethical framework to the realm of international relations, I propose that sovereignty should similarly be reimagined not as a static, exclusive claim to authority, but as a relational construct. It emerges from the interdependence, mutual recognition, and ongoing negotiation between states. Just as *ningen* denotes the co-constituted nature of personhood, so too might sovereignty be understood as a function of state-to-state *aidagara* (間柄, betweenness), rather than an absolute claim to non-interference or self-sufficiency.

My thesis unfolds in four parts. In the first section, I lay out the core elements of Watsuji's ethical theory, introducing 4 concepts including *ningen*, *rinri* (倫理, ethics), *yononaka* (世の中, the public world), and *sonzai* (存在, existence), that I will use later to show how each concept contributes to a non-individualistic, relational ethics. In the second section, I examine traditional models of sovereignty, tracing their philosophical roots and exposing their theoretical and practical limitations through critiques by scholars such as Stephen Krasner and Andreas Osiander. In the third section, I articulate a model of relational sovereignty grounded in Watsuji's ethics, applying it to contemporary global challenges, such as climate governance, economic cooperation, and the European Union, as illustrative cases. In the last section I engage with key In the last section I engage with key objections, including the role of power, realism, and the critique of idealism and a lack of procedural clarity, to assess the viability of this alternative framework as it is important to acknowledge the tensions it introduces.

This thesis contributes to the development of non-Eurocentric conceptions of statehood and, in so doing, to the broader effort to decolonise the field of IR. It creates room for a philosophical reorientation: from self-sufficient states and humans to ethically entangled communities of obligation. By foregrounding the moral significance of relationality, Watsuji's thought opens the possibility for a more cooperative, responsive, and just global order.

1. Watsuji's Ethical Framework: Key Concepts and Foundations

To lay the groundwork for applying Watsuji's ethical framework to international relations, this first part introduces the key concepts of his moral philosophy. These include *ningen*, *rinri*, *yononaka*, and *sonzai*. The four concepts all describe about the same relational reality, but with different emphases: *sonzai* provides the most ontological account of existence as inherently social; *ningen* bridges ontology and ethics by defining human beings as constituted through relationships; *rinri* formalizes this into a moral framework grounded in social obligations; and *yononaka* describes the concrete, socio-historical space in which these ethical relationships unfold. Through these concepts, Watsuji articulates a view of

ethics not as a matter of isolated moral reasoning, but as an ongoing practice rooted in our embeddedness within a shared social world. By clarifying these philosophical foundations, this section establishes the relational ontology on which a new, non-individualistic conception of sovereignty can later be built.

First of all, it is important to recognise that Watsuji's Tetsurō's thought is rooted in the concept he names *ningen (人間),* which translates to "human being" This is unlike the Western notions of modern thought in which the autonomy of the individual is highlighted (Carter, 2013, p. 134-135). Watsuji critiques the modern Western tendency to define ethics as a matter of individual consciousness, arguing instead that ethics must be understood as the study of human relationships (Watsuji, 1996, p. 9). Now, *ningen* refers to the social aspect of human beings and the fact that humans are always together with others, making it a fundamental part of being human, clarifying the inherent relationality of human existence (Carter, 2013, p. 137). The term itself consists of two kanji characters: nin (人), meaning "person," and gen (間), meaning "between" or "space" (Carter, 2013, p. 135). It represents not only the individual being but also the interconnections and relationships among them, basically describing that humans exist within a social and spatial network of relationships that we can not be separated from. Carter (2013) explains these relationships on page 135 with, *"We are, at one time or another, children and parents, cousins and friends, students and teachers, consumers and merchants, laborers and care givers".* This example highlights that we are, on an everyday basis, in contact with other human beings, relating to each other in various ways. Which would explain that even without the intention of being in relation with others, we nevertheless are.

Watsuji highlights that living in *ningen* is not something that is always granted, as actions that have been continuously performed in the past to strengthen communal life can be disrupted in the future, which would risk this way of life. In this sense, relationships are not a one-time achievement that once reached will permanently exist, but require ongoing effort and ethical commitment to be maintained. For instance, consider a friend group that has a strong bond with each other, which was

established through past actions from all participants. If one friend stops being supportive or neglects his friends, this bond that was created will be disturbed or even break down. This example shows that relationships are not static as they require continuous actions to sustain them. He continues to explain that humans have an endless drive to form and restore community because humans are *ningen*, beings whose essence is to exist in relation to others. What Watsuji means by that is that while humans inherently strive to live in *ningen*, there is a need for an ongoing effort to maintain that status (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 11-12).

Watsuji's approach to ethics aligns closely with Confucianism, which influenced Japanese ethical thought by providing clear principles on social roles and relational obligations, such as loyalty and filial piety (Carter, 2013, pp. 139-140). This stood in contrast with the traditional Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, which mainly focuses on spiritual and ceremonial practices rather than explicit social ethics (Kasulis, 2025). While Shinto did incorporate some social precepts, it lacked a systematic framework. Watsuji saw Confucianism's emphasis on structured relationships as essential to understanding human ethics, especially in terms of social cohesion. He used this influence when describing different concepts, emphasising that human identity and morality are rooted in relationships and social bonds, which were underdeveloped in the ritual and spiritual focus of Shinto tradition (Carter, 2013, p. 138-140).

The Japanese word for Ethics is translated to rinri (倫理), consisting of two components "Rin" (倫), which can be translated to "fellows" or "companions," and "Ri," (理), referring to principles or reason. *Rinri* reflects Watsuji's relational understanding of morality. It focuses on the fact that ethical questions and principles can not be discussed in isolation but only in the context of the relationships between people and social interactions. This means that *rinri* describes the study of the relationship between individuals in the context of community, in essence explaining that human interactions and relationships do not exist in a vacuum but are embedded in social structures and communities. When we are looking at ethics, according to an understanding of ethics as *rinri*, we should see it as an ideal

which we constantly strive to realise more fully.

This relational approach challenges Western moral and political philosophies that prioritise individual agency, such as those of Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes views human nature as self-interested and posits that ethical behaviour emerges from a social contract to avoid conflict (Hobbes, 1651, pp. 88-89). Locke, while acknowledging natural rights, also recognises natural duties and obligations that arise from individuals' social contexts (Locke, 1689; Carter, 2013, p. 137). However, Watsuji's ethics differs in centring communal relationships as primary, arguing that moral duties rooted in relationality precede individual rights and are fundamental to human existence as he writes: "the locus of ethical problems lies not in the consciousness of the isolated individual, but precisely in the in-betweenness of person and person" (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 10-11).

