

Sunday Message from Fr William for the Third Sunday of Advent 2023

*The 'Other World' continued from 10.12.23*

View (a) We're purely physical bodies interacting with our environment in a way that is entirely deterministic. Our experiences of freedom, of personal identity, of self, can all be accounted for in terms of information processing, and by the complexity of the central nervous system that does the information processing, and by the uniqueness of the central nervous system in each individual. 'Mind' is an epiphenomenon of the brain.

Snags with this view? I mentioned one. It seems self-evident that there is a self, somewhere inside, that is in charge, a self that is distinct from our physical bodies. But I don't think this is the main snag, nor the most compelling counter argument. After all, things which seem self-evident don't always turn out to be true on closer analysis.

No, the main snag with this view it seems to me, at least for a Christian, is that it undermines the dignity of Man. It undermines our capacity for a freedom that is not deterministic. It undermines our capacity for love. It denigrates the Creator, the Trinity, as if they would create Man and then leave him in an illusion of autonomy. And it denigrates the Creator, the Trinity, in that they would enter into a relationship with a creature that is purely physical, purely material, with whom they have nothing in common. So, it's not a scientific objection. It's a religious objection.

View (b) We are, yes, physical bodies, but with a non-material component, a soul. Our experiences of freedom, of personal identity, of self, are all attributed to the soul. 'Mind' is not an epiphenomenon of the brain; it is the operation, the activity of this non-material self, the 'soul'.

The snag with this view? I mentioned earlier in these reflections how aptitudes/abilities that were once thought to be uniquely human – language, self-awareness, self-determination, delayed gratification, and so on – have, one by one, been recognised in other species. At the same time, experiences that were once attributed to a non-material 'soul' – memory, self, personal identity, freedom to choose, and so on – are progressively explained by scientific observation and accounted for by rational argument. The human 'soul', accounting for experiences that cannot otherwise be explained, is gradually and inexorably being explained away.

Both views have had their detractors. The idea of a non-material soul inhabiting a physical body was infamously dubbed the 'ghost in the machine' by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1949). Conversely the idea that humans are purely physical bodies, more complex, more evolved, but not qualitatively different from other species, was ridiculed with similar infamy in the caricatures of Charles Darwin in the 1870s.

Each view has its merits. Neither deserves ridicule. There's room for both views in the Christian tradition. But I do want to look with you at a third way that brings these two views together into an integrated whole.

*to be continued...*

*William*

17 December 2023