

# Moral Choices of Japanese University Students

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## Introduction

In recent years Japan has undergone a crisis concerning moral behaviour; particularly troubling to Japanese society is the changing youth culture. Throughout the 1980's, 1990's, and continuing into the twenty first century media have repeatedly reported grim stories of youth crime, suicide, delinquency, truancy, promiscuity, prostitution, hikikomori, and classroom collapse (Kingston, 2002, pp. 268). Furthermore, parents, teachers, and other adult members of society claim that Japanese youth are "aliens" and the contrast between the stolid gray-suited salarymen reading their newspapers on the trains and their casually dressed, blond haired, pierced, ear-phone wearing, keitai packing young person has never been so vivid (Kingston, 2002, pp. 269)

Much of the developed world today has similar problems related to morality at multiple levels of society. World leaders lie compulsively, priests

molest children, married couples commit adultery, and children murder children. It is no longer surprising that these acts occur, but we are disturbed at what seems to be the dominance of these forces in our societies.

Facing these troubled times, we look for moral leaders and foundations to anchor our world, to prevent everything from spinning out of control. But in the developed world, including Japan, moral anchors are difficult to locate on a daily basis. Japan lacks a concise, authoritative canon of the moral guidelines that are found in the bible and other monotheistic texts. And even after centuries of using the bible to constrain immoral behaviour, the west still has great difficulty following the most unambiguous and succinct of canons, the Old Testament.

Where then do we locate morality? Scholars have offered three possible sources for the locus on morality in everyday life. Hauser (2006) argues that human morality is the outcome of primate evolution and can be found in the behavior of lower primates including monkeys and modern apes. Turiel (2002) does not question the evolutionary origin of morality but argues that our everyday morality is most evident in community life through its norms and codes of conduct.

If morality is located in the individual and organizations comprised of individuals. We assume, or hope, that morality is taught in the home or other community institutions. We also hope that the child internalises rules and codes and uses them when he or she faces temptation or moral dilemmas. The psychological research, however, does not fully support the notion that individuals ever fully internalise these rules which must eventually be applied to wide variety of contexts.

The application of moral codes in real life behavior has been characterized by Doris (2002) who argues that morality can be conceptualized

through two very different paradigms - situationism and globalism.

Situationism's three central theoretical commitments, amounting to a qualified reflection of globalism, concern behavioural variation, the nature of traits, and personality organization.

- (1) Behavioural variation across a population owes more to situational differences than dispositional differences among persons.
- (2) Systematic observation problematizes the attribution of robust traits. People will quite typically behave inconsistently with respect to the attributive standards associated with a trait, and whatever behavioural consistency is displayed may be readily disrupted by situational variation.
- (3) Personality is not often evaluatively integrated. For a given person, the dispositions operative in one situation may have an evaluative status very different from those manifested in another situation.

Globalism maintains the following three theses, two regarding the nature of traits and a third regarding personality organization.

- (1) Consistency. Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviour across a diversity of trait-relevant eliciting conditions that may vary widely in their conduciveness to the manifestation of the trait in question.
- (2) Stability. Character and personality traits are reliably manifested in trait-relevant behaviours over iterated trials of similar trait-relevant eliciting conditions.
- (3) Evaluative integration. In a given character or personality the occurrence of a trait with a particular evaluative valence is probabilistically related to the occurrence of other traits with similar evaluative valences. Taken together, these construe personality as more or less coherently

integrated with reliable, relatively situation situation-resistant, behavioural implications.

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After reviewing the wide body of literature exploring situationism and globalism Doris (2002) concluded that individual moral action is much more consistent with that characterized by situationism. Although individuals may be aware of moral rules, action is highly dependent on contextual factors.

One method of determining the nature of moral thought and action is to examine personal narratives that pivot around a moral choice. For this study, a moral choice is defined as an action or decision, or contemplation of an action, in which the outcome, or intention can be construed as good or bad, right or wrong. Narratives of this nature are part of our everyday experience, and are embedded in our daily round activities.

This study examines moral narratives that were played out in the lives of Japanese university students. The narratives were written as weekly assignments, and collected over a period of four years. The assignment itself was to give a brief account, around two hundred words, of a personal conflict the student experienced during a one week period. In addition to giving in an account of the experience, the student also was instructed to write a brief annotation to the report, reflecting on their experience. This method was first proposed by Jakobovits (1979) as an alternative to survey data collection that often omitted contextual details. These narratives, or as referred to as Witness Reports (Jakobovits, 1979) include rich contextual and situational data, helping us to understand our object of study in greater depth. These reports were then analyzed

and grouped into several categories of personal conflict. The first of these categories reported is marriage and relationships. It should be noted that some content of the reports were altered to protect the privacy and anonymity of the student author.

### **Marriage and Relationships: Looking Forward**

In the reports the students composed, there was very little content addressing their expectations of marriage or other types of future, primary relationships. These three messages, however, do address future relationships, but primarily in terms of the writer, one half of a primary relationship. The first message describes an episode that occurred several years earlier, in which the author recalls a middle school relationship. It should be noted that some reports contain grammar errors which appeared in the original texts.

When I was 14 years old, I wanted to give a chocolate cake to a boy I loved for Valentine's Day. I wanted to make it myself. But I was bad at cooking and I had never made a cake. At first, I bought a cookbook and read it, and chose which cake. I experimented and made three cakes. On the eve of Valentine's Day, I could make a perfect cake. (I thought it was perfect) On that day, I handed it to him courageously and said, "I love you." But after all that, I was disappointed in the love for him.

This goal is a bittersweet memory for me. At that time I was a late bloomer, and very shy. So, for this goal, I needed patience and courage. The result of my love was lost. But I could be proud because I did my best. I could come out of my shell. I noticed that I had the ability to overcome my weaknesses.

