

June 22, 2003
All Saints' Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In the final analysis, the choice of a philosophy is . . . well, a choice. A person really does decide to look at existence from a particular point of view, to interpret the world in a certain way. The reason that this determination must involve a choice is the undeniable fact that the world itself can be regarded from more than one perspective. By presenting us with a variety of conflicting impressions, existence invites us, as it were, to consider it from different, even contradictory angles. A truly sensitive thinker is aware that he is making a philosophical choice. All real thinking is free thinking.

Take the Stoic, for instance. The Stoic deliberately *chooses* to defy all the evidence suggesting that existence is chaotic. Because he is convinced by a contrary impression about the world, the Stoic holds at bay all the reasons for supposing that existence is only a meaningless jumble. He looks out on the world and says, "I discern around me so much evidence of design and meaningful structure (*logos*) that I am determined to base my life and thought on the presumption of cosmic order. Consequently, when I experience what seems to be chaos in existence, and especially when I am besieged by misfortunes, I shall yet hold fast my conviction that this world is founded on a mysterious depth of meaning that binds it all together. Therefore, I will deliberately regard all misfortunes and disasters as integral components of a larger picture that my limited understanding simply cannot contain. Accordingly, my moral efforts will be directed to maintaining patience and serenity in the face of adversity." This is the attitude we see in Epictetus, Seneca, Jane Austen, and the world's other great Stoics.

The Nihilist, on the other hand, makes the opposite philosophical choice. "The world provides so much evidence of radical disarray," he says, "so many indications that nothing really makes sense, that personal integrity obliges me to regard existence as meaningless and chaotic. No matter how sensible some things appear, it is an observable fact that everything eventually comes to nothing (*nihil*). Even in those cases, then, when existence does appear to make sense, I will regard that impression as subjective and illusory. Accordingly, my moral efforts will be directed to maintaining

patience and serenity, as I liberate myself from such illusions." Sartre's Existentialism may be taken as a recent example of this philosophical option, but there are other forms of it.

For example, Siddhartha Gautama, known to history as the Enlightened One, or Buddha, is also to be included among the Nihilists. According to his own account, Gautama's Enlightenment consisted in a discovery of the moral path required to escape the radical vexation that plagues existence. This vexation, Gautama believed, consists of three components: the impermanence (*anicca*) of existence, the radical unreality (*anatta*) of the self, and the sorrow (*dukkha*) that results from these perceptions. Any other view of existence, he believed, is an exercise in illusion, and his true moral task is to escape such illusions. If we were to express Gautama's interpretation of the world, then, in a single sentence, then, it might be: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity."

Ironically, however, it was not Gautama who immortalized that formula, but a divinely inspired author of Holy Scripture. We know his thought from the book that bears his name, Qoheleth or, in Greek, Ecclesiastes.

Qoheleth is not only the most somber of the biblical authors; he is one of the darkest writers in the entire history of philosophy. For him, all of existence is vexation of heart and spirit (1:14; 2:11,17,22,26; 4:4,6,16; 6:9). Empirical evidence, he believes, does not support the thesis of a moral universe (3:16; 4:1; 5:8; 7:15; 8:12,14). Happiness is supremely elusive (5:10-12; 6:1-9), and nothing is ever as it appears (9:11; 10:6). The very sequences of times and seasons, which elsewhere in the Bible represent God's covenanted care for man (Genesis 8:22; Psalms 103 [104]:19-24), provoke in the soul of Qoheleth only the deepest sense of ennui (1:3-8; 3:2-8). Even if wisdom can be attained-which prospect he deems unlikely (7:23-24)-wisdom and grief are inseparable (1:18).

For all that, Qoheleth is no Buddhist. If "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity" best summarizes a final philosophical choice for Gautama, for Qoheleth it represents only a vexing impression with which his believing mind struggles. In spite of this impression, Qoheleth remains a man of faith, and ultimately his philosophical choice is inseparable from that faith. Believing in a supreme God-and very unlike Gautama in this respect-Qoheleth never embraces the thesis of radical chaos. The root problem in the world is not the world. It is

the human heart's rebellion against God: "Truly, this only have I found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes" (7:29). In spite of all appearances, then, Qoheleth never loses his conviction that God is the final judge of all human decisions (3:17; 5:6). God's sovereignty over man's destiny must never be forgotten (11:9-12:1). However dark the path that man treads, he must in faith continue to "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil" (12:13-14).

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