

HEARTS OF FLESH:  
A MEDITATION ON HUMAN  
NATURE AND THE LANGUAGE  
THAT GIVES LIFE

D.C. SCHINDLER

“[A]ll language is ultimately a speaking of heart to heart. . . . All language has this form because it is an ‘incarnation’ of meaning in the flesh of the word, which is sent out abroad, from which journey it does not return without bearing some fruit, and prospering the thing in which it is received.”



I. SPEAKING OF THE HEART

We are all quite familiar with the famous passage in Ezekiel: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh” (36:26); and we all know, or at least think we know, more or less what it intends to say. To have a heart of stone is to be unfeeling and cold, inattentive to others and the world around us, while to have a heart of flesh is to be alive, solicitous, open and responsive toward the other. Ultimately, to have a heart of flesh simply

means to be properly disposed toward God and our neighbor. We recognize that the expression is metaphorical, specifically an example of synecdoche, in which a part of the body and its particular condition is used to express a person's overall spiritual or emotional state. It could not be more obvious that, at the very least, the phrase "heart of stone" is a figure of speech, not a literal reality, because it indicates a state of affairs that is straightforwardly impossible. What we have in the contrast between "heart of stone" and "heart of flesh" is a rhetorical use of a material thing, whether real or only poetically imagined, to communicate an immaterial mode of being.

It is not the purpose of this essay to deny the modicum of truth in this common way of thinking about the phrase from Ezekiel, which has clear echoes in other scriptural passages. Instead, our principal aim in what follows is to reflect more deeply, in a more "openhearted" manner, on what actually comes to expression in this passage and on its implications, supplementing that reflection by drawing on resources from classical philosophy, especially Aristotle and Aquinas. We will seek thereby to gain some insight into what it means to be human, an animal with reason or speech, specifically as embodied spirit, *in* the world but not *of* the world, existing in oneself always only as existing simultaneously with (and *in* and *from* and *before*) God and other creatures. Our method, our way of approach (*meth' hodos*), will be general and speculative, because of the constraints of the context, but the hope is to open up directions for research and a more systematic study of the matter in the future.

To set us on our way, it suffices to pose a simple question: if the point of the passage from Ezekiel were merely to indicate the spiritual condition of being open to the other rather than closed, why did the author not just say so? Why potentially obfuscate the matter by decorating it with an obvious fiction, a poetic invention? There are two immediate responses that are possible to this question, but both of them turn out to pose further questions. One could reply, first of all, that the ancient Hebrews were an "earthy" people, disinclined to abstract modes of expression,<sup>1</sup> and thus tended as a rule to use imagery in their

---

1. See Johannes Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 106.

writing. But this in turn raises the question *why* they are so disinclined, and, even more interestingly, what it *means* to be so disinclined. In other words, this first possible response is not an answer that resolves the question but one that deepens and expands it. Second, a more thoughtful reader might point out that, in any event, the expressions “open” and “closed” are *also* metaphorical; they differ from the phrases “heart of flesh” and “heart of stone” only in being less organic, less immediately “natural.” In fact, as the Inklings grasped no doubt better than just about anyone,<sup>2</sup> there is ultimately no such thing as “abstract” or “literal” language, if this means “nonmetaphorical.” Indeed, even the words “abstract” and “literal” are metaphors, just like all other meaningful words; the difference between poetic and imaginative language, on the one hand, and literal or technical language, on the other, is not absolute, but runs more along the lines of a difference between metaphors that have become so familiar and automatic that they simply disappear in their signifying, and ones that are meant to remain present as such in that act, so that the signifier itself contributes in some way to the signification. It is not hard to see that “poetic” language is richer, and communicates more, than technical language, which is invaluable in particular contexts precisely *because* it communicates less, allowing for more precision and control of meaning. The Bible is apparently *not* such a context, however; the thought of translating all the imagery in the Bible into more abstract and univocal expressions, as we see in certain modern versions, cannot fail to make one’s blood run cold (so to speak). But this observation itself raises more questions: *Why* is the image-rich language of the Bible so much more powerful than an equivalent technical translation would be? What does this fact, which we all recognize, say about human nature, and indeed about the nature of God and his creation and redemption of the world, which are recounted in the Bible? Or even more basically, if scriptural sayings could be boiled down to their “essential” meaning, would something get lost in translation? If so, does this not suggest that the images