This is the type of relationship many of us can recall. We were infatuated by someone we barely knew and the fuel for that relationship, if it was to burn, had to be ignited by our own fire, our own efforts, since no relationship, yet, existed. The most striking feature of this account is the self-reflection by the author, and the efforts of a girl to immerse herself into the act of baking a cake, as a means to both express her attraction to this boy, and as a path to self-improvement. The episode then evokes two distinct relationships, one with the object of her affection, and the other, a more lasting one, her relationship with herself. The account of her “bittersweet memory” becomes a benchmark of maturity, her beginning to overcome her shy tendencies, which over time far outlive her relationship with the boy.

This episode and the relationship from which it emerged constructs an enduring memory, placing the girl in a role, somewhat frozen in time. The relationship itself is also frozen in time, but the actors, the girl she remembers, and the boy whom she desired, constructs an enduring generator of positive emotion. This episode evolved to become a positive self-evaluation and confirms a social value, that it is virtuous to reveal oneself to others, and even better if this is an act of love. Furthermore, the relationship becomes a catalyst for persistence and courage, both virtues highly valued by Japanese society.

This next report looks forward to a future relationship from a different perspective, but still through the lens of the self and how the self will be transformed by marriage.

Today in class, you asked me if I was still looking for a job. I answered

I quit and will look for someone to marry me. You know I was just kidding. You were right; it will be much harder to find a husband than a job. However, I am really tired of looking for a job. Nothing comes out as hope. I wish I could find someone to support me.

This report was written after the “job hunting” period which signals a crossover from university life to joining the labor force, or as students often refer to this new world, “society.” This student reports she has given up looking for employment and foresees a future of part-time work, uncertainty, and living with her family. It is clear that at this point, she has despaired, and sees only one acceptable option: marriage.

Her admission that she wants to find a husband to take care of her reveals her stark honesty. Her remedy for her hopeless situation lies not in self-improvement or further exploration of employment. She sees her salvation as coming from outside, from a man who is willing to take over the role of her parents, someone whom she can depend upon, someone who will rescue her from her dire condition. Note, that there is no reference to her role as a wife, and how she can prepare for marriage, nor any expectations or aspirations that can be accomplished through family. Also, there is no reference as to what type of man would be good for her, other than the fact that he can take care of her survival needs. Furthermore, there is no mention of personal goals to which she aspires. Instead of self-fulfillment or development, she has decided that her problem can be remedied through marriage.

The third and final report addressing future relationships was written by a male student, soon to graduate.

I have had a lot of girlfriends. I'm so busy to go to them because this is a very important goal for me. When I marry, I will live with her forever, so I think about this very seriously. Because of that, I need to go on dates with many girls. I need to have many opportunities to meet girls.

This student has a vision of his future, and sees marriage as an important and inevitable part of his life. He views marriage as a life-long commitment that requires effort on his part to find a wife that will be a suitable partner. Although there is a hint of the “playboy” in his report, his motive for dating a number of young women comes not from his need to experience variety for its own sake, but to be able to choose a mate from a wide pool of potential partners. There is also some indication in his report that he is confident in this endeavour and this is an enjoyable stage in his life.

In this young man's report, he is at the center. The image he constructs is that of being surrounded by girls from his past, leading toward one woman in his future. The report is positive and optimistic, if naive. There is no hint of possible failure in his future and his quest to find a suitable partner.

These three reports address future, primary relationships from very different perspectives. One common thread, however, is that their viewpoint is almost entirely self-centered and the real relationship they are pondering at the moment is with themselves. The young woman who relates a middle school crush eventually focuses on herself and how this evocation of young love motivated her to attempt new behaviours, breaking out of her shell and gaining more confidence as a pro-active person.

The second report emerges from a worldview that is depressing and



despairing. The young woman's myopic view sees herself as helpless and waits to be rescued by a man on whom she can depend. Her relationship focuses on her dependent, helpless self, who aspires not to become stronger, but to be sheltered. The young man on the other had views the world as a promising land of optimism, where he will find a partner, after a period of experimentation and searching.

These three reports also indicate that the choice of a life partner is a matter best handled by those who must live with that decision, not their parents or other community members. Prominent for each person, is the fulfilment of their own needs; this drives them towards romantic relationships.

The moral decisions that underpin these reports are vague, but can lay down a foundation on which lives are constructed for years to come. What is a good husband and wife? What do I owe myself and my parents when I choose a lifetime partner? What type of self should I construct to prepare for marriage and family? These reports suggest that the answers to these questions are based on ill-defined and immediate needs. What is most striking is the lack of any self-reflection or self-realization involved in constructing a future self for a future family.

### **Infatuation and Unrequited Love**

The person who is infatuated with another someone constructs a relationship, usually one sided, that is located primarily within their own thoughts and fantasies. Infatuation based relationships can be elaborate, with some history, almost always an the imagined future, and given to constant fantasies about one's position within the relationship.

Similar to infatuation, the person experiencing an unrequited love also

must cope with strong emotions that are not shared or who is a participant in a non-reciprocal relationship. The loss of love is different in its history. A couple, for a period of time, constructs a similar reality, gives each other pleasure, and provides mutual security. When love is lost, however, one partner must continue to live with these memories and feelings, until they can be exorcised in some way, or in some cases, destroy the person who is heart broken.

The reports below reveal a snapshot of infatuation in the hearts of young adults. All of the reports are clearly heartfelt, demonstrating an undeniable belief that the object of their infatuation is worthy of the desire generated for them. The first report is written by a young woman who developed strong emotions for a young man following one date.

Last Wednesday I went to the mall with a boy I met at a party. We went to the game center, then went to karaoke and sang for two hours. After that, he drove me home. Then he came to my apartment and we talked for a long time. I had a very good time. But the next day I was shocked because I heard that he had a girlfriend. I couldn't believe it because he seemed to like me. Also, he didn't tell me he had a girlfriend.

