

What is man?

A reflection by Frank J. Sheed from his book "Theology and Sanity" pages 162-167

That man has at once a material and spiritual elements, and therefore belongs to both worlds, we *might* know merely by looking at him and thinking about what we see. But on the whole, though man is much given to looking at himself, he is not at all good at *thinking* about what he sees. Nothing in the world is more fantastic than the variety of answers man has proposed to the simple question, What is man? Fortunately we are not left to our own incompetent devices: God has told us, through the men whom He inspired to write His Scriptures.

The account of creation in the first two chapters of Genesis gives us two principal statements about man: "Let us make man to our image and likeness" (Gen 1:26). "And the Lord God formed Man of the slime of the earth: and breathed into his face the breath of life and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7). There you have the two-fold element in man, the slime of the earth and the likeness of God. And both elements belong. The matter of our body is not simply an extra, something we should be better without, something to be grown out of as the butterfly grows out of the grub, something in some happier future to be discarded as the butterfly discards the cocoon. Matter is part of the very nature of man; he would not be man without it. And he would not perform his function in the universe without it. For it is precisely his function to join the two worlds of matter and spirit into one universe, and he does it by belonging essentially to both of them. We are to think of creation not as two closed circles which nowhere meet but as a kind of figure-eight with man on both sides of the joint.

Thus if man is not, as he sometimes thinks, the center of the universe (in the sense of that upon which all revolves), he is in this other sense *at* the center of the universe, bestriding the lower world of matter and the upper world of spirit. In both worlds he has the closest and most vital contacts: it is a pity that he is so much more keenly aware of the lower one, and so sketchily and intermittently aware of the upper, for both are realities, and realities that affect him profoundly. Angels can guard him; cows can nourish him, and so can sunsets. Angels, again, can tempt him, insects can bite him. The trouble is that we are more concerned about insects than about devils, more concerned that cows should nourish us than that angels should bless. We must recover a total view of our universe if only in order to know where we are—and that in the interest of sanity. As to answers for the question, How did angels get to tempting, how did man become temptable and biteable – so very biteable that he bites himself more fatally than any insect can bite him—these things too we must get to know. They will begin to appear a little later in the story, when we come to see what man made of himself. Here we are concerned with man as God made him.

He is, we have seen, a union of spirit and matter. But what does that mean? The meaning at the first level may be set out simply enough. Man has a living body; therefore, there is some principle in him which makes his body to be alive. And whether a body be vegetable or lower animal or man, that principle in it which makes it living is what we call its soul. Man, then, has a soul; so has a dog, so has a cabbage: and man's soul does for his body what their souls do for theirs, makes it a living body. But whereas their souls are material, limited to matter, not producing any operation that goes beyond matter, man's soul is spirit. It does not only the things that souls do, but the things that spirits do. By intellect and will it knows and loves as spirits know and love: in its thinking it handles the abstract and the universal. Man, having a body and soul, is an animal, but he is a rational animal, for alone of the animals he has a soul which is a spirit.

But how are we to conceive a union of two beings, one of them in space, the other not. And note that it is not just any kind of union, but a union so close that the two constitute one being. The soul, which is spirit, is in every part of the body; no smallest part of the body is outside the union. Now

it is obvious that in all this the effort to give the soul some sort of shape in order to make the union seem easier to grasp is a waste of time. There is no gain in trying to think of the body as thinly buttered all over with soul, or as a sponge interpenetrated with soul, or of the soul as shaped like the body so that it can have a point by point contact with each part of the body, only made of some spirit stuff more refined than matter. A moment's reflection will show us why imagination is driven to such odd acrobatics. In its efforts to make the problem easier for itself, it is introducing a difficulty that is not there. It sees it as the problem of how a body so large that it occupies quite a lot of space can be totally occupied by a soul so small that it occupies no space whatever. But the soul is outside space not because it is too small to occupy even the smallest section of space, but because it lacks the limitations which would make space necessary for it. If we are to think of a difference of largeness between soul and body, then we must think of the soul as larger; for it has more being in it, has fewer limitations to diminish it, is every way greater in being. Thus for the intellect the question of how spirit can totally occupy matter is simply the question of how the greater can totally occupy the less; and the answer is simple—by superiority of being and of energy. A spirit is not in space, but it can act upon a being that is in space. And this is the only kind of spatial presence that a spirit can have. It is where it acts. The soul acts upon every part of the body, and its action is to vivify, to make alive (indeed, according to St. Thomas, the soul not only makes the body alive, it makes it a body). In some ways the presence of the soul in every part of the body is comparable to the presence of God in every part of the universe.

There is in the purely material order a comparison which the mind may find helpful provided that it gets what is to be got from it and then resolutely throws it away. When a pot of water is boiling over a flame, there is a sense in which the flame is in every part of the water, although the flame itself occupies none of the space that the water occupies. The energies that come from the flame are what set every part of the water bubbling and hissing. The casual onlooker might easily be deceived into thinking that the water is the energetic things and might overlook altogether the flame with its utter stillness. If the flame happened to be invisible, there would be people to assert that all this talk of flame was superstitious nonsense. But all the movement of the water is due to the superior energy of the flame. And the water, if it could think about the matter at all, might easily think that the flame had no other business than to heat it. But the flame has a life of its own and can continue as a flame whether the water is there or not.

All this can be applied easily enough to the relation of soul and body. The body is so very alive and clamorous that the soul can be overlooked altogether. But all the vitality of the body is derived from the energizing upon it of the soul. One need not be told what happens to any part of the body, the finger, say, if it gets separated from the body and thus removed from the field of the soul's energies. Which reminds us that the union of soul and body has this double flower of intimacy, that the soul acts upon every part of the body, but only upon that particular body: with no other material thing can it make direct contact at all. My soul is meant for the vivifying of my body. It is the perfect specialist. The illustration, I have said, must be used for what it has to give and then discarded. For it is valid only up to a point. The flame and the water are two separate realities brought into relation for a specific purpose, but each quite capable of existing fully as itself apart from the other. But soul and body are not thus casually brought together; they are united to form one complete individual reality; they would not come into existence without each other; if they are separated, they suffer loss – the body ceases to be a body, and the spirit, although it survives, survives with a large part of its powers idle within it for lack of a body to use them on. You must never think of your soul simply as a more powerful thing which dominates your body: soul and body are partners in the business of being you.