---

2. See Owen Barfield, “Owen Barfield and the Origin of Language,” *Towards* 1, no. 2 (June 1978): 1, 3–7; 1, no. 3 (December 1978): 13–15; C. S. Lewis, “Horrid Red Things,” in *The Grand Miracle* (New York: Random House, 1970), 43–46; J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” in *Tree and Leaf* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 1–82.

are not just extrinsically adduced vehicles conveying a content that, in its abstraction, could have taken indifferently many other possible forms? Does it not suggest that there is something, if not necessary, at least *fitting*, in the Bible's use of poetic imagery to express what it is meant to express?

Our aim here is not principally to reflect on the massive question of the nature of language in itself, but instead to come to a deeper appreciation of what is being communicated by the specific phrase "heart of flesh," though we will see that the sense of this phrase bears directly on the question of language. If the writers of Scripture are prone to use imagery, it is interesting to note that the "heart" is not just one image among others, but seems to occupy a *central* place: written images are *by* and *for* man, and at the center of a man lies the heart. As the respected Old Testament scholar H. W. Wolff has observed, the "heart" is the most important anthropological word in the Old Testament, and as such it appears more frequently than any other part of the human being to express some fundamental meaning.<sup>3</sup> Some version of the word occurs almost a thousand times in the Old Testament (not to mention 250 times or so in the New). It is also worth pointing out that the significance of the heart, its capacity to convey meaning in a concrete way, or, to coin a very abstract (and admittedly ugly) term, its "metaphoricity," is not restricted to Hebrew. It seems that most (perhaps all?) languages, at least in the West, have given the heart a certain prominence. In English, we have a heart; we take things to heart; we break our hearts; we wear our hearts on our sleeve; we have a heavy or a light heart; we learn things by heart; we give a hearty handshake; we eat our hearts out; we give heartfelt thanks; we undergo a change of heart; we get to the heart of a matter; we converse with an intimate one "heart-to-heart," and on and on. The philosopher Robert Wood has observed that the entry on the "heart" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* occupies eighteen pages and fills twenty-two columns, which leads him to muse that the heart is, "so to speak, at the heart of everyday usage" of language.<sup>4</sup> We are going

---

3. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 40.

4. Robert Wood, "The Heart in Heidegger's Thought," *Continental Philosophical Review* 48 (November 2015): 445.

to suggest why what Wood says here is even truer than Wood likely realized. In the essay that follows, we mean to argue that the human heart is in fact the very source-ground of language.

## II. THE HEBREW HEART

### 2.1. לֵב, *Leb*: Heart

In order to work our way up to what no doubt appears initially to be a strange and perhaps implausible proposal, we need to start with a simple question, and then follow it up with a second: What *is* the heart in the Old Testament? And what does it mean to describe it according to the “stone/flesh” binary? According to Wolff, the word “heart,” *leb* in Hebrew, designates not just the generic organ but something distinctively human; if the word is used with reference to other animals (only five times), he observes, it is virtually always for the sake of a comparison with man.<sup>5</sup> This connection to man, however, does not exclude the word’s being used in an extended sense, which we would recognize as obviously “metaphorical”: the Old Testament speaks of the heart of the sea eleven times, the heart of heaven or the sky once, and even the heart of an oak tree.<sup>6</sup> It is also in this extended sense that “heart” is used with reference to God, though it is not insignificant that virtually all references to God’s heart concern God’s relation to man.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the “heart” means more than just the biological organ essential to life.

Let us consider what the more evidently metaphorical use of the term reveals about its meaning. When the Old Testament speaks of the heart of the sea or the heart of the heavens, it seems to indicate an essentially inaccessible depth or height,

---

5. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 40. See 2 Sam 17:10; Hos 7:11; Dan 4:13 and 5:21.