I think I have grown to like him more and more. He is my type. I enjoy being with him. So, I will try to capture his heart. I'll pretend that I don't know he has a girlfriend. This time I will be very careful. I'm usually very positive, but I am going to wait and see what he will do.

This narrative unfolds the progression of an infatuated heart. The emotional attachment begins on a date, where the couple engaged in common, mundane activities. For the young woman, however, the mutual

participation in these activities are interpreted as a common bond, a new-found intimate relationship, and a reciprocal attraction. On the next day, however, the young woman is shocked to learn her date already has a girlfriend. She is confused by the dissonance of the two juxtaposed possibilities. How can he like her if he has a girlfriend?

The young woman's response to the knowledge that her date has a girlfriend is striking. Rather than resolve the matter, by confronting him and asking how he feels about her or whether he actually does have someone else, she decides to pretend she doesn't know. Clearly, she has spent time incubating an infatuation for this boy, and decided to win his love. It is interesting that her outward actions are quite passive: wait and see, pretend not to know and being careful. Inwardly, however, her emotions are volatile and internally active, with the action being entirely directed towards her self, and the relationship, within herself, that she is building.

Her story continues by recounting an unhappy outcome of her emotional endeavour.

Today, I worked part-time at the video rental shop. I saw him come in around five o'clock. I thought he came to see me, so I fixed my make-up and walked out of the office, to talk to him. He was talking to his friend, who works with me. When I walked over to him, he was very cold to me. I was shocked as tears started to run down my face.

I thought I was not that sad after I finished crying. But I cared about him so much, even if he didn't like me that much. I don't know. I met him a couple of times. I want to know him better. But I don't want to be hurt.

So, I don't want to be serious about him. But it is difficult. Because my heart is full of him now.

The chance meeting came as an unhappy shock for the young woman. When she saw him enter the store, she believed he had come to see her. She had internalized the fantasy she had created for herself, and had transformed any doubts she had about his feelings for her, and his relationship with another young woman, into a near certainty that he shared her desire for intimacy. The young man, however, shatters this belief, by ignoring her, or at least not responding in a way that she had hoped for and expected. He had successfully communicated that he was not interested in furthering their relationship and her presence did not bring him the same happiness that she felt by seeing him.

The young woman accepts the reality that he is not interested in a relationship with her. She quietly, and passively, retreats, not causing conflict or expressing anger. She turns her hurtful emotions completely inward, inflicting no one but herself. She had expanded her emotional world to allow him within its boundaries, and lived in that world for a time, with him as her quiet, imagined companion. Now that he has made it clear, that he does not share the same thoughts and emotions as she, by his behavior in the objective world, she must withdraw, closing her emotional boundaries, not including a present or future with the young man.

The following report gives an account of infatuation, residing inside a lost love and a broken heart.

I have a big problem now. I am lovesick. I have loved this boy for two years. At first he was one of my best friends. But then I fell in love with

him. We were always together. I thought we would be together for a long time. Everyone said we were the perfect couple. It was so natural for us to be together. But, this summer, a freshman girl stole him away from me. We belong to the same tennis club, so I have to see her everyday. I would like to give him up, but I have to see him everyday. If I could wish him happiness, I would, but I can't do that now. He is still kind to me. I have pain in my heart for his kindness. He was my friend, then my boyfriend. I don't know the boundary between being a friend and being a girlfriend. I just wish I didn't have to see him everyday. I have to overcome this.

Unlike the previous report, this young woman had spent a considerable length of time intimately involved with a young man, in what seemed to be a fulfilling relationship for her. Her choice is painful. If she continues to be involved with the tennis club, she will face her loss everyday. If she wishes not to be confronted with her loss, she must leave the club. She understands that she must redraw the boundary of her relationship, and not include him in her sphere of intimacies, to being friends as before. But, she realizes this will not be easy. She decides to endure the hurt, to remain in the club, not to lash out in anger, but to draw upon inner strength.

This final narrative is drawn from three separate reports written by a young woman. This narrative gives the account of a relationship that is ill defined and the source of confusion for the young woman.

My precious friend, Hiro, is travelling soon, this evening to Australia. He is very gentle and understands me better than any other boy I have

ever known. So, it is difficult for me not to see him for a month and a half.

I didn't go to his home. I knew that it would be a chance to be with him. But I was afraid of the loneliness I would feel after seeing him. The bigger the happiness, the bigger the loneliness. I knew we would have a nice time together before he left, but I didn't want to feel that lonely afterward.

Hiro is going to Australia with his best friend, who happens to be a woman. He looked very excited to be going on his long journey, in spite of my complicated heart.

I don't think I am in love with him. It is true that I rely on him. I am very open with him, and fully express myself when I am with him. And I feel I need him when I am troubled - when I have a nightmare, when I feel powerless. To see him this excited, and to go with a woman, I know he has no loving feelings for her, she is just a friend, but still I treat him harshly. I don't know why I was so irritated. I want him to have a great time in Australia, I do, but I am very lonely.

This young woman is clearly, strongly attached to her friend, Hiro. Her feelings are consistent with someone who is in love. She admits she will miss him when he leaves for a month and a half; and she knows she will be lonely, perhaps the kind of loneliness that cannot be healed by other friends. She does not admit to being in love, but she may be holding back, not allowing herself to admit this to herself, or to take the next step. Whatever her relationship is with the young man, the intensity is not shared. She reports that he is going with a young woman, who is also his best friend. The greater intensity of the relationship, then, is

with parts of her. She holds onto a deep affection that the young man does not share, and is conflicted about the true intensity of her feelings. Her outward behavior towards him is her expression of this inner conflict, revealed as simply irritation. Her sense of having done something wrong, to treat him harshly, is not part of an inner struggle centered on right and wrong morality, but on the understanding of her own feelings and how she can be unkind to someone she needs so much.

