

What is Soul?



Last summer we were privileged to host a talk at our centre on the subject of ‘Soul’ by Matthew Del Nevo, a visiting philosopher from Australia. Matthew is Associate Professor in Philosophy at the Catholic Institute of Sydney, where he lectures mainly in the area of the history of ideas and modern continental philosophy. He is also the author of several books, including his latest publication “The Metaphysics of Night”.

Everyone instinctively knows what soul means. We talk about a soulful person, or soulful music, or on the other hand a soulless institution or a soulless performance. Soul is in fact what makes us eminently human. We appreciate or “know” soulfulness by our sensibility. Sensibility marks the level of connection between “inner” and “outer”. Sensibility cultivated is the source of culture. And the soul is not just within us in this regard, but all about us: the Anima Mundi or World Soul.

The poet Keats came up with a metaphor of the world as a “vale of soul-making”. The Valley Way of the Soul – the title of one of Del Nevo’s books – is a verdant valley from which one can perceive the spirit. If you want to make the ascent up the spiritual mountain, you have to start in the valley and explore it. It is a theme well known in literature and music. In fact the Mount Carmel of the spirit is best seen from the valley, rather than being up it.

How can we get more in touch with our soul? Matthew suggested the technique of ‘attunement’. This is to be aware of what touches us, sensitizes us and makes us sensible: the work of sensibility is receptive, repetitive and reflective. We start with our attunements: what draws us. It might be a historical figure, an ancestor, a poet, a type of music or art – everyone has their attunements. After discovering them, we need to explore them further in order to strengthen them. So if we feel attuned to a particular writer or composer, we should find out more about their life and work. By developing a personal relationship with that figure, we also come closer to our own soul. We approach our own vocation.



It is also important to recognize that our attunements will be contradictory. Our eccentricities are very important. We have to be able to handle our contradictions and not expect ourselves or others to be totally uniform and rational. Matthew mentioned the Slovenian philosopher Zizek as an example of an intellectual who is soulfully attuned. People criticize him for being “all over the place”, but that is his genius, to which, unlike a lot of us, he is attuned.

It is a mistake, in Del Nevo’s view, to try to get into spirituality before working with soul. Soul needs to be prepared before it can receive the grace of spirit. In fact, spirit does not need to be developed, it will come to you once the soul is prepared. Spiritual development is in a way a misnomer. Developing our attunements is a way to prepare for spirit.

Matthew also touched upon the concept of ‘melancholy’. Melancholy is a primary ground mood of the soul for the work of opening our personality to our attunements. It is not the same as depression, which closes and imprisons us. Melancholy is midway between sadness and joy. Keats’ Ode on Melancholy perfectly explains the state. There are other ground-moods of the soul, and “art music” can be a great way to get in touch with them, as music explores these regions without words, what Del Nevo calls *Melos* beyond *Logos*. Melody beyond words.