

August 9, 2015
Saint Matthias

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is difficult to explain the origin of the idea of freedom unless human beings are, in fact, endowed with a reality that corresponds to that idea. The thinker arrives at it because freedom represents something the thinker has actually experienced. Freedom, for the human being, is an experience before it is a concept.

And here we encounter the truly mysterious aspect of freedom, its resistance to confinement in a concept; as an idea, freedom is extremely elusive as an idea. It is hardly surprising that modern science, concerned with precision and objectivity, is distinctly uncomfortable with it. The “scientific method,” with its emphasis on measurement and predictability, may find it much easier to deny the existence of freedom than to account for it.

This is also true of the social sciences. One thinks of the myriad followers of B. F. Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, published in 1971, and the dystopian literature in the tradition of Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange*, published nine years earlier.

Freedom is very mysterious. Indeed, if the thinker searches for the *reason* for this experience of freedom, he finds himself stymied; he knows, first, that his freedom is a *given*. He cannot explain it, however, without running into an intractable psychological—and, perhaps, logical—puzzle. Whatever freedom is, it *is* simply because it *is*. Freedom exists for the sake of free, intelligent choice; it is, in its origin, self-referential. A free choice is its own cause.

Freedom thus bears the character of a tautology: We human beings choose *because* we choose. If the act is compelled, it is not choice. We have motives, of course, but free choice is, as such, *self*-caused. The *why* of a free choice is simply the freedom of the choice. The determination of a free choice is not reducible to a psychological motive. If it were, that would be the end of what we call the “justice system.”

It further occurs to our thinker—one hopes—to reflect that if freedom is a *given*, it must also be a *gift*. And if freedom is a gift, what does that fact say about the existence of a *giver*? Only *Someone* with freedom can *give* freedom.

When man (our anonymous thinker) goes on to examine the created Cosmos, he reaches the further conclusion that *he*—the human

being—must be very special in this world, inasmuch as he detects no evidence that anything else in existence is endowed this conscious experience of freedom. Every other creature in existence is reducible to the causes brought to bear upon it. Only in the case of human choice do we speak of “responsibility.” Only the human being has the capacity to *respond* in freedom

Everything else that takes place in the Universe takes place as an inevitable effect of some cause outside itself. Everything else in the Universe is *driven*; whatever every other creature *does* is the result of the determining influences brought to bear upon it. Planets move because something, a very long time ago, set them moving. Plants grow because of an inherent dynamism over which they have no control. Man, *alone*—within the Universe, is *self*-determining.

Consequently, when the human being declares that God made the Universe in *freedom*, he is basing this declaration on an analogy. He is saying that in God there is something very much *like* man’s own experience of freedom. And, since God is the creating source of man’s freedom, freedom must start with God, not with man. Any “analogy of freedom” in man’s thought must confess that the radical origin of freedom is the infinite and wise freedom of God. Man, in his own freedom, simply bears some *likeness* to God.

The thinking man, however, if he wants his thought about freedom to be complete, must also reflect—on the basis of his own experience—that freedom is inseparable from self-possession, the consciousness and the conscious experience of pursuing and discerning truth. If freedom is really *free*, it must be part of self-reflective *thought*, or *logos*; otherwise freedom would be identical with chaos. Man’s choices are not determined by his impulses. To say that man is truly free, then, implies that he is gifted with the ability to think reflectively. He is self-determined because he is *self-conscious*.