

PASTOR'S NOTES. Thoughts on the nature of Sin, part 1.

*“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things He has made...”*

(Romans 1:19-20a, NRSV)

In my studies of philosophy, the part of my college years that probably ruined me the most, I learned of a concept that I have almost never heard since: *solipsism*. Solipsism is the idea that I am the only thing that truly exists, as if the world around me were all a dream.

Solipsism is similar to selfishness; in both cases the person is acting as if they were was all that mattered. I prefer the lesser-known term because I believe it is more forceful in describing the disturbing trend in our society: there is a feeling that people are growing more selfish, but the idea of solipsism may help to explain why.

First of all, let's be clear about this: *there is no objective way to prove that you are not dreaming right now*. Now that's a sad thought: you might be dreaming that you are reading my stuff – surely there must be better things to dream about. No doubt you have heard about ways to tell if you are dreaming: pinch yourself, look for colors, sensations, are your feet touching the ground, can you read a note on the wall, can you retrace your steps to get to where you are now, and others. I was dreaming once and actually figured out, by retracing my steps, that I was in a dream. While it is possible in a dream to tell you are dreaming, there is no sure way to tell that you are not, because all of those clues I just mentioned could be part of the dream.

I'm not the only one who has these kind of thoughts. Just this week, a young woman (in her 20s) told me it would be an awful thing if she just woke up and found herself back in kindergarten and that all those years of school were just a dream and she would have to relive all the school and teenage years. I tried to reassure her that she should just breeze through those classes now (because she already knows it all) and she will be better prepared for all the body changes and the fickleness of her friends. But then I realized that since she dreamed all that stuff, it might all be wrong – that she will have to learn all different stuff (and unlearn everything she thinks she knows). So I was no reassurance at all.

The bottom line in all of this is that we cannot prove that there is a real world beyond our minds (since we can't get outside our minds to do it). We accept the real world around us on faith. This is nothing new, we read about it from philosophers Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and George Berkeley (1685-1753). Descartes thought he could be dreaming or some evil genius is making him see things, so he could never be sure of his perceptions. He decided that the only thing he could know for sure is that someone is thinking about this question right now. So Descartes said “I think, therefore I am.” Berkeley took it a step further in asserting that the “someone” is God; in other words, we exist only in the mind of God. As a Philosophy student, I learned about these thinkers, but no one seemed to take them too seriously, and we moved on.

But consider this outline of history:

1. First, we had only face-to-face communication and a spoken language to get a message from one person to another;
2. Then we developed a written language (even today there are cultures that do not have one) that allowed us to get a message to another person without being physically present;
3. With the telephone, we were able to communicate a bit more personally than through written letters, but still not exactly face-to-face;
4. With radio, then television, we greatly increased the amount of communication apart from physically face-to-face;
5. Then with the internet, email, cellphones, texting, there has been an explosion of messaging, to the point that more one-on-one messaging happens these ways than in person. Not only business, but family contacts and even meeting people have become a primarily electronic matter.
6. With the advent of AI (artificial intelligence) and VR (virtual reality), it is now possible for the electronics to do your work of communicating for you, and to simulate the world around you. Now you can be fooled into thinking that you are communicating with a real human being, or even be deceived in the reality of your surroundings.

You can see there has been a general progression away from physical contact and face-to-face connection. Back in the 1980s I read philosophers of the time who called the current progression in science “methodological solipsism.” That is, that much of modern science (and computers) moves forward with the assumption that everything in reality can eventually be simulated somehow. This has become so successful that some philosophers ask the question, “how do we know that we are not in a simulation right now?” and movies like *The Matrix* re-examine the questions of Descartes and Berkeley.

If you are a younger reader, none of this might strike you as odd; it is the way of the world in which you have grown up. But for those of us who are older, who met most people in person before we wrote or called on the phone, who visited other parts of the world before seeing them online, we can’t help but feel that something important is being lost. Our mental and physical health is grounded in connection with other humans, with our surroundings, and with God. First with the television, and now with computer games and cellphones, we spend much less time interacting with the real world.

So how does all this relate to sin? I see a connection with the idea of solipsism and sin, but it’s probably going to take me more than one more article to make it clear (if I can make anything clear). But if I haven’t lost you yet, and you are still reading now, I thank you for your attention and in the next articles I intend to make it worth your time.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'John' or similar, written in a cursive style.