Building on this relational understanding, Watsuji sets out to define the term that he thinks describes the "whole of human existence" and finds it in the concept of *yononaka (*世の中), which he translates to "the public". He explains that *yononaka is* not only a geographical or physical space but describes it as encompassing a realm where individuals exist and interact in historical, climatic and social contexts *(Watsuji, 1996, p. 15)*. Through this concept, Watsuji explains where and how this relationality happens. *Yononaka* refers to the broader public realm, the historical, social, and environmental context in which human relationships take shape. It underscores that individuals are always situated within shared structures such as customs, institutions, and collective norms, which both enable and shape relational life *(Watsuji, 1996, p. 19)*. This means that one's existence is, was and will always be interconnected and intertwined with others. To say it in other words, individuals do not exist in isolation but only exist in a broader realm and only gain meaning through their relationships with others in "the public".The public is not an objective structure, but a dynamic space of subjective interrelations between people. Publicness comes from the "betweenness" where individuals act and respond to one another (Watsuji, 1996, p. 18).

Watsuji differentiates between how *hito* (人, an individual human being) and *yononaka* characterise *ningen*. While *yononaka* is the social nature of *ningen*, *hito* describes the individual nature of it; these two complement each other. In Watsuji's thought, "hito" embodies the individual human, distinct, separate, and autonomous, yet still embedded within social contexts. We could not see *ningen* only through the perspective of *hito,* as this would deny the social aspect of humans and only focus on the individuality of it. *(Watsuji, 1996, p. 18)*. I believe that Watusji's *ningen* cannot be fully understood through the lens of *yononaka* (the public), because he earlier writes that "Individuals are basically different from society and yet dissolve themselves into society." This highlights that individuals (*hito*) are also essential to the concept of *ningen*, and thus, viewing it solely from the perspective of *yononaka* would overlook its full meaning (Watsuji, 1996, p. 15). For Watsuji, neither individuality nor social is more important than the other; to him, they are "co-equals" (Carter, 2013, p. 137).

Finally, Watsuji introduces the concept of *sonzai* (存在), meaning "existence" or "being" . He describes that *sonzai* adds a further dimension by emphasising how existence itself is lived through these interrelations (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 20- 21). It shifts the focus from the structure of relationships (*ningen* and *yononaka*) to the phenomenological experience of living as a relational being (Watsuji, 1996, p. 15). This stands in contrast to existentialist thinkers like Heidegger, who emphasise individual existence (*Dasein*), whereas Watsuji views existence as fundamentally social. He critiques Heidegger for neglecting the spatial and communal aspects of existence, arguing that "to exist" is to be embedded within a network of relationships (Carter, 2013, pp. 132-133). For Watsuji, *sonzai* is not a static substance or even an entity. For him, *sonzai* highlights existence as a process*;* it exists through the interconnectedness of individuals and though continuously formed through interaction, obligation, and co-existence with each other. Basically, it includes and describes the subjective experience of each individual, describing their relation to and in society (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 22-23).

His four concepts of *ningen*, *rinri*, *yononaka*, and *sonzai* make clear that ethics is not about the isolated individual decision-making but should rather be understood as maintaining good relationships

in harmony with others and society. Watsuji clarifies that the formal structure of these concepts, such as legal responsibilities and obligations, seems to fulfil this need, but they are often end up reduced to a mere system of rules (Watsuji, 1996, pp. 22-23). What's problematic about this reduction is, that it strips the concepts of their relational and dynamic foundation. Rules, by nature, are fixed and abstract, there is always a line between following or going against them. They can certainly govern actions, but they cannot account for the things that define ethical relationships, such as emotional vibrance or mutual caring. Ongoing efforts to interpersonal and communal bonds are something that cannot be fully accounted for or ensured by rigid rules. When these concepts are understood only as a legal or superficial agreement, it would neglect the deeper, ongoing effort required to sustain authentic "ningensei", that is the dual structure of individual and societal existence as fundamentally social and dynamic. Ethics, in this sense, is not about abstract moral laws but about maintaining harmony within human relationships. This is significant for Watsuji's foundation as he makes it clear that ethics, the way he understands it, in its entirety can only be discussed through the lens of these relationships. That would be the move away from abstract traditional individualistic concepts, like Kant's categorial imperatives or the social contract theory. Kant's moral theory, which focuses on that one should act only according to maxims that could be willed as universal law, regardless of context or relationships. Similarly, the social contract theory sees moral and political obligations as being based upon agreements made by autonomous individuals to form a secure society. Both theories assume the existence of a pre-social self and are concerned with autonomy and abstract duty. In contrast to these, Watsuji insists that ethics is not a contract between individuals, but emerges through the ongoing relational condition of *aidagara*, or "betweenness", as human existence arises from the ongoing, dynamic interrelation between people.

Watsuji brings forward convincing examples such as the relationship between family members or the connection that humans share through language. The most convincing example that made things clear for me was about the relationship between an author and a reader that exists even if neither are

having the other actively in mind. These are relationships that we are in without seeing any benefits or contracts. Therefore, his ethical framework convinces me as a critique of Western individualism and at the same time offers an alternative model which is based on interdependence.

Watsuji's central argument is that human beings do not exist in isolation but are always embedded within a web of relationships, a concept he terms "betweenness" (Watsuji, 1996, p. 57). He describes ethical life as a process of double negation, individuals assert their distinctiveness while simultaneously being shaped by their social context (Watsuji, 1996, p. 11). In a world in which the individual and their desires continue to play an increasingly important role, Watsuji's thought-provoking impulse to rethink and reconsider how our relationships are the foundation to ethical acts and essential to humanity (Watsuji, 1996, p. 59). Watsuji makes it clear that each person does not exist in solitude, but only as part of a complex web of relationships that influence thoughts, emotions, and actions (Watsuji, 1996, p. 84-86). He suggests that our responsibilities to one another shape our sense of right and wrong. In other words, recognising that we exist in relationships with others gives us a fuller, more grounded understanding of what it means to live ethically. For Watsuji, ethics isn't just a theoretical discussion; to him it's something we navigate every day through our interactions and commitments to the people around us. (Watsuji, 1996, p. 37).