6. For “heart of the sea,” see for example Prv 30:19, 23:34; Ez 27:4, 27:25–27, 28:2; Ex 15:8. For “heart of heaven,” see Dt 4:11. For “heart of an oak tree,” see 2 Sam 18:14. The expression in this last case seems to indicate the “dark, innermost branches of the foliage” (Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 45).

7. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 55–56.

a point in the sea or sky that lies impenetrably hidden, beyond our grasp. In this respect, the “heart” represents the center of the thing in question, a center that is mysterious because it does not lie openly on the surface.<sup>8</sup> But “center,” in this context, does not indicate mere physical coordinates in a quantitative sense; instead, it really means *center of the being*, of the creature (or of God). As such, “heart” designates not just the inaccessible mystery of a thing, but its *truth*, the place where what is *essential* to it is gathered. The “heart” indicates, thus, not (just) the “physical,” interior depth of a thing, but what it “really” is. It concentrates in itself the essential properties of a thing, not just in a generic sense but also in what we might call the proper, personal sense. This point is of course not so evident in the sea or the tree, for example, but it is quite clear in God: the reference to the “heart of God” in Scripture expresses on the one hand the deep and inaccessible mystery of God, his “inner life,” so to speak, but also, on the other hand, his intellect and (above all) his will, to speak generally, or, more specifically and properly, his innermost thoughts and plans. These lie in the heart of God, we might say, because they are expressions of “who God really is.”

This last point is especially illuminating with respect to man. When the heart of man is mentioned in Scripture, it does appear to have at least *something* to do with life in the sense of what we might call biologically “being alive,” but far and away the most common usage is to indicate the seat of the activities that *distinguish* man from other living beings. Thus, according to Wolff, the “heart” in the Old Testament is *principally* an organ of *reason*, and, precisely for this reason, an organ of feeling, perceptions, passions, and sympathy.<sup>10</sup> It is so, again, because the heart is not first of all, literally speaking, a “blood pump” to which we apply poetically a series of metaphors that are perhaps prompted

---

8. 1 Sam 16:7: “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart”; God “knows the secret of the heart” (Ps 44:21).

9. The most direct connection between the heart and “biological life” occurs in 1 Sam 25:37ff, but other passages indicate the connection more indirectly, by speaking of eating bread, for example, as “strengthening the heart” (Gn 18:5). Cf. Jgs 19:5 and 19:8; 1 Kgs 21:7; Is 1:5, 57:15; and Ps 37:15.

10. The section on the heart in Wolff’s *Anthropology of the Old Testament* is entitled “Reasonable Man,” i.e., man precisely as a creature of reason.

by the organ's central biological role. Instead, the Old Testament does not immediately distinguish between matter and meaning. What is meaningful is the bodily reality, and the bodily reality is what *means*.<sup>11</sup> The heart is the innermost reality of the person, and for that reason it is the seat of the person's most essential acts.

Now, what defines man specifically is not that he is an organism, but of course that *as a nephesh*,<sup>12</sup> a "living being," he is most essentially a "person," which is to say a being that lives only as feeling, desiring, thinking, willing, choosing, and acting. To put the point in more evidently biblical terms, what distinguishes man from other creatures is that man is made "in the image and likeness of God," and this is because God not only forms man from the dust like the rest of the living creatures, but uniquely breathes directly into the nostrils of this creature his spirit, *ruah*.<sup>13</sup> It is not an accident that there is a special connection between spirit and the heart (which we see indicated, for example, in our opening passage from Ezekiel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you").<sup>14</sup> By receiving God's spirit, the

---

11. See Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 172: "When the Israelite speaks of the heart, it is not so that he first thinks of the bit of flesh within his body, and then 'metaphorically' of the activities of the soul which he is likely to connect with it. The heart, it is true, is a bit of flesh, but it is always filled with life, the central element of man and heart, indissolubly connected with the entirety of soul."

12. On *nephesh*, from the verb *naphash*, "to take breath," see *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* [= *TWOT*], ed. R. Laird Harris, Bruce K. Waltke, and Gleason L. Archer Jr. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 1395a; *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 5315.