The stories reported in this section are primarily dilemmas that occur within the self. The young adults that wrote these stories may have directed their feelings and thoughts toward other people, real or imagined, but the primary conflict is an inner one. However, in attempting to find some resolution, each person plays to an inner community consisting of imagined partners, one-sided relationships, or relationships that mainly reside in the territory of the imagination. The decisions made under these circumstances, involving others who are primarily mentally represented, is a basis for a kind of narcissism. The young woman who hopes to find a husband to take care of her surrounds herself with mental mirrors reflecting her lack of self worth, not real people who can help her build greater confidence. The young man who plans to sample many young women before selecting a partner basks in the confidence offered by hypothetical or shallow relationships, rather than an actual woman who hurts from being just one of the sampled items on his list. The young women who suffer silently over their non-reciprocal relationships were drawn to a young men who could not and would not return their affection. Consequently, their decisions reflect a morality that inflicts pain upon a self already suffering from low expectations. These inner conflicts are represented internally by the self, surrounded by imagined

interlocutors that were created by images and memories drawn from real life, but infused with the feelings of the self. Thus, any decision is based more on the internal emotional environment of the person, rather than a group of real people that helps to construct any form of mutually constructed morals and ethics.

### **Constructing Primary Relationships**

This section consists of stories and reports written by young people involved in relationships with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Unlike the stories in the first section, these accounts involve people who meet and emotionally interact on a daily basis and attempt to construct a set of rules and norms within their relationship.

In this report, a young woman describes her dilemma of balancing emotional need with independence and maturity.

My boyfriend works for a company in Kyoto from early in the morning to late at night. It is really hard for me to wait for his call, and I want to see him. We rarely see each other. He is very busy everyday.

This is not only my effort but also his. He calls me everyday after work and sometimes comes over to my place, even during the weekday. So I try not to complain about his work or about us not seeing much of each other.

This brief account goes straight to the heart of a common conflict of relationships, particularly in the early stages. According to the young woman, she and her boyfriend share a strong mutual desire to be



together. As is often the case, the world of work and school interferes with the time they can be together resulting in a mutual longing. Her dilemma is how to manage her needs and still respect her boyfriend's obligations. She has reached the point of maturity where she understands that her best course of action is to constrain her emotions and demands. She needs to know that although he cannot be with her, he cares for her and demonstrates this by calling her and being with her whenever he can. Somehow, she must endure her suffering and at the same time, maintain the relationship. What is not explicitly stated but implied is that the emotional constraint is motivated by love and empathy. The couple has a mutual desire to see each other, conflicting schedules, and at times place the other's needs, or the needs of the couple itself, over needs of the self.

Young adults often seek independence from the authority of their parents, but have not fully internalised the self-constraints that are necessary to live safely and responsibly. University students often depend upon their friends and romantic partners as their primary source of social feedback, to tell them when they are crossing over the line into the territory of unhealthy or unacceptable behaviour. This is one of the thresholds of adulthood. We are free to make mistakes, but have the option of listening to advice from our peers. In the following report, the young woman tests the limits of alcohol consumption, and fails.

I went to a year-end party with my boyfriend last Sunday. It was his baseball team's party, and I was the only girl there, among 30 boys. All of the members like me, and I like them as well. I drank too much, without meaning to. I got very drunk and could not remember very much

about the party.

My boyfriend got very angry and told me not to drink. I thought about that and repented the next day. I sometimes can't hold my alcohol. I thought women should not drink too much.

This situation contains a number of elements worth noting. One is that she was the only female at the party. Most likely, this meant she was without her usual reference group, which typically would be a group of young women. If she were surrounded by other female friends, she likely would have been more self-conscious of their attitudes towards her and any unacceptable behaviour. Furthermore, there were thirty boys at the party, making her a center of attention. The young woman claims that her excessive drinking was an unintentional act, that she was drunk before being aware of her state. Not only are there no peers to help control her drinking, but also she could not even monitor the effects of alcohol consumption.

The only source of constraint was her boyfriend, who failed to restrain the young woman's drinking. Later, however, she becomes aware of the social and physical effects of excessive drinking. She felt physically ill and embarrassed. She reaches the conclusion that women should not drink too much, herself included. This conclusion is driven by her boyfriend's clear anger and disapproval, framing the incident as one of shame and repentance.

Cultures sometime specify moral and ethical norms within gender-based contexts. Men and women are held to different behavioural standards. In Japanese culture today, however, gender norms are in a state

of instability, with young people questioning traditional roles. This is not trivial. To define oneself as a good woman, man, or partner requires the individual to form conclusions about the nature of expectations and norms. This is often fertile soil for disagreements and resentments among couples. These following reports, written by the same young woman, illustrate this type of dilemma.

#### Report 1

My boyfriend stayed with me at my apartment for about a week recently. One day, he said to me, "I'm hungry so cook something for me." At that time, I was not hungry, so I refused. I told him that if he was hungry he could cook something for himself. He was offended when I said that.

I knew he could cook but he wanted me to cook something. I couldn't understand his thinking about cooking. Whenever I cook dinner, he never offers to help me. Why? I am not his housekeeper. Maybe he thought I felt cooking was too much trouble at that time, but I didn't. I wonder why he asked me to cook.

#### Report 2

My boyfriend is a very messy person. After he uses the toilet and bathroom he never turns off the lights. After he eats, he leaves the dishes on the table. His dirty clothes are always scattered on the floor, and I have to pick things up.

I told him to straighten things up again and again but he never cleans. Can't he clean his own place? Maybe not. I don't understand this at all. I have been to his flat. His flat was neat, so I know he can clean up after himself. But he can't keep my place clean. Maybe he thinks I will let him

do anything he wants. I don't understand him and I don't understand men.