In this thesis, I will apply Watsuji's ideas to concepts of international relations, to move away from states and autonomous actors and provide a vision of global governance which could be based on mutual obligations. This would reflect an understanding of states just as individuals cannot exist outside of their social environment, states and nations, too, are defined by their relations to and with others. This means that I will be discussing whether we should change our perspective discussing international relations away from sovereign states acting independently to states acting more collectively accordingly to their relationship with other states. Before I do this, it is necessary to first acknowledge and critically address the broader controversies surrounding his work and the intellectual tradition he is associated with. Engaging with these criticisms not only clarifies the philosophical foundations of this thesis but

also ensures that the claims I draw from Watsuji are situated within a fully informed and responsible context.

1.1 Critics on Watsuji and Japanese Philosophy

As Japanese philosophy and, with it, the Kyoto School is increasingly discussed in the global context, so too have critical examinations of its historical context, political implications, and normative assumptions (Arisaka, Y. 2017, p. 756). Watsuji's ideas on relationality and communal harmony, while sounding peaceful, have also been addressed with concern, particularly in light of Japan's imperial history and the potential misuse of such ideas to justify totalitarianism (Zanghellini & Sato, 2020, p. 1289). Addressing these critiques is important, not only for intellectual transparency but also to clarify the normative potential and limits before applying Watsuji's ethics to questions of sovereignty and global governance.

As I mentioned above, the most prominent objection to Watsuji's ethics is that its emphasis on communal identity and relational harmony causes, through totalitarianism, "eventually the individual gets submerged in society" (Odin, 1992, p. 492). This risks erasing the individual, thereby leaving little room for dissent, autonomy, or resistance. This is a major concern, especially if Watsuji's concept of *ningen* is interpreted as a privileging group over the individual. Critics are right to argue that if this view could lend itself to totalitarian ideologies in which the "harmony" of society is the priority, taking the place of the individual and suppressing it. However, Watsuji's notion of *hito*, or the individual aspect of *ningen*, complicates this reading. *Hito* acknowledges that each person remains distinct, and this individuality is not only preserved but is essential to ethical action. For Watsuji, ethical life emerges through a dynamic tension between individual autonomy and social embeddedness. The individual is never fully absorbed by the collective but is instead always negotiating their place within it. This double structure or double negation, as Watsuji describes it, of individuality and sociality, ensures that Watsuji's ethics retains a space for personal moral responsibility (Zanghellini & Sato, 2020, pp. 1305-1306). In

this way, the individual does not vanish; rather, their autonomy is set in a new context as a relational, responsive form of agency that resists the view of totalitarianism. This critique is especially important to address in the context of the historical background of Japanese philosophy.

Japanese philosophers and their work, including Watsuji Tetsurō's, are criticised for their ties to Japanese imperialism in the early 20th century. Watsuji wasn't overly political, but was part of intellectual movements that justified modernisation and state power (Arisaka, Y. 2017, p. 760). This raises the question whether his ethics of relationality and interdependence can be misused politically. During the Pacific War, Japanese intellectuals like Nishida Kitarō and his students (Nishitani Keiji, Kōsaka Masaaki) supported nationalist rhetoric and imperial expansion. Nishida's "New World Order" and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere aligned with state ambitions (Arisaka, Y. 2017, p. 764). Watsuji, though focused on ethics and working within the same intellectual climate, chose to emphasise Japan's unique cultural mission, particularly in his best-known work translated into English, *Ethics (Rinrigaku)* (McCarthy, 2017, p. 507). As mentioned above, he prioritises communal harmony (*ningen*), critiquing Western liberalism. I addressed it earlier that such a view, when taken to an extreme, could be interpreted as legitimising a state-centric ideology where every critique or deviation of the majority is suppressed in favour of national unity, by prioritising the collective will over individual rights. This raises concerns about whether his framework, despite its ethical intentions, can be appropriated to support authoritarian governance, much like how other Kyoto School thinkers were criticised for aligning with imperialist ideology (Arisaka, Y. 2017, p. 766). This is what happened in wartime Japan, where collective identity was used to suppress dissent, and promote unity under the emperor (Arisaka, Y. 2017, p. 764-765). I believe that his ethics should not be dismissed due to historical misuse, but there is a need for critical reexamination. In which the focus lies on interdependence rather than cultural determinism, his ideas create a thought-provoking vision, in which international relations can be thought differently, prioritising relations and mutual obligations over unilateral sovereignty.

2. The Limits of Sovereignty: Westphalian Roots and Critical Challenges

In order to be able to draw the line from Watsuji's understanding of the concept of ethics to a change of perspective on sovereignty in the discipline of International Relations, we first need to understand the concept of sovereignty. To establish how Watsuji Tetsurō's relational ethics can reframe the concept of sovereignty in international relations, it is first necessary to critically examine the traditional understanding of sovereignty itself. This section provides an overview of the dominant Westphalian model, explores its philosophical foundations in the work of Hobbes and Locke, and presents key critiques that have emerged in response to global interdependence. In doing so, it sets the stage for understanding why the alternative model grounded in Watsuji's relational thought is both timely and necessary.

The concept of sovereignty has been central to the discipline of IR and is traditionally framed within the context of the Westphalian model. This model presents that states are self-contained, independent entities with absolute authority within their territories and will not interfere in and on other countries territories and domestic affairs (Osiander, 2001, p. 261). The Westphalian model assumes that states are independent, self-contained units with clear territorial boundaries and centralized authority. This model implies that international relations are between separate independent entities, each having full authority and supreme power over its borders (Krasner, 1999, p. 3-4).

2.1 Hobbes and Locke on sovereignty

To be able to better understand the philosophical foundation of the traditional sovereignty model, the next section will contrast the views of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, whose theories continue to shape modern conceptions of state authority and autonomy. The views on sovereignty by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, both thinkers in classical political

philosophy, create an insightful yet differing foundation. Hobbes in “Leviathan” argues for the absolute sovereignty as a necessity to avoid the chaotic state of nature. He depicts a pre-political phase where men have a natural liberty - a right to everything and nothing simultaneously- which inevitably leads to conflict and insecurity (Hobbes 1651, p. 78-79). In Hobbes' viewpoint, man is by nature selfish and self-interested, motivated by the fear of death and the urge for self-preservation. To escape from this state, people collectively surrender their rights to a sovereign for peace and order, which results in a commanding, centralised ruler (Hobbes 1651, p. 105-106). However, the legitimacy of this sovereign authority, while appearing to rest purely on contractual command, also subtly relies on the personal virtue of the sovereign (Hoye, 2019, p. 207).

