Death and Life Studies and the Applied Ethics Education Program

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The Applied Ethics Education Program, which began in 2002, is a special program designed to study and educate on academic issues in Applied Ethics as seen in light of the rapid development of technology and contemporary society.

As the 21 Century COE DALS project, which began in the same year, shares a number of similar objects of inquiry and general concerns with the Applied Ethics Education Program, it has been decided that both groups will work together in a personnel and organizational sense.

For the last quarter of a century, in Japan and throughout the world, Applied Ethics has diligently developed and evidenced a number of achievements in regard to the “burning social questions” that have been strongly posed to it.

At the same time, Applied Ethics has yet to become an established academic method. In the case of such problems created by modern technology (i.e., organ transplantation, genetic engineering, in vitro fertilization, cloning), for example, we are faced with nothing but dilemma. To borrow the words of Hisatake KATO, “No matter how deep we read the classic texts of Ethics and Philosophy, there are no prior cases or normative theories. No matter how far we inquire into past discourse and tradition, there is no answer. To borrow a phrase from Kabuki, ‘Even the Buddha doesn’t know’.” Accordingly, a new form of unity and synthesis between the knowledge of those at the forefront of the Natural Sciences and those in the Social Humanities is needed.

That being said, it is also true that the most important contemporary issues cannot only be solved from the perspective of the present. Speaking at the Applied Ethics Research Meeting, Yoshihiko Komatsu, who presented a paper entitled “The Pitfalls and Limits to Bio/Ethics,” critically noted that Applied (Bio) Ethics in recent years has been fundamentally concerned with fine-tuning arguments and “regulating traffic,” which is simply synonymous with legislation and scientific risk assessment.

Komatsu warned that our inquiry most not be limited to our contemporary situation, but that we also must pay heed to our vast body of accumulated cultural knowledge.

The problem, in other words (and to put this in a Socio-Human sense), comes to these questions: “What is life?”; “What is dignity?”; “What are values?”; and “What are human beings?” Simply put, are these questions such that they can be developed in a fully unified (or synthesized) sense with the knowledge that the Natural Sciences offer?

In this fundamental sense, and with the advance of modern technology and society (and the according denial of death and life), Death and Life Studies asks the same question as Applied Ethics. And it is for this reason, that we see the necessity to work and cooperate with the DALS project. Concretely put, we further plan to hold joint symposia and research meetings with DALS in order to further our mutual curricular needs.