The story begins by the boyfriend's invasion into the young woman's apartment and living space. The boyfriend then attempted to establish a domestic relationship resembling mother and son. The young woman is expected to respond to his needs, being asked to cook for him (and only him) and to clean up his mess. The young woman is aware that his behavior seems to be situation specific; he keeps his own apartment clean, but not hers. Although this angers the young woman, she does not clearly understand what is occurring. The young man is attempting to construct the norms of their relationship, placing him in the role of the child, and her in the role of the caretaker mother. In addition, he is also attempting to assert power in their relationship, by redefining her living space, from what was once her personal territory, to including him and his needs within this apartment. The young woman questions this new situation, but does not go as far as to assert her definition of the relationship or the rules to be applied within the walls of her apartment. She only questions his motives, leaving open the possibility that she will eventually accept his definition of what is a good woman, man, and partner.

It is sometimes easy to overlook the realities that some university students have very stressful lives, managing and balancing school, work, and personal relationships. Seen as a testing ground for adult family life, managing similar demands, young people must construct a set of rules to follow when sharing their life with intimate partners. One of the most difficult challenges in today's society involves knowing at whom, and to what extent is it fair to vent anger. There are so few people who

can serve this role as the person to whom we can safely unleash our negative outbursts. Our life partner, and later our children, often fill this role. The following report reveals how a young woman copes with this dilemma of modern life.

I stayed at school from Wednesday to Friday to work with my school club. I came back home tired and worn out. But I had my part-time job on the weekend, and had to work. My boyfriend stayed with me over the weekend and I was difficult and on edge.

I was so stressed that I took it out on him for no reason. If I did have any reasons, they were just small, unimportant things. After I left to go to work, he wrote me a letter. He said that he didn't want to be alone at his place, and thanked me for letting him stay the two nights. I felt bad about the way I had treated him. I couldn't see his needs, because I was so full of myself.

This report reveals two delicate aspects of close relationships. On one hand we desire to be both physically and emotionally close to our partner. On the other hand, we need some personal distance in order to maintain our sense of individually. The young woman reports that she was tired and stressed, but still faced the needs of her boyfriend, who wanted to stay with her at her apartment. Reacting to his demands, she treated him what she considered unfairly. After reading his letter, she regretted her lack of kindness and sensitivity to her boyfriend's needs, concluding that she was self-absorbed to the point of not regarding his feelings. This represents a personal moral dilemma that persists throughout our lifetime. Is it ever fair to refuse the needs of the ones we love? Are we

ever justified in using our partner to vent anger that is at least partly generated in situations outside the relationship? The resolution depends upon the strength and depth of the relationship. Once again, we see it is the depth of empathy that works to constrain this young woman's anger and causes her to reflect back on her mistreatment of her boyfriend.

The above accounts illustrate moral decisions that arise from reacting to the needs of others. But what about our needs? When is it fair and right to ask others to fulfil our needs? The two reports below, written by different young women, explore these issues.

#### Report 1

A few days ago, I went to my boyfriend's house by bicycle. When I left his house, it was late and raining, so I expected him to take me to my house, but he didn't. He only saw me off at the place where I parked my bike. I went home alone. I felt quite wretched when I lost myself.

The next day, I told him that I wanted him to take me home. He told me that I didn't say anything like that at the time. I wish I had asked him to take me home. But I think he should have taken me home at night, even if I said nothing.

#### Report 2

I often quarrel with my boyfriend. The other day, I was angry with him and refused to talk to him. He always leaves his things in my room and sleeps in my bed because I live alone. When I am with him, I want him to show he cares about me. I want us to sit close, and talk with each other. I sometimes feel that my room is just a convenience for him. So, I told him how I felt. He asked me why I would say this to him, and fell into a

bad mood. We were both angry and silent. He said, "Please don't be angry. You are always angry." I told him I was sorry. Then he said he was sorry. I forgave him because I couldn't help it.

I felt that all his stuff in my room was making me uncomfortable. I thought he wanted me to treat him like a baby. I was the only person he treated this way. I don't want to quarrel with him if I can help it.

In each of these reports, the young women desire a level of intimacy that is not readily offered by their respective boyfriends. In the first report, the young woman wanted her boyfriend to anticipate her need to be taken home, without her explicitly asking this favor. Her conclusion is that she should not have had to ask, that it is his role and responsibility to understand her needs and fulfill them. In her mind, this is a right that should be afforded her with an intimate partner; she feels it is fair to expect her partner to know her needs. This is an interesting moral decision. It is not that her partner is being deliberately resistant, it is just that he cannot read her thoughts or know enough about her needs to anticipate them. Nonetheless, she feels she is entitled to this level of understanding. The young woman is asking that their personal boundaries not stop at the surface of their skin, but penetrate into their thoughts.

The second report also addresses an issue of personal boundaries. The young woman states she is unhappy with her boyfriend invading her room. But, if he is going to be there, then she wants physical and emotional intimacy. She incurs some personal costs in sharing her living space with the young man, in return, she wants to feel close. His reaction is that she is always angry. This report indicates that this couple fails to reach a point of empathy, where there is a mutual understanding that

the needs of the other is valid, even if they cannot always be addressed. In this encounter, it seems the boyfriend wins the battle. He simply wants an end to the anger and conflict. In return, he offers an apology, but not a promise to change his behavior. The moral that emerges from this encounter is that emotional harmony has greater value than unfulfilled needs.

## **Friends**

It is through experiences with friends that our personal moral choices stand the greatest test. Friends lack the authority of parents to coerce behavior. Although we may be emotionally attached to our friends, they do not fulfil the same deep needs as our romantic partners. But nevertheless, we cherish our friends, want their approval, and fear the possibility of social isolation, ridicule, or a damaged reputation.