In contrast, Locke’s Two Treatises of Government presents a more optimistic and limited vision of sovereignty. Locke outlines the state of nature as a relatively peaceful condition governed by natural law, where individuals are free and equal, yet they lack an impartial authority to resolve disputes. Unlike Hobbes, Locke’s social contract does not include transfer of all rights but a mutual agreement to protect specific natural rights, such as, life, liberty, and possessions (Locke, 1689, sec. 6). People form governments by agreeing to secure comfort, peace and security of properties (Locke, 1689, sec. 95). For Locke, the government is legitimate only on the condition that it secures these rights; if it fails, citizens are no longer bound to obey (Locke, 1689, sec. 131). Otherwise, the people are entitled to resist or overthrow it. Thus, political power is legitimate only when it is based on the rational consent of the governed, rather than imposed through force or coercion. Despite their foundational differences, both philosophers work with the same assumption: that there exist pre-social selves, independent agents who will unite into political unions for utilitarian purposes. Sovereignty, in their models, is generated through the collection of these individual wills, and the state is conceptualised as the vessel of power, which is independent and self-sufficient. This aligns with the Westphalian vision

of sovereignty so far as, it prefers the isolated, non-interventionist nature of states and views political obligation as contractarian rather than a socially entrenched aspect.

Various critiques of traditional sovereignty have established themselves, particularly in terms of power imbalances and the persistence of unequal influence within international institutions. Through these critiques, the development of post-Westphalian models became more recognised. These models propose a redefinition of sovereignty that would address transnational challenges and the realities of a globalised world more accurately, moving beyond the notion of states as isolated, self-sufficient entities.

Stephen D. Krasner challenges the concept of traditional sovereignty in his Book "*Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*" in which he, as the title already suggests, introduces the concept of "organized hypocrisy". Hereby, he discloses that the principles of (Westphalian) sovereignty are upheld rhetorically, but frequently compromised as soon as they do not promote the interest of those in power. However, this does not mean that some rulers have not acted against the principles and norms of sovereignty when motivated by a desire to maintain power, this can mean that they either used the power imbalance to coerce a weaker counterpart to change domestic policies or even invite external actors, compromising the autonomy of the own state (Krasner, 1999, p. 25). He points out that the principles of sovereignty have been routinely compromised, with external actors influencing domestic affairs through mechanisms like international financial institutions and human rights interventions (Krasner, 1999, p. 70). What Krasner means by that is that sovereignty does not accurately describe the state of affairs, as the more powerful can disregard this notion and override it to their wants and needs.

2.2 Post-Westphalian frameworks

One influential post-Westphalian framework is "shared sovereignty", which is discussed

by Krasner. He explains that in certain contexts, particularly in weak or failing states, “international actors share authority with local actors” to ensure basic governance and order (Krasner, 2004, p. 119-120). What he is suggesting is, that in order to ensure international security, powerful states take on the authority of local actors for an indefinite time, through contracts, until it is ensured that this would not affect the global community anymore. This model rejects the idea of exclusive control and embraces practical governance through cooperative arrangements. Critiques to that model are that it could take over the local authority, if the external actor intrudes too heavily and undermines through unclear goal setting in the contracts, compromising the state autonomy (Ciorciari, 2021, pp. 35, 58-60).

Another framework is "global constitutionalism," which proposes that international law and institutions should constrain state behaviour similarly to domestic constitutions. Anne-Marie Slaughter argues that we are witnessing the rise of a “networked sovereignty” in which domestic institutions increasingly interact with international counterparts, forming horizontal relationships across borders (Slaughter, 2004, p. 15-17). In this model, a legal framework with international laws has binding authority over states, which ensures that state action aligns with previously agreed-upon rules. Through “networked sovereignty,” states do not lose control but rather share authority with international bodies and peer institutions, enabling cooperation while maintaining mutual accountability across borders. A possible critique of this model is presented by Martti Koskenniemi. He examines how international law's claims to universality often mask underlying power dynamics and serve the interests of dominant states. This underscores that the “powerful” states can influence international law in their favour, as international politics takes precedence which results in perpetuating power structures (Koskenniemi, 2001, p. 444-445).

Both these models mentioned reflect a shift from autonomy to relational interdependence, while both have their own critiques, they are offering a conceptual bridge

toward relational philosophies like Watsuji's. The traditional understanding of sovereignty, rooted in the Westphalian model and articulated by theorists like Hobbes and Locke, envisions states as independent, self-contained units with absolute authority within their territories. However, this perspective has been increasingly challenged by scholars who highlight the constructed nature of the Westphalian narrative and the practical inconsistencies in the application of sovereignty. Watsuji's relational approach further questions the adequacy of traditional sovereignty in capturing the interconnected realities of human and state existence. As globalisation intensifies, there is a growing need to rethink sovereignty in a way that reflects the interdependent nature of contemporary international relations, which is testified by the development of alternative models of sovereignty that I have discussed.

3. Sovereignty Reimagined: A Relational Ethics for Global Interdependence

After I outlined how traditional sovereignty is understood in the Westphalian sense through the perspective of Hobbes and Locke, along with the current critiques of this framework and an introduction to two post-Westphalian models, I will now apply Watsuji's concept of relational ethics to the field of international politics.

States claim autonomy but are continuously negotiating their authority through international agreements, economic dependencies, and diplomatic relations. Here, it is important to make the consideration that states, unlike humans in the concept of hito, are not, by nature, recognised as autonomous states. States first need to be recognised as such according to international law to be part of this "community"; this is established in the Montevideo Convention, articles 1-9 (*Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States*, 1933). Therefore, it is important that states clearly set themselves apart from other states with borders, as this creates a territory which is governed by the state. This can only

happen through interaction with the states and the territory surrounding a state. In this case, this means that states only exist through mutual acknowledgement. Just as Watsuji rejects the idea of an isolated self, his philosophy challenges the notion of absolute sovereignty as a self-sufficient principle.

It is important to note that Watsuji does not develop a theory of justice, comparable to Western frameworks, especially not for the international realm. In comparison Watsuji's framework of ethics does imply that justice is upheld through the maintenance of ethical harmony. This approach is more pragmatic than a legal model that does not take cultural and historical differences into account and therefore proves to be inflexible. This flexibility leaves space for the reality of international relations where competing interests, plural norms, and relational ruptures often disregard rigid legal solutions. It is an unexpected strength of this framwork as it offers a normative compass without imposing the current one-size-fits-all notion. This encourages states to act ethically within their specific webs of interdependence.

