
The Right Use of Free Will - Self Determination

We are our own parents – we give birth to ourselves by our choices

We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be, whether male or female, moulding ourselves to the teaching of virtue or vice.¹

Free will acts as the midwife in our birth

When we lay bare the hidden meaning of the history, Scripture is seen to teach that the birth which distresses the tyrant is the beginning of the virtuous life. I am speaking of that kind of birth in which free will serves as the midwife, delivering the child amid great pain. For no one causes grief to his antagonist unless he exhibits in himself those marks which give proof of his victory over the other.²

Each person is the painter of his own life - choice is the craftsman, the virtues are the paints

Just as when we are learning the art of painting, the teacher puts before us on a panel a beautifully executed model, and it is necessary for each student to imitate in every way the beauty of that model on his own panel, so that the panels of all will be adorned in accordance with the example of the beauty set before them; in the same way, since every person is the painter of his own life, and choice is the craftsman of the work, and the virtues are the paints for executing the image, there is no small danger that the imitation may change the Prototype into a hateful and ugly person instead of reproducing the master form if we sketch in the character of evil with muddy colours.

But, since it is possible, one must prepare the pure colours of the virtues, mixing them with each other according to some artistic formula for the imitation of beauty, so that we become an image of the image, having achieved the beauty of the Prototype through activity as a kind of imitation, as did Paul, who became an 'imitator of Christ,'³ through his life of virtue.⁴

¹ *Life of Moses* 2.3 (pp.55-6)

² *Life of Moses* 2.5 (p.56)

³ 1 Corinthians 4:16

⁴ *On Perfection* in V. Callahan (trans), *St Gregory: Ascetical Works - Fathers of the Church Vol. 58* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), pp.110-1

Imitate the wise bee by moulding within yourself a honeycomb of virtues

Since the book of Proverbs desires wisdom's disciple to go to the bee ... wisdom says to her lovers, "Go to the bee and learn its work" [Prov. 6:8]. The bee's work in procuring honey is noble, for both kings and commoners use its labours for their health. (Proverbs says that the bee is desirable and honoured by everyone; although weak, it esteems wisdom and is given as an example of life for the virtuous. The bee is thus offered to us as honouring wisdom.)

These words counsel us not to abstain from good teachings, but by flying over the fields of divinely inspired words, we are to gather something from each one for the creation of wisdom. We mould within ourselves a honeycomb, so to speak, storing up in our hearts this labour of love as in a hive. The various doctrines create in our memory storehouses like the different cells in wax which are unable to be destroyed. By imitating that wise bee whose honeycomb is sweet and whose sting does not prick, we are always busy about the noble task of acquiring virtues.

A bee engaged in this task has truly exchanged the works of this present life for the blessings of eternity. It metes out the fruit of its own labours for the health of both kings and commoners. In the same way, the soul becomes desirable for her bridegroom; it is honoured by angels and perfects its strength in infirmity by honouring wisdom.⁵

"Behold, you are fair, my companion" (Song of Songs 1:15) – The soul is a mirror which takes on the appearance of what we choose to hold up to it

Since our free choice has the capacity to become whatever it desires, the Word rightly says to the bride who has been made beautiful: "You have rejected fellowship with evil and have drawn near to me. By approaching my archetypal beauty, you have yourself become beautiful. Just like a mirror you have taken on my appearance."

Human nature is in fact like a mirror, and it takes on different appearances according to the impressions of free will. If gold is held up to the mirror, the mirror assumes the appearance of gold and reflects the splendour of gold's substance. If anything abominable is held up, its ugliness is impressed on the mirror - for example a frog, toad, centipede, or anything unpleasant to behold.

Thus, the mirror represents in its own being whatever is placed before it. So too the soul, when cleansed by the Word from vice, it receives within itself the sun's orb and shines with this reflected light. Therefore, the Word says to his bride: "You have become beautiful by approaching my light; by drawing near to me, you have attained communion with my beauty." "Behold, you are fair, my companion".⁶

⁵ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 9* (McCambley, p.174)

⁶ *Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily 4* (McCambley, pp.92-3)