### **Defining self through friends**

Friends often play a significant role in the development of our self-esteem and sense of accomplishment, particularly in Japan where much time is devoted to group activities. This student writes about overcoming a self perceived weakness, with the help of her teammates, due to a lack of perseverance.

I belonged to a badminton team when I was young. I played doubles with my friend. When we were in the last year of elementary school, we wanted to win the championship, since that was our last chance. The year before, I neglected practice and could only come in second. But the next year, my coach and family expected us to win the championship. We



wanted to live up to their expectations. I changed my attitude and trained hard for four months. At last, we won the championship.

This goal was big for me at that time. Our opponents had won many other championships. They were very tough. We always lost to them. But because of our hard effort, we won.

This is not an unusual story, but its significance is seldom underappreciated by those who have experienced the joy winning following defeat. The moral lesson learned is one that is highly valued in Japanese culture, that perseverance will be rewarded not only by success but also by the experience itself. There are two elements to this story that are worth noting. One is that the student attributed her initial failure to her lack of practice. Her change in attitude was facilitated by her coach and family who expected the student and her teammates to win the championship. Finally, victory itself reinforced the understanding that success is the consequence of hard work.

Much of our life does not consist of great moments, but small, often trivial incidents. Each day we are faced with numerous choices; we must decide what to do, what to think, how to feel about occurrences in our daily round. The next report reflects on this type of experience, certainly trivial in nature, but important enough to pose a moral dilemma.

Yesterday, I went to my friend's house and stayed overnight. We slept in the kotatsu. While I was sleeping, my friend kicked me in the back, several times. I moved, and slept on the floor instead of the carpet. Moreover, she snored and kept talking in her sleep. I felt so uncomfortable.

I was angry and thought that I wouldn't sleep with her again. But she didn't do it on purpose. So, I can forgive her. She doesn't remember anything. She can't do anything about it. I think there is nothing we can do about it.

This young person has opened her life to this friend, then realized that in doing so she has widened her personal boundary as well, and is not sure she is pleased with the outcome. The woman writing the report was invited to stay at her friend's place. Later she realized that sleeping there meant sharing both a psychological and physical space, which proved to be uncomfortable. What at first might have seemed like shared intimacy turned into a sleepless night. The young woman's anger is directed at her friend, not at herself for choosing to be in this situation in the first place. She then attempts to forgive her friend, since her snoring and moving around was not intentional, but done in her sleep. The young woman chose to maintain the friendship, valuing empathy over personal comfort, and a personal relationship, over a safe but confining personal boundary.

The following reports illustrate the tension that occurs when friends must compromise self-gratifying desires for the sake of the survival of the relationship. This is a quality that is instilled throughout the life cycle of the Japanese individual. Japanese children are taught from a very early age that a good person is one who can play well with others. A good child is one who can wait their turn, share toys, and make an attempt to find harmony when playing with others, rather than always insist on satisfying our own desires. As young adults, the dilemma of reaching mutual decisions that leads to mutual satisfaction becomes a

critical factor in continuing or terminating friendships. The following two reports illustrate the tensions created by people with competing needs.

#### Report 1

I went shopping with my friends. One friend worked part-time, so she was late. Another friend and I got hungry, and we decided to go somewhere and eat lunch. I asked her what she wanted to eat. She said that anything was OK. I suggested that we eat udon, but she said that she didn't want to eat that. Finally we ate spaghetti.

She said that she could eat anything, but then why not udon? Isn't udon anything? If she wanted to eat spaghetti, she should have said so in the first place. We could have decided on a place to eat sooner. I like her very much, but I felt unpleasant.

#### Report 2

A friend and I went to a video shop to rent a movie. I wanted to rent a Disney movie, but my friend wanted to rent *Jaws*. We disagreed on which video to rent.

I don't like watching scary movies. But she wanted to watch the movie. In the end, we rented the Disney movie because she gave in to my demands. I am very stubborn and she knows what I am like. I think I should listen to other people's suggestions. Next year I want to be a nice girl.

These two reports represent two sides of the same selfish coin. In the first report, the young woman's friend insists on eating spaghetti, after

first saying that she would eat anything. The author of the report finds it difficult to resolve this contradiction in her friend, who claims to be open to the others needs, but in fact is determined to eat what she wants. In the second report, it is the author of the story who does not act on her friends needs or find a compromise. Contrary to the ideals of consensual decisions, sometimes the fulfilment of needs cannot reach mutual satisfaction. The moral position to be reached is much more complex than getting along with others. We are faced with finding empathy with those who place their needs above ours, or forgive ourselves for our uncontrollable selfishness.

Entering into a friendship-based relationship requires the mutual agreement of certain, often unspoken rules. Many of these rules are culturally specific and sometimes different from rules learned from our respective families. One area of rules involves the issue of tardiness, being late for an appointment with a friend. How long can one be made to wait? How long is one expected to wait before giving up? Most of us agree it is wrong to make others wait, but how wrong? At some point, most of us must ponder these questions. In the following report, this young woman faces this predicament.

On Sunday I went shopping with my friend. I invited her to go shopping, and asked her to meet me early in the morning, since I have a part-time job in the afternoon. I agreed to meet at ten. I set two alarm clocks on Saturday night. On Sunday morning, the phone rang and woke me up. The voice on the other end said, "Hello! Where are you?" I was shocked. It was already ten thirty. I said I was sorry, got up, got ready, and went to Namba. I got there at eleven. She wasn't angry, she just said that she was surprised I was still in bed. I told her I was sorry. I made an

inexcusable mistake. I invited her to meet me, and I was late. She didn't get angry. I don't know why I didn't hear the alarm.