This shift from an individual to a collective approach that entails the concept of "betweenness" could influence the discussion around state sovereignty in the sphere of international relations. I mentioned above that traditional theories highlight states as isolated, or at least independent entities, which follow the principles of sovereignty, one example being the Charter of the UN, Article 2, 1–5 (Chapter I: Article 2(1)–(5) 2023). Here states are in relation to each other through the creation of treaties; without these, the states seem not to be in relation at all.

When we apply the relational and more collectivistic concept, Watsuji's, we can start to rethink state interactions and understand them differently. What I mean by that is that the concept of "betweenness" in the context of state sovereignty calls for a recognition that the actions and policies of one state are inherently linked to others. In order to explain how Watsuji's

concept of *betweenness* can make us rethink our understanding of state sovereignty and international responsibility, I present a three-part example that builds-up in complexity. This approach will demonstrate how state actions, even when confined within national borders, can impact international ethical relations.

The first scenario outlines a straightforward case: State “A” pollutes a river that flows through another state “B” afterwards impacting this state directly, as the river's natural form is altered. This could mean that people downstream cannot catch as many fish or grow crops due to pollution. This is a clear example of the impact two countries can have on each other. Sovereignty here fails to protect against relational disruption, because State A’s actions materially violate the well-being of its neighbour.

The next example is that if the river starts and ends in the same country, “A”, but the country “A” signed a treaty on protecting rivers from pollution, which is binding for the country “A”. Following from this, countries “B-Z” are impacted when the country “A” pollutes the rivers, as the treaty has been broken, leading to a loss of trust in the ambitions or in the signature of the country “A” to ensure it upholds the common treaty. This is already a bit more complex as the action itself does only affects country “A”, but through the creation and signature of treaties, other countries “B-Z”, which also sign this treaty are indirectly affected. Here, the relational rupture does not come from direct harm but from the failure to uphold collective commitments.

Lastly to the example I was leading to, in Watsuji’s concept of “betweenness”, if state “A” pollutes the river that starts and ends in country “A”, other countries “B” are impacted as the actions of a state can strain relations with other states without impacting those directly, as the actions reflect a divergence away from the relational harmony. This final step of my examples makes clear that even when there is no direct harm, the ethical fabric with connects states, in the concept of “betweenness”, can be disturbed. According to Watsuji’s idea of *betweenness*,

such actions disrupt the underlying ethical fabric that connects states, not because they cause direct harm, but because they violate the moral interdependence that defines international coexistence.

In my example, the river as a physical space becomes a symbolic thread for a shared ethical space that interacts between countries. As actions can influence this ethical space so it can impact other countries without physically interacting with them. Sovereignty, from this relational perspective, is not a shield of isolation, but a dynamic field of responsibility. Therefore, Watsuji's ethics prompts us to view international relations not as transactions between bounded units, but as ongoing moral interactions within a shared world. This shift is especially clear when we consider the role of international treaties, as it exemplifies this exchange of state interaction. International treaties are typically framed as negotiated agreements between autonomous states, each trying to maximise their interests while fulfilling minimal obligations. In this model, cooperation is conditional, instrumental, and often based on reciprocity or strategic gain. While these treaties are essential tools for governance, their logic inherently reinforces the idea that the relationships between states are formed through contracts rather than constitutive. Watsuji's relational ethics challenges this by suggesting that international cooperation should not merely be based on formal obligations, but on a deeper recognition of interdependence and mutual moral responsibility, a space where commitments are not only legalistic, but ethical and ongoing. We can observe this in the context of international cooperation on a multilateral level, issues such as climate change, human rights, and security, that showcase how states manage their sovereignty. Here, states use their sovereignty not to be an isolated actor in the global system, but to be a participant in a larger group that governs itself through dependencies and in the end, mutual interests.

A great example of relational sovereignty in action is the European Union. Member

states maintain their national identities while sharing decision-making power in a collective system. For many, the EU is and was the first step towards a European federation, in which the member states would give up more of their sovereignty to become part of this collectivistic, supranational entity (Van Der Velden, 2013). This shift would further blur the lines between national and collective interests, emphasising cooperation and shared governance over absolute state autonomy. This aligns with Watsuji's concept of "betweenness", which sees relationships not as oppositional but as part of an intertwined network.

To me, the EU serves as a compelling example of relational sovereignty, but it is important to address that its origins are rooted in the Westphalian principles. As mentioned above, this established the modern concept of state sovereignty, emphasising non-interference and territorial integrity. However, the EU represents an evolution of these principles and not a clear continuation, nor a direct contradiction. In the EU, member states maintain their sovereign equality while at the same time a system of shared governance and supranational decision making is established. This structure that embraces a duality between sovereignty and supranationality is a shift from the model of singular, independent sovereign states toward one in which sovereign countries have ongoing negotiations between national and collective interests. This dynamic system aligns with Watsuji's ethical framework, where interdependence does not erase individuality but reshapes it within a broader relational structure. Thus, rather than rejecting the Westphalian model outright, the EU demonstrates how sovereignty can be reinterpreted through the lens of interconnected responsibilities and mutual obligations, while still requiring treaties to formalise and regulate this relational structure.

3.1 Broader Applications of Relational Sovereignty

As mentioned above, the EU is a powerful example that shows the works of relational sovereignty, but the concept of "betweenness" can be applied to a wider range of international

interactions that also challenge the traditional notion of absolute state autonomy. In this era of globalisation, institutions like the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have a growing influence, suggesting that the concept of sovereignty is increasingly used within cooperative frameworks rather than in isolation. Instead, it is more and more characterised by cooperative arrangements, in which states can negotiate and resulting from this harmonise their policies with others.

One relevant area where relational sovereignty manifests is in the sphere of global economic governance. In today's interconnected world, no state operates in economic isolation. The economic policies of one country inevitably affect others, whether through trade agreements, currency exchange rates, or supply chain dependencies. In this sphere, the WTO, is the overarching institution that enables the negotiations of trade agreements and sets out to improve state-to-state relations, by providing a systematic approach to organising trade relations such that states' national economic policies are harmonised with broader global interests. While working on a contractual and interest-based model, the WTO, embodies certain aspects of the concept of "betweeness", as it encourages ongoing negotiations between states and trying to ensure that no state exists in economic isolation. However, the main motivation behind this is not ethical obligations but their own profit from a share of international trade of their member states. When considering Watuji's concept of "betweenness" in this context, this showcases that: while global institutions like the WTO promote cooperation purely out of strategic interest, betweenness incorperates ethical obligations of existence in economic interdependence, a structure in which obligations arise not from contracts, but from our inherent relational embeddedness.

