

Sunday Message from Fr William for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time 2024

The 'Other World' continued from 28.01.24

But what about Freedom? Early in these reflections on the 'other world' I asked what might be the highest gifts given to us as human beings. I gave you my top two candidates – Freedom, and Love (23 July 2023). Freedom is more than just freedom of movement. It's more than just freedom from external or internal constraint. Freedom is the ability to make choices, to act, and to live in accord with your deepest desires and aspirations. Remember Jacques Maritain – 'By its liberty, the human person transcends the stars and all the world of nature.' (*The Person and the Common Good* 2).

But if Man is an organism infused by the Spirit, in what sense can he possibly be said to be 'free'? Doesn't this make him doubly un-free? As an organism his thoughts and actions are determined and ultimately predictable, however complex the central nervous system. On top of that, what distinguishes Man from all the other animals is that he is being gradually taken over by the Spirit (*Genesis 2:7*). Doesn't this make him not only doubly un-free, but actually less free than all the other animals?

You won't be surprised that I'll be taking issue with a phrase like 'taken over' to describe the Spirit's action. As mentioned, the Bible uses very different images to convey how the Spirit is given. He is 'poured into', 'breathed into' Man, that Man 'drinks in', is 'plunged into', is 'filled with' the Spirit. (21 Jan 2024).

But laying aside for a moment the Spirit factor, and focussing solely for a moment on the human organism apart from the Spirit, I've offered you an account of how the building of memory, and the uniqueness of personal identity can each be accounted for in terms of the neural network of the individual. And I've offered you an account of how both freedom as an objective phenomenon and also the subjective experience of freedom can be accounted for in terms of memory and personal identity (3, 10 December 2023). Each choice you make is genuinely made by you, by your own self, you with your own unique personal identity. In other words we don't need to invoke some component additional to the human organism to account for our freedom.

As mentioned there's room in Christian thinking for all three accounts of Man:

- (a) That we are physical bodies, and no need to invoke a non-material component. This, I understand, would accord with Semitic philosophy, predominant among first century Jews such as Jesus himself and his disciples.
- (b) That we are, or have, physical bodies with a non-material component some call the 'soul'. This, I understand, would accord with Hellenistic philosophy, predominant throughout the Greek speaking world in the first century. Paul, with his more cosmopolitan experience, would either have been influenced by this himself, or been aware that his audiences and letter recipients would be thinking in these terms.
- (c) This third way I've been proposing that is effectively a synthesis of (a) and (b). (7, 14, 21, 28 January 2024). So, another opportunity for you to choose!

Whatever your philosophy of Man, the Spirit is breathed into him. How does this impact our freedom?

to be continued...



4 February 2024