

Anonymity and Irreplaceability: Gross Anatomical Practices in Japanese Medical Education

Authors : Ayami Umemura

Abstract : Without exception, all the bodies dissected in the gross anatomical practices are bodies that have lived irreplaceable lives, laughing and talking with family and friends. While medical education aims to cultivate medical knowledge that is universally applicable to all human bodies, it relies on a unique, irreplaceable, and singular entity. In this presentation, we will explore the "irreplaceable relationship" that is cultivated between medical students and anonymous cadavers during gross anatomical practices, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's "ethics of the face" and Martin Buber's discussion of "I-Thou." Through this, we aim to present "a different ethic" that emerges only in the context of face-to-face relationships, which differs from the generalized, institutionalized, mass-produced ethics like seen in so-called "ethics codes." Since the 1990s, there has been a movement around the world to use gross anatomical practices as an "educational tool" for medical professionalism and medical ethics, and some educational institutions have started disclosing the actual names, occupations, and places of birth of corpses to medical students. These efforts have also been criticized because they lack medical calmness. In any case, the issue here is that this information is all about the past that medical students never know directly. The critical fact that medical students are building relationships from scratch and spending precious time together without any information about the corpses before death is overlooked. Amid gross anatomical practices, a medical student is exposed to anonymous cadavers with faces and touching and feeling them. In this presentation, we will examine a collection of essays written by medical students on gross anatomical practices collected by the Japanese Association for Volunteer Body Donation from medical students across the country since 1978. There, we see the students calling out to the corpse, being called out to, being encouraged, superimposing the carcasses on their own immediate family, regretting parting, and shedding tears. Then, medical students can be seen addressing the dead body in the second person singular, "you." These behaviors reveal an irreplaceable relationship between the anonymous cadavers and the medical students. The moment they become involved in an irreplaceable relationship between "I and you," an accidental and anonymous encounter becomes inevitable. When medical students notice being the inevitable takers of voluntary and addressless gifts, they pledge to become "Good Doctors" owing the anonymous persons. This presentation aims to present "a different ethic" based on uniqueness and irreplaceability that comes from the faces of the others embedded in each context, which is different from "routine" and "institutionalized" ethics. That can only be realized "because of anonymity".

Keywords : anonymity, irreplaceability, uniqueness, singularity, emanuel levinas, martin buber, alain badiou, medical education

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