As a consequence, economic policies could not be dictated solely by national interest but would be influenced by the interdependent nature of global relations. Watsuji argues that

ethics is a lived reality, shaped by our continuous negotiation of relational existence, which extends beyond individuals to encompass national and international relationships (*Watsuji, 1996, p. 12*). Thus, sovereignty should be understood as a dynamic process of mutual engagement rather than as an absolute, self-contained authority.

3.2 Sovereignty and Global Challenges

Another important field where relational sovereignty exists is international action against climate change. The Paris Agreement of 2015 is a prime example of this, where states came together to act in unity to address climate change, which is beyond the matter of an individual state. Climate change can never be addressed by one state alone; instead, it requires continuous cooperation, exchange of information, and allegiance to international action. This is something that I think aligns directly with Watsuji's ethical vision; here states, like individuals, exist within a network of mutual dependence and must acknowledge their interconnected responsibilities. The failure of one state to act on climate change has repercussions for others, reinforcing the necessity of relational governance. While some states know that they are not immediately affected by the repercussions of climate change, they will never be able to escape its consequences. Therefore, purely individualistic actions can not exist in this context.

Similarly, security concerns increasingly challenge the concept of complete sovereignty. Traditional realist arguments assert that national security depends on military capability and the ability to act unilaterally. However, new security threats such as terrorism, cyber attacks, and pandemics demonstrate that security cannot be addressed only within national boundaries. International cooperation, intelligence sharing, and global health initiatives prove that it is a relational, not just nationalistic, security approach that guarantees stability. The COVID-19 pandemic is a recent example which underscored this reality, as nations had to coordinate public health interventions, vaccine rollout, and border restrictions in ways that tested traditional understandings of sovereignty as absolute

authority over domestic affairs (Taylor, 2021). Watsuji's ethics provides a framework for understanding why sovereignty must evolve in response to these global challenges, as mutual aid and cooperation become prerequisites for sustainable governance.

3.3 Possible implications

In the previous sections, I contrasted Watsuji's understanding of ethical relationships with the traditional notions of sovereignty. On the basis of this contrast, I outlined the applications of Watsuji's concept on sovereignty and how this relates to global challenges. In this section I will explore the possible implications of bringing Watsuji's relational ethics into dialogue with international relations. This is not merely an abstract philosophical exercise, but a response to a pressing gap in IR theory and practice. By introducing Watsuji's concepts of *ningen* (person-in-relation) and *aidagara* (betweenness) into IR, we begin to see sovereignty not as a fixed boundary or legal entitlement, but as an evolving ethical relationship. This reframing shifts international politics away from transactional logics and toward moral responsibility. The following analysis outlines what this might mean in practice, particularly in contexts such as humanitarian intervention, global climate policy, and the role of institutions.

Watsuji's concept of relational ethics calls for a reassessment of the moral obligations that come with sovereignty. In traditional Westphalian models, sovereignty is largely seen as a right, the ability of a state to govern itself without external interference. The same is stated in the Charter of UN: "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state"(Chapter II: Article 2(7) 2023). However, a relational perspective shifts the focus toward sovereignty as a responsibility. Just as individuals are responsible for maintaining ethical relations with others in society, states, too, bear ethical responsibilities toward other nations in Watsuji's model. If applied to real-world scenarios, this redefinition has significant implications for issues such as humanitarian intervention and international justice. If sovereignty is understood relationally, then the suffering of individuals in one state is not

merely an internal matter but a concern for the global community.

This means that if sovereignty is redefined through Watsuji's relational philosophy, then statehood itself becomes contingent on ethical interdependence. In such a framework, a humanitarian crisis would not simply be of sovereign concern but a rupture in the global web of *ningen*. This is outside of the scope of *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P), which gives UN member states the responsibility to protect their populations from atrocities, and if one member state fails to do so, only then, this responsibility is given to the international community. The framework for ethical interdependence would move toward intervention as a restorative act grounded in shared human vulnerability. The emphasis here is not on policing norms from above, but on relational repair: restoring trust, restoring recognition, and re-establishing ethical proximity between communities. This approach is still vulnerable to the tension of power imbalances. Historical precedents, such as humanitarian interventions justified under "responsibility to protect" (R2P), reveal how powerful states often impose their interpretations of "care." This could be addressed through a correction in Watsuji's ethics. By grounding cooperation in ongoing negotiation rather than fixed hierarchies, it demands accountability from dominant actors. State Intervention, then, would not be an act of overreach but a moral response grounded in shared responsibility. Such a transformation raises critical ethical questions: When should intervention occur, and on what grounds? Intervention then is a restorative act, which addresses ruptures in the global ethical fabric (e.g., genocide, climate collapse) rather than asserting dominance.

This would go beyond the current logic that dominates international politics, where intervention is often justified through a legalistic framework or strategic calculations connected to geopolitical interest. In contrast, through Watsuji's ethics, a humanitarian crisis such as genocide or famine would not be a tragedy "over there" as it is a relational rupture or even a breakdown in the ethical fabric of *ningen* that binds the international community, that binds us together. An intervention in that case would not be understood as "help" from above or outside, but as a relational duty to participate in the process

of ethical recovery of the rapture, which is created through the disturbance of the shared moral space we are connected through. This would require humility, attentiveness to context, and a willingness to engage in mutual dialogue and not impose solutions connected to policies. Just as states might intervene to address a rupture in one region, they must also be open to critique and support when they themselves fail to uphold the ethical responsibilities of relational existence. When crisis and intervention would be understood in this way, it would become less about who has the right to act but more about how does one state act in relations to others. The central ethical question shifts from *"Is intervention permitted?"* to *"How do we responsibly inhabit our shared interdependence?"*. In pratical terms this shift would mean that traditional sovereignty as a shield for separation, would be new interpreted as an idea of moral responsibility.

This new interpretation has far-reaching implications for how international interventions or cooperation is justified and structured. For instance, aid programs or involvement in crisis situations would not be decided in terms of conditionality or strategic leverage, but states would be ethically compelled to respond to suffering because they are already entangled in a shared ethical world. In this case, global institutions would have the role to nurture this relational network among states as interconnected, toward a vision of multilateralism rooted in *aidagara*. International treaties would become obsolete and the international community could move away from the traditional role of institutions and states as enforcers of binding norms and rules derived from national interest. In a system like this, ethical responsibility does not arise from abstract, universal legal mandates, but from the mutual recognition of vulnerability, obligation, and interdependence between states.