The woman writing this report has asked her friend to meet her early in the day, thus taking responsibility for the woman's time. Although, unable to hear her two alarm clocks (but hearing the phone) the woman learns she is late and her friend is waiting. Her friend does not openly express anger, just surprise. The friend finding the empathy necessary to avoid anger, and the writer seeking forgiveness, resolves the situation. The young woman who was late realized that her action was inexcusable, accepting full responsibility. One moral choice made by both women, especially the friend, is that at least in this case, the value of their friendship was greater than time wasted. This moral choice made restraint of anger possible.

During the course of friendships, we learn what behaviours are reliable and predictable. In the following report, a young woman demonstrates understanding her friend's thoughts and feelings at such a depth.

A friend of mine asked me if I would buy some chocolates for her mother from the store where I work. I said that I would. But, before I actually bought them, I called her to make sure she wanted me to buy them. She told me that her mother had already bought the chocolates, and wouldn't need me to buy any for her.

I expected this kind of thing to happen, so I didn't just go ahead and buy the chocolates. I made sure to check if she really wanted them, and because of that, I avoided trouble. If I were in her position, I would have called to tell me that she didn't need the chocolates.

This young woman decided not to completely trust her friend. Perhaps at some point, she learned her friend changes her mind and does not always keep promises. Rather than terminate the friendship completely, the young woman checks back with her friend to confirm the request. In this case, her prediction was accurate; her friend decided not to buy the chocolates, but failed to inform the young woman. The moral question here is what can we expect from friends? Is it right to terminate a friendship when we know that the other person cannot keep his or her word? Are we expected to compensate for their behavioral and ethical shortcomings? In a culture that places such great importance on friendships, as is the case with Japan, when is it not a virtue to maintain a close relationship?

Reciprocity is possibly the most difficult terrain for friendships. We are expected to repay the efforts and kindness of others. We are, however, aware of how much we are willing to repay particularly when our time is at issue. Since friends are not family, and usually do not extract the same emotional payment as romantic partners, we are often faced with the dilemma of setting limits upon reciprocity. Furthermore, we are faced with judging our character when we have received more than we are willing to give. The following report reflects this type of decision.

My friend caught a cold last Thursday because she didn't dress warmly. She was laid up for two days with her cold. When I was sick, she took care of me. But when she was sick, I had to work so I couldn't take care of her.

She took care of me, so I thought that when she got sick I would take care of her. But I couldn't and I am sorry. The next time she is sick, I will

take care of her.

The young woman who wrote this report was aware of her friend's act of kindness, as well as her inability to reciprocate when her friend needed help. The writer resolves her transgression by admitting that she was wrong, and feels remorse. In addition, she promises to take care of her friend in the future. There was a moral choice made in this situation. The young woman decided that her responsibility to her employer was more important than taking care of her friend. This is a decision similar to those Japanese face all through their work career, balancing work and the needs of their family. This report indicates that the tilt towards the work place and responsibility to the employer begins early in life. The young woman was willing to allow her friend to suffer alone, and pay the personal cost of guilt and shame.

Making choices about friendships when considering reciprocity is not always a calculus comparing our effort against that of another person. The following report illustrates such a situation.

Last Thursday, a friend from high school told me that another friend's father had just died. We were all on the same basketball team in high school. I couldn't decide whether I should go to the funeral or not. But, in the end, I didn't go, and now I regret that decision.

I had a few reasons why I did go to the funeral. One reason is that I had another commitment that day. Secondly, the boy and I are not very close, and I had never met his father. Thirdly, the boy did not come to my mother's funeral when she died. So, I didn't think I had to go to the

funeral. But then, I remembered that many of my friends had come to my mother's funeral and they gave me a lot of support that day. I think I should have gone to my friend's father's funeral.

This is another example of not taking action to extend the hand of friendship followed by regret. At first the young man questions whether he should go to his teammate's father's funeral. He feels some sense of obligation since the boy who lost his father is a teammate. In the end, however, the young man reaches the conclusion that he need not attend the funeral, claiming that he and the other boy were not close and perhaps more relevant, the other person did not attend the funeral when his mother died. After not attending the funeral, the young man rethinks his decision. He recalls the support he felt when friends attended his mother's mother, and realized that he missed the opportunity to extend that same sentiment to his teammate. This is an important question in adult development. Should we help others who have not first helped us? Are we morally obligated to help others if we can help, when we are not returning the favour? In this case, through reflection and empathy, the young man concluded that he should have been there for his teammate. He will have to wait for another opportunity to put his realization into action.

The next report is a telling example the strength of peer groups on Japanese university students. One of the major functions of the university experience for young Japanese adults is that they prepare for they type of socialization that is necessary for the roles they will lead in the world of work, family, and community. Since the lives of high school



students are so highly structured, there are few opportunities for young people in Japan to make choices that will affect their own lives. University provides social experiences where young people are able to fail at risk levels that are less severe and disastrous than those in the adult world. This is not to say that there is no risk at all; students can be ostracized and stigmatized by their peer groups, but this can often be forgiven through some form of apology and reform. The following report illustrates this type of experience.

From Friday to Sunday my school had a festival. My circle made french fries and doughnuts. I had a good time on Saturday, because I drank some alcohol in the morning with some of my friends and people I didn't know very well. Since I went to different stalls at the festival, I didn't work very hard. My circle chairperson got angry with us. So, after the circle chairperson got angry at me, I worked hard.

I was looking forward to the school festival. I thought it was a chance to have fun and make a lot of friends. But I drank too much. I felt bad for not working and letting my chairperson down, but I had a good time of Friday and Saturday.

This experience offers an important lesson concerning obligations to society and the separation of social spheres. University circles are primarily social organizations that provide opportunities for friendship, fun, and at times community action. The young woman did not understand that the function of the circle's food stall at the festival was to raise funds, and instituted rules that resembled any other form of work relationship. People are given responsibilities, and are expected to perform

the tasks they are assigned. It is not acceptable to suddenly abandon that role, do what one feels like doing, drink alcohol, and socialize. The circle had established a different set of rules for the festival activities. The young woman needed to learn that organizations can dictate appropriate behavior, and punish inappropriate behavior, depending upon purpose, time and place.

