Student Pieces: What I Learned from a Paralyzed Patient

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What I Learned from a Paralyzed Patient

By Allison Reamy

A German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote in Critique of Pure Reason, "All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: (1) What can I know? (2) What ought I to do? (3) What may I hope?"

My Jesuit education has helped me to seek answers to these three questions—particularly by opening the doors to what I can know, introducing me to contemplation through action, and giving me a sense of hope in the present, past, and future.

Through my study of the humanities, as inspired by the founder of the Society of Jesus, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Joseph's University has encouraged me to expand my education beyond the basic sciences, and all that is practical and solvable, to look more carefully at the demanding tenets and rhetorics of philosophy and theology, whose answers are not always in the back of the book.

Throughout the last three years at Saint Joseph's University, I have found a sense of empowerment and passion while studying these subjects that have not only stimulated my mind, but my heart and soul.

One course in particular, taught by the Rev. Joseph Godfrey, S.J., encouraged me to search beyond the words of the texts and take an inventory of my own intellectual, moral, and spiritual understandings of the world, philosophy of religion. In this class, philosophical works by Kant and others challenged me to critically analyze religion as a component of reason. I found the class compelling as it extended beyond questions concerning the human person and free will—as addressed by my freshman year service learning classes, moral philosophy and philosophy of the human person—and opened my mind to questions such as "What is God?" "Does a greater spiritual force exist?" "What constitutes religion?" and "What does this all mean?"

Specifically, philosophy of religion, in conjunction with my service work at Ignis House, a wheel chair community of 400 physically (and some mentally) handicapped adults, has strengthened my own faith.

While working with a partially paralyzed patient named Cynthia, I found that she is often taken advantage of for simply being handicapped, as she depends on staff to help her with simple tasks, such as getting out of bed in the morning or reading the clock, despite her being extremely intelligent. From her, I learned that free will and freedom of choice are not guaranteed, but rather are often compromised by one's inability to act physically or by one's inability to communicate effectively one's needs. Nevertheless, beyond all her physical boundaries, Cynthia openly speaks about spirituality and trust in God. Her faith is what sustains her. She simply believes that God will help her die with pain and that angels will take care of her one day. She trusts in the goodness of life. Although she may be restrained physically in other aspects of her life, she has this freedom of belief—to essentially create her own creed. Seeing her faith without the bounds of a Church gives me hope that theology can grow and develop to accommodate different circumstances.

As discussed in philosophy of religion, religion can come in many forms, or as Kant proposed, is based on morality and hope that the human can act to dictate the path of faith within the bounds of reason. The freedom of Cynthia's faith, as it relates to the course materials, thus, teaches me that I can believe in God without the structure of religion and rather accept it as a spiritual force. And, faith can dictate the formation of my religion.

Through my introduction to Cynthia, I have been pushed to understand the interplay of morality with philosophy and theology beyond the text—allowing me to decide what I feel is right and reasonable—I can know, I can do, and I can hope. Ultimately, I have found that Kant, Cynthia, and I can converse.

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