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The Moral Code of LAS

Written by: Bryant Dawson

It was not until my freshman year at Butler that my morals were strewn into the inferno - and quite deliberately, in a seminar class titled, "Faith, Doubt, and Reason." Despite the burn, I emerged with a clearer understanding of right and wrong. The class was the spark I needed to step outside my conservative comfort zone of Southern Indiana and into reality. What I have discovered throughout my subsequent liberal arts studies at Butler University is that this reality is incredibly situational, but it can offer great insight into what is right and wrong when approached through a certain lens.

"Faith, Doubt and Reason" first exposed me to strong arguments challenging my method of thinking. An argument made by Paul Tillich in his book *Dynamics of Faith* states that "Science has no right and no power to interfere with faith and faith has no power to interfere with science" (Tillich 94). Tillich's philosophy rocked my way of seeing the world. "How is it that two items intended to improve human life and direct behavior for the masses could possibly ever be completely compartmentalized?" I thought. The questions inspired by this first class at Butler convinced me to change my major from Biology to the emerging field of Science, Technology, and Society. This has allowed me to broaden my perspective on a variety of social issues, ultimately making me a more accepting person.

In the major, abbreviated as "STS," I have found that I can continue asking the same philosophical questions that were so interesting to me as a freshman. Philosophy, however, is a paradoxical subject. The Greeks defined it as "the love of wisdom," yet most writers seek to exclude some ideology, preaching a one-sided argument. Maybe somewhere during the past 2,500 years we have lost the meaning of wisdom. Certainly excluding ideas is not wise.

This is exactly where I feel my Butler education has led me. Above all, an open mind is necessary to understand morals. Decisions about good and bad are relative, a lesson I have learned from observations of other cultures. Last summer I received my core community requirement volunteering with a medical brigade in Guatemala through Butler's Timmy Global Health chapter. During the trip I met a midwife name Maria Louisa, one of the community women helping bridge the language barriers between our American medical brigade and the rural Guatemalan community of Mayan descent. All day long, she had a blanket strapped around her back carrying a sleepy toddler. He eventually became restless and wiggled free to the ground, exploring what I assume was the newly discovered art of running. The Butler volunteers and I were enjoying his new found freedom until Maria

Louisa caught up, snagged him by one arm, and lifted him up, giving him several resounding spanks on the rear end. The boy did not cry, but I wanted to. The scene was hard to watch and seemed unjust.

The act to me seemed morally wrong. "Can't spanking so frequently condition children to answer anger with physicality?" I thought I had read that somewhere, and it is certainly not what the world needs. Later that night, however, I learned the Church in Guatemala encourages women to spank to teach obedience. Maria Louisa was a single mother and she had never read a psychological study about the affects of spanking to make her question the action. What other authority did she have to listen to if not the word of the Church? How can I say that she was wrong?

While I experienced the situational nature of right and wrong in Guatemala, I also discovered the necessity of perspective in decision making during my semester abroad in Spain. I spent fall of 2013 on a Butler Spanish immersion program in Alcalá de Henares, a suburb of Madrid. As the semester progressed, I slowly learned about the city's most famous hero, Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*. The book portrays the idea that perception is the key to understanding reality. In the book, Don Quixote's perception is so limited by the countless fantasies he reads that he is disconnected from reality. He famously mistakes windmills for giants and attempts to slay them. Regarding moral decisions, we need to be careful not to find ourselves caught in a fantasy. What Don Quixote needs, what society needs, and more specifically, what I need, is to be widely informed to make decisions about what is right and wrong.

Yes, moral decisions are incredibly difficult. Yes, we often do the wrong things. What can we expect from the first beings on Earth to try to understand decisions as being somehow right or wrong? Only sharing ideas, the "love of wisdom," can help us understand the puzzle of morality. Right or wrong cannot exist unless many options are known and understood so that choices exist. I know now that I was wrong to think Maria Louisa should not spank her child. She has no other choice.

I have learned right from wrong not from being told by my parents, or by discovering the answer in a single scientific experiment. It was obtained through the places I have been, the languages I have spoken, and the experiences I have had. The distinction between what is right and wrong is certainly a matter of perspective. It can be very situational, but the more informed we are about all ideas, the better adapted we are to judge right versus wrong. I am convinced that the true value of my liberal arts education is the exposure it has given me to other people, places and ideas.