

MIND, BODY, AND BIOETHICS IN JAPAN AND BEYOND

Freshman Seminar, Whitman College, 2007-2008

In the U.S., when a woman over 35 is pregnant, an obstetrician will offer or recommend an amniocentesis to test the fetus for chromosomal abnormalities. In some nations, such as Israel, where there is particular concern about bolstering healthy birth rates, the test is offered to all women (regardless of age) and covered by national health insurance. In Japan, women of any age are rarely offered the test. Women are encouraged to accept the baby that they were given. An obstetrician may begin referring to the pregnant woman as “mom” from an early stage of the pregnancy. The bond between the mother and child and the responsibility of the mother is emphasized over the autonomy of the fetus as an independent being. By the same logic, if a woman is unable or reluctant to carry the fetus to term, for economic reasons, for example, abortion is fully accepted as a means of terminating the pregnancy and preventing a situation in which a child would go uncared for.

The Japanese perform far fewer organ transplants each year than do Western industrialized nations. Thousands die in need of organs, or leave the country to procure them. The chief reason is that the notion of “brain death” (loss of brain function but support of breathing and other vital bodily functions through artificial support systems) is not widely recognized as the end of life. Hence, “brain dead” patients cannot become organ donors. In Buddhist thought, human beings gradually enter and exit the world, and it is the immersion in society which defines the being as fully human. Symbolically, until children are 9 years old they are not considered fully human; after one turns 60 one gradually enters the world of the spirits.

These brief examples reveal that culture is centrally important to the ways in which health, illness, medicine, and biotechnology are understood and accepted. Japan is an interesting place for exploring such cultural differences. Japan is a highly productive, educated, wealthy, and technologized society; its economy is the second largest in the world. And yet many fundamental ideas about human development, the boundaries of the self, the nature of death, the line between human and non-human, appear to be construed fundamentally differently. The Japanese have embraced Western social thought and technology with enthusiasm, but historically there has been a strong sense that these would need to be modified to fit with received social values.

The seminar will examine key concepts of the mind, the body, and the nature-culture distinction. We will study about these issues in the context of historical and cultural

views, making connections between “lay culture” and “science culture.” Broadly, we will pay attention to Japanese beliefs about the good society: laissez-faire economics versus state-managed economies and societies; the self versus the family as the fundamental social unit; democracy as individual rights and self-expression versus democracy as imposed equality.

Issues of health, illness, biotechnology raise these issues pointedly. Why is menopause not pathologized or associated with “deficiency” in Japan? We begin by exploring the crucial role that middle-aged women play in the family, particularly caring for the elderly. Why were SSRIs made available 11 years after their entry into the U.S. We will look at the stigma of mental health issues and the styles of care for the depressed (and others) which have emerged from Japan’s family and corporate welfare models. Why are Japanese seemingly more comfortable with robots? How do tensions between the desire for social cohesion and the need to meet individual needs animate the politics around disability in Japan? What does it mean to be an “alcoholic” or an “enabler” in a society which promotes alcohol as a palliative for hard work, and has subsidized women to remain at home? These and other questions will be explored. The class will put the Japan material in dialogue with broader questions of ethics, and readings will also include background material on Japanese culture. Two novels and two films are included in the material.