Here, an example could be, how climate finance mechanisms could be redesigned as partnerships, in which wealthy nations acknowledge their relational duties to more vulnerable states. These wealthy nations would not view financial support as charity or leverage anymore, but as a relational obligation. This reframes climate justice as an ethical necessity, not a political negotiation.

Consider the role of the United States in global climate governance as an example. Up until now, U.S. participation has been strongly influenced and driven by strategic interest. The government used its influence to shape climate negotiations in order to protect domestic industries or secure international cooperation through economic leverage. When the concept of ethical interdependence, as established above, is applied, their role would be different. Instead of enforcing cooperation or pursuing their own interest, the U.S., as one of the most powerful and influential, would act as an agent seeking to fulfil their duties and helping others to do the same. The government would be aware of its historical responsibility and with this, its entanglement in the shared ethical space. Therefore, they would involve themselves in leading efforts in climate finance not as a geopolitical tool, but as a response, knowing about the shared vulnerability. Following from this acknowledgement, the U.S. would support adaptation and loss-and-damage mechanisms for climate-vulnerable nations, without conditions. From the other states these actions would not be understood as acts of benevolence or charity, but as a recognition of co-responsibility. This shift from strategic diplomacy to relational responsiveness is an example of how Watsuji's ethics could transform not only international norms but everyday practices in international politics.

4. Objections

4.1 Underestimation of power and self-interest

While the previous sections outlined how Watsuji's relational ethics can reframe sovereignty as an interdependent and ethical construct, it is essential to acknowledge the most pressing critiques this approach may face. In what follows, I address two major concerns. First, the charge that Watsuji underestimates the enduring role of power, self-interest, and coercion in global politics. Second, the critique that his relational ethics are too idealistic or philosophically abstract to provide actionable guidance in complex international contexts. By responding to these objections, I aim to clarify this notion and limitations of applying Watsuji's framework to international relations.

One potential critique of Watsuji's relational ethics, could be that it does not seem to account for the reality of power politics, selfish/national interest and international security concerns and lastly has difficulties with a clear concept of justice, which all influence the sphere of international relations. There are traditional realist scholars who argue that the state would operate in an anarchic international system, where everyone is in for themselves, pursuing self-interest, such as economic well-being, power preservation, having leverage against other countries, and taking advantage wherever it is possible. The interest of the own country takes precedence over ethical considerations. Hobbes describes the state of nature as a "war of all against all", which would create the necessity for strong sovereign powers to ensure stability (Hobbes, 1651, p. 115- 118). Further, Hans Morgenthau, one of the core figures in 20th-century realism, describes that trustworthy processes in international politics are impossible, as states prioritise their survival and strategic advantage (Morgenthau, 1948, p. 3-7). When taking on this perspective, I can agree that Watsuji's ethical framework, whose foundation is based on a relational approach, seems to be overly optimistic, and fails to acknowledge that sovereignty is enforced through power, and will collapse when changing to an ethical relationship.

However, I would argue that Watsuji's ethics does not deny the presence of self-interest, but creates a broader context of interdependence around it. One important point he makes is that individuals, and through my extension states, do not exist in isolation but only within the web of relations of betweenness, interacting with others (Watsuji, 1996, p. 84-86). We have to understand that ethical considerations already arise naturally from this web of interconnected realities (Watsuji, 1996, p. 102). Clearly, this perspective does not entail that individuals/states will always act morally but in order to have long-term stable relationships, ethical behaviour is necessary. The reason for this is that for Watsuji, ethics is nothing other than building and strengthening these relationships. The European Union, for instance, demonstrates how states negotiate their interests within a shared framework, balancing national priorities with collective obligations.

Morgenthau's argument that in the world of international relations, countries tend to choose their

own interest can be addressed by showcasing that this is not always the case, and there are examples that show that countries can prioritise the “greater good”. During the process of globalisation, it was clear that the interdependence through institutions like the World Trade Organisation and regional trade agreements such as the EU or NAFTA demonstrated that cooperation and mutual constraint often yielded greater prosperity than isolation or zero-sum competition of the economy. States benefited more from this cooperation than from absolute sovereignty. Similar to this, climate change negotiations reveal that states must act collectively to mitigate global threats, for example, the Paris Agreement (2015), where even vulnerable developing nations accepted obligations for the sake of global stability. As national security is increasingly linked to environmental stability. In this sense, Watsuji’s framework highlights that sovereignty is not about unilateral power but about balancing relationships to ensure long-term sustainability. Rather than being naïve about power dynamics, Watsuji’s ethics provides a way to understand how ethical considerations shape international decision-making.

Lastly, as outlined earlier, Watsuji does not explicitly develop a theory of justice in the Western sense, his framework does provide an implicit account of justice as the maintenance of ethical harmony. I strongly believe that this is a more pragmatic approach than an inflexible legal model which fails to take cultural and historical differences into account. The clear focus set on relations can offer a more adaptable method for addressing global injustices, especially in areas like economic inequality, refugee crises, and post-conflict reconciliation. In the sphere of international relations, this relational approach would not ignore conflict but it recognises that an enduring peace is dependent on how the peace is created and how and if the relationships between the parties are restored and maintained after the dispute. Instead of being an unrealistic framework, it provides ways to resolve or address conflicts which have failed to be addressed by traditional sovereignty-based approaches.

4.2 Too idealistic and lacks procedural clarity

A second and distinct objection concerns not the power dynamics of international politics, but the practical applicability and normative clarity of Watsuji's relational ethics. Even if one accepts that states are interdependent, critics might argue that concepts like *aidagara* (betweenness) or *ningensei* (relational existence) are too vague, idealistic, or philosophically abstract to serve as reliable guides in a world shaped by conflict, inequality, and institutional complexity. This would make this concept unsuitable as I previously highlighted Krasner's "organised hypocrisy", where states rhetorically endorse cooperation while acting unilaterally, or Morgenthau's insistence that survival, not harmony, drives state behaviour. In particular, some might see Watsuji's framework as lacking a clear account of justice, especially when compared to more procedural or rule-based approaches. Without concrete mechanisms to resolve disputes or balance power asymmetries, how can a relational ethics truly guide global governance? This can be seen as an advantage or disadvantage; for me, it leaves room for the necessary ambiguity that reflects the fluidity of real-world international relations.