### A Clear Moral Choice

One surprising discovery from the analysis of these stories is the lack of explicit moral choices, where the author identified the moral dilemma and stated his or her difficulty in making moral decisions. The report that follows is one of the few examples of this type of decision process.

I am trying to decide whether I should cheat to succeed. I thought it was OK for me to cheat to succeed. Recently I had to cheat, and I thought it was OK. But now I cannot decide if it is good or night.

To determine if cheating is good or bad, we need to consider each situation, case by case. Cheating is bad, in general, but I believed it was always the worst thing, I would be unhappy, because one day, I will have to cheat. I can't decide if it is right or not.

This is a remarkable self-report. The author has admitted to cheating at least once, and does not appear to regret this course of action. The author does, however, understand that cheating is an unacceptable act to some people, in some contexts. The dilemma for this person is to identify those contexts in which cheating is not acceptable. The solution for this person is to consider the contexts of cheating. But the author seems to

have little understanding of what contexts, or what aspects of these contexts relaxes the moral imperative of honesty. Also worth noting is that the author indicates that the act of cheating is in some way beyond his or her control, that it is something one has to do. The author is aware that in a general sense, cheating is wrong, but it is the context of the act that holds greater influence in this person's decision.

### Conclusion

This study addressed questions asking how so young people make moral decisions and how do they conceptualize these decisions. From the reports presented in this study, three aspects of moral choices have emerged: self-centeredness, context, and empathy.

Given that Japan has such a rich history of group centeredness, it was surprising that so many of the reports focused on how their choices would affect the author, rather than others who were involved in the dilemma. In the reports concerning romantic relationships, most of the stories centered on the feelings of the author, rather than the other person involved in the relationship. More surprising, however, is the self-focus in the reports concerning peer or parent relationships. Rather than focusing on the feelings and thoughts of the other people involved, the authors often drew their attention towards their own feelings of guilt, shame, regret, or self-improvement. This may be a dialogic form of narcissism, in which group relationships, and the schema of these relationships have been internalized over the course of development. When a crisis emerges, however, the individual looks at themselves, through the critical eyes of their internalized audience, rather than attempting to understand those in their sphere of involvement. The greater intensity of

the emotions, the greater the focus on the self and the less attention given to the actual thoughts and feelings of others.

Context consists of place, time, circumstances, and other people involved in the dilemma. Of these, time and people will be considered in this study. Time influences decisions through two dimensions. One dimension is that of where in time this decision is located. The young adults who pondered their future partners were primarily considering the future, and for that reason, an actual decision would be delayed until the actually arrived. For others, the time was the present, as in the case of the young person dealing with unrequited love who had to decide on a course of action, first to attract her intended romantic target, and later to address a crushing rejection. Of course, all decisions actually take place in present time; however, these real choices make morality difficult and elusive. In most of these reports, the people making decisions relied on their feelings at the time, with little attention to rules of behavior or even the consequences of their actions. Other decisions were located in the past, including regrets and rationalizations. These types of decisions were quite common among the stories and provided the basis of moral reflections. Stories that included the boy who did not attend a funeral and the young woman who was reprimanded for not taking her job seriously found people formulating a moral story, placing themselves in the role of good or delinquent actors. Although after the fact, these decisions are not about what to do, but about what should have been done, and what to say about the person who was responsible for the deed.

The second, and most influential element of context is the people involved in the moral dilemmas. Obviously, other people were both part of the source of the dilemma and inseparable from the consequences. More

striking though was how relationships influenced choices. One of the primary motivations in these decisions was the expectation and reflection of guilt and shame. The closer the relationship, the greater the prospect of guilt and shame, and the less likely that these consequences could be avoided. Perhaps, the most effective protection these young Japanese adults have against guilt and shame is to distance themselves from others and from a social boundary around their psychological space. The shame and guilt of deceiving a romantic hopeful or not going to a funeral can be minimized by construction social distance and alienation. Perhaps then the dominant moral narrative in Japanese society is an act followed by shame, or avoiding shame, rather than the notion of “doing the right thing” and receiving praise from their reference group.

Considering the costs of relationships then, empathy is both a blessing and a curse. To have empathy for others gives young Japanese people a rich emotional and social life, however, this same empathy leaves them vulnerable to criticism, and internalized shame for their actions. Recent social problems, including hikikomori, “freeta” and “neeto” may be as much a self-protective strategy a lack of social skills. If potential shame is not counter balanced by strong family and social support, the person has little recourse other than to withdraw or worse, end his or her life.

Finally, the most salient element motivating moral action is not situation or context, but the nature of the relationships involved in the dilemma. Stronger than the situation or the context of the dilemma are the people affected by choices and actions. As in other aspects of Japanese society, the relationship itself, including roles, status, social distance, and implicit and explicit associations with other people hold powerful influence over moral choices. Much more importance is

demonstrated in these reports that concern the influence of relationships than an explicit rule that is to be followed or broken. Furthermore, when an individual must make a choice that involves no other people, a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety is expressed, as illustrated in the reports of the young man considering cheating and the young woman contemplating marriage with no partner in mind.

In conclusion, these reports indicate that morality can be constructed as a narrative, including context, decision, and consequences. The tendency of a person to make decisions that benefit others or at least minimize harm, is primarily influenced by pro-social attitudes and feelings, and the expectation of shame as a consequence that have been developed throughout the person's lifetime. Explicit moral rules play little if any role in these decisions. Morality is then largely a matter of relational considerations. If society is to produce generations of moral citizens, pro-social experiences, emotional experiences, over the individual's lifetime, through family, friends, and other institutions, are essential.

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