This ambiguity is not simply a concession to complexity, but presents a methodological feature of relational ethics which would be new. Where traditional theories try to achieve clarity through abstract procedures or enforcing universal principles, Watsuji's approach allows for a judgment depending on each situation, as the ethical reasoning emerges within and through relationships. This is particularly useful in intercultural contexts where fixed norms often fail to resonate. Instead of enforcing rules from above, Watsuji's ethics invites participants to respond to raptures in the ethical space by restoring relational balance. In this sense, ambiguity is not indecision, but it gives the opportunity to act ethically in various contexts, through mutual vulnerability. This approach would challenge states to interrogate whether their actions are fostering ethical harmony or causing raptures in the ethical fabric.

Consider my earlier example of the EU's duality, where member states negotiate sovereignty through ongoing dialogue rather than rigid contracts. Similarly, justice in a Watsujian framework emerges not

from top-down adjudication but from restoring ethical betweenness, as seen in restorative justice processes.

To the charge of idealism, I respond by mentioning my analysis of climate change and the Paris Agreement. There, I showed how states already act relationally when facing existential threats, balancing self-interest with collective obligation. Watsuji's ethics merely systematises this behaviour, revealing it as an expression of *rinri* (relational ethics) not naïveté but pragmatic adaptation to interdependence. Even power asymmetries, which I critically examined in shared sovereignty models, are addressed by Watsuji's insistence that *ningen* is a "double negation": stronger states must continually renegotiate their authority within the web of relations, lest they undermine the very fabric of mutual recognition that legitimises their power. Does this approach resolve all conflicts? No, but neither does the current system, as my critique of Krasner's "organised hypocrisy" demonstrated. What Watsuji offers, and what I have tried to make useful in this thesis, is a normative compass: a way to evaluate whether institutions like the UN or WTO are fostering relational harmony or perpetuating domination.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued for a new interpretation of sovereignty in international relations through the notion of Watsuji Tetsurō's relational ethics. Hereby, I challenged the traditional Westphalian model, which frames states as autonomous, separate entities. I have proposed an alternative framework grounded in interdependence, mutual recognition, and ethical entanglement. Watsuji's concepts of *ningen* (human being), *aidagara (betweenness)*, *rinri* (relational ethics), *yononaka* (the public realm), and *sonzai* (interconnected existence) provide a philosophical foundation for understanding sovereignty not as an absolute claim to authority but as a dynamic construct shaped by relationships between states.

I showcased the limitations of traditional sovereignty, by addressing critiques of scholars like Krasner and Osiander. Through these it becomes clear that in the face of global challenges such as

climate change, economic interdependence, and transnational security threats, a different approach is needed. These issues demand cooperative solutions that go beyond the rigid notions of the current framework fo state autonomy. The European Union, the Paris Agreement, and global governance institutions like the UN and WTO showcase a step towards more relational sovereignty in practice, in which national interests with collective responsibilities can be balanced. While critiques of power asymmetries and realism's emphasis on self-interest remain valid, Watsuji's ethics offers a normative compass for navigating these tensions, while also ensuring long-term stability and justice that arises from ethical coexistence rather than domination.

It is important to note, that while Watsuji's framework does not prescribe specific policies, it provides a transformative way of thinking about international relations, one that prioritises dialogue, repair, and mutual accountability. In the current era of escalating global crises, this relational approach offers not just a theoretical alternative but shows a pragmatic pathway toward a more just and cooperative international system. The future of this world does not lie in isolation and strong sovereignty but in the recognition that states, like individuals, are always bound to one another.

References

Arisaka, Y. (2017). The controversial cultural identity of Japanese philosophy. In B. W. Davis (Ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy (pp. 1–3) [Journal-article]. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199945726.013.37

Chapter I: Article 2(1)–(5) (2023) — Charter of the United Nations — Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs — Codification Division Publications. (n.d.). https://legal.un.org/repertory/art2.shtml

Chapter I: Article 2(7) (2023) — Charter of the United Nations — Repertory of Practice of United Nations Organs — Codification Division Publications. (n.d.). https://legal.un.org/repertory/art2_7.shtml

Ciorciari, J. D. (2021). Sovereignty sharing in fragile states. Stanford University Press. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=27 49678

Heisig, J. W., Kasulis, T. P., & Maraldo, J. C. (2011). *Japanese philosophy : a sourcebook*. University of Hawaii Press. https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.21313/9780824837075

Hobbes, T. (1651). Leviathan. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3207/3207-h/3207-h.htm

Hoye, J. M. (2019). Natural Justice, Law, and virtue in Hobbes's Leviathan. *Hobbes Studies*, *32*(2), 179–208. https://doi.org/10.1163/18750257-03202004

McCarthy, Erin, (2017) 'Watsuji Tetsurō: The Mutuality of Climate and Culture and an Ethics of Betweenness', in Bret W. Davis (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy, Oxford Handbooks (2019; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2014), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199945726.013.26

Kasulis, Thomas, (2025) “Japanese Philosophy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2025 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/japanese-philosophy/

Koskenniemi, M. (2001). The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870–1960. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Krasner, S. D. (1999). *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton University Press. Retrieved from https://press.princeton.edu/books/ebook/9781400823260/sovereignty

Krasner, S. D. (2004). Sharing Sovereignty: New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States. *International Security*, *29*(2), 85–120. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4137587

Locke, J. (1689). *Two Treatises of Government*. Retrieved from https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm

Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States. (1933, December 26). https://www.jus.uio.no/. Retrieved May 14, 2025, from. https://www.jus.uio.no/english/services/library/treaties/01/1-02/rights-duties-stat es.html

Morgenthau, H. J., & Thompson, K. W. (1985). *Politics among nations : the struggle for power and peace* (6th ed.). Knopf.

Odin, S. (1992). The Social Self in Japanese philosophy and American Pragmatism: A Comparative study of Watsuji Tetsurō and George Herbert Mead. *Philosophy East and West*, *42*(3), 475–501. https://doi.org/10.2307/1399274https://www.jstor.org/stable/1399274

Osiander, A. (2001). Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth. *International*

Organization, 55(2), 251–287. Retrieved from [https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/sovereignty-international-relations-and-the-westphalian-myth/

Slaughter, A. (2005). *A New World Order*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi-org.proxy-ub.rug.nl/10.1515/9781400825998

Taylor, R. C. R. (2021). The global governance of pandemics. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *43*(6), 1540–1553. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13293

Watsuji, T. (1996). *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku* (; S. Yamamoto & R. E. Carter, Trans.). State University of New York Press. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=8637

Zanghellini, A., & Sato, M. (2020). A critical recuperation of Watsuji's Rinrigaku. *Philosophia*, *49*(3), 1289–1307. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-020-00296-1