13. We will not enter into a discussion here about the full sense of "image and likeness" in the Old Testament—which, incidentally, is much more "physical" than typically recognized by the classical Christian tradition. In the ancient Middle East, statues ("images") of the king would be set up to instantiate his dominion over that region (see Wolf, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 160). The Christian tradition, having taken up the Greek philosophical tradition, including the Platonic anthropology, tends to emphasize the spiritual powers: see, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [= *ST*] I, q. 93, a. 6. But here we are contenting ourselves with the observation that, *whatever else it signifies*, being in the image of God includes the acts of reason: thinking and willing.

14. See also Ps 51:17; Ez 11:19, 18:31. According to Pederson, there are three basic words for "soul": *nephesh*, *ruah*, and *leb* (*Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 102). Perhaps it is not too much to say that *nephesh* indicates the

heart of man is given a participation in the heart of God. This is a basic part of what it means to be *imago Dei*. It is crucial to note that this participation in God is not something “layered” on top of the heart’s (otherwise merely “biological”) life, but the fullest expression thereof: spirit *is* life, life to the full.<sup>15</sup> There is, we might say, an analogy between the spiritual and the biological, and the heart lies at the center of this analogy as its realized principle.

It is common for us to think of feelings, passions (or, as we more often say today, “emotions”),<sup>16</sup> desires, and thoughts in a merely subjective sense, as “events” that occur within the essentially circumscribed “space” of consciousness, and over which we have either no control at all or complete control.<sup>17</sup> We will come back to this way of conceiving things at greater length later on, but here we want to point out the more evident *reality* of these acts in the ancient understanding of man one finds in Scripture. To say that the heart is the seat of passions and thoughts is to say that it is not “merely” the interior reality of man, but it is that interior reality precisely as oriented toward what is exterior, or in any event “other,” to man. As Johannes Pederson points out, if *nepshesh* is used to designate the essential character of the soul, its comprehensive determination in itself (as righteous or evil, for example),<sup>18</sup> *leb* indicates the total soul specifically in its fundamental disposition toward a thing, usually something quite specific. Thus, “heart” is

---

“soul” in its more basically *bodily* sense (cf. Greek *psychē*), interpreted “from below” in continuity with other animals, as distinct from “soul” in its more “transcendent,” “from-above” sense, as spirit (cf. Greek *pneuma* or *nous*). “Heart,” then, would represent something of a point of intersection between the two.

15. Jn 6:63, 10:10. Cf. Gn 6:17, 7:15, 7:22. On this, see *Strong’s Concordance*, 7307 (esp. 1e); and *TWOT*, 2131a.

16. Thomas Dixon has shown that the rise of the language of “emotions,” which took the place of the older language of the “passions” and “affections,” essentially coincided with the displacement of the classical Christian anthropology. See his *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

17. These are not at all opposites, but turn out to be flip sides of the same coin, as I have tried to show in my book *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), esp. 51–63.

18. Thus, the soul can stand for the whole person. See, e.g., Lv 7:27.



used to designate the special tendency of the whole soul.<sup>19</sup> It is usually connected with a kind of *directedness*,<sup>20</sup> especially a directedness that arises from the interior depths of the person.<sup>21</sup> This is why it is “basic” in the strict, etymological sense, designating a fundamental orientation of the person. The “heart” presents not just a discrete thought or action but rather the condition that enables all thoughts and actions,<sup>22</sup> so that we can say that “the direction of the heart determines the act.”<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the turning of the heart toward or away from Yahweh,<sup>24</sup> or indeed toward or away from another human being,<sup>25</sup> is thus a redirection of the whole existence of the person or people; to have one’s heart with another is to be present to and with him, or to be in obedience.<sup>26</sup> Direction is meaning; meaning is direction.<sup>27</sup> The fact that the heart indicates fundamental orientation also explains why the heart is connected with what we would call the “higher-level” human activities, understanding and will, more commonly than the “lower level” of mere (ineffectual and thus unsubstantial) feeling.<sup>28</sup>

---

19. Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 103.

20. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 50.

21. Joachim Becker explains that the heart is involved, not in superficial emotions, but in those that involve reason and will because they arise from the center of one’s being. See his “The Heart in the Language of the Bible,” in *Faith in Christ and the Worship of Christ*, ed. Leo Scheffczyk (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 30.

22. Peter Selg calls the disposition of the heart the “decisive premise” for the discrete acts of reason and will in *The Mystery of the Heart: The Sacramental Physiology of the Heart in Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Rudolf Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA: Steiner Books, 2012), 5.

23. Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 103.

24. 1 Kgs 18:37; Joel 2:12; 1 Sam 7:3; Jer 3:10.

25. Jgs 9:3 and 19:3.

26. 1 Kgs 8:61, 11:4, 15:3, and 15:14.

27. “Sense” is derived from the Indo-European root *sent-*, “to go.” Cf. the Old High German *sinman*, “to travel, strive after.” *Sinn* thus can also mean “pathway.”

28. Becker, *Faith in Christ*, 30. Note that this essential connection with reason distinguishes the notion in the Old Testament (and in Aristotle and Aquinas, as we will see), from the place of love and the heart in the personalism of Max Scheler. Though it is not possible to enter into the details of Scheler’s sophisticated view (which is not systematically presented in a single

The heart's being an interior seat that is directed in an essential way toward what is "outside" is especially significant for us. Let us note how it illuminates two distinctive aspects of the Hebrew conception of the human activity of knowing.

1) On the one hand, as we already noted, it has often been remarked that the biblical Jews did not have a notion of abstract or purely theoretical thinking. Instead, Hebrew thought evidently has a "wisdom" character, or a "sapiential dimension," to use the phrase from Pope John Paul II,<sup>29</sup> which is to say it is teleological, directed to some accomplishment or realization, some reality as good. It is thus "concrete" in the etymological sense: *con-crescere*, a "growing together" of the interior reality of the person and that to which the person is directed. Knowledge is a kind of discovery, a coming to awareness, of the presence of a thing or a person, and thus a kind of interior "connection" or union with it or him:

For the Israelite *thinking* was not the solving of abstract problems. He does not add link to link, nor does he set up major and minor premises from which conclusions are drawn. To him thinking is to grasp a totality. He directs his soul towards the principal matter, that which determines the totality, and receives it into his soul, the soul thus being immediately stirred and led in a certain direction.<sup>30</sup>

(Here, incidentally, we see a way to explain the oft-remarked "sexual" sense of the Hebrew verb *yada*, "to know"—"Adam knew Eve, his wife, and she conceived" [Gn 4:1].) This is knowledge understood as an act of the heart. In Scripture, to lack heart is to lack intelligence, not as an abstract conceptual capacity but as wisdom, as a proper directedness of one's being to an other. To lack heart, in this respect, is to drift aimlessly.<sup>31</sup>

---

place), it is worth pointing out that Scheler makes the *ordo amoris* essentially independent of reason. An interesting point of similarity, nevertheless, is the fundamental character of the heart's disposition (or indeed "predisposition") in his interpretation. See Scheler, "Ordo Amoris," in *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 98–135.

29. *Fides et ratio*, 81.

30. Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 108 (emphasis original).

31. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 50: "'Without heart' means without a clear sense of direction."

2) On the other hand, knowledge interpreted thus as an act of the heart explains the importance for the Hebrews of what we might call a depth-dimension in good human intelligence. The activities of reason are not only concretely directed *toward* some actual reality; in the proper sense they are directed precisely *from* an interior depth. The fool is the one for whom there is no difference between interior depth and exterior surface, which is to say that *everything is surface*. This superficiality is expressed, significantly, by saying that the fool has his “heart in his mouth.” By contrast, the wise man also connects his heart and his mouth, but in precisely the opposite sense: he has his “mouth in his heart” (Sir 21:26).<sup>32</sup> In other words, the words issuing from his mouth originate “from the heart.” In general, a disorder, a lack of wisdom or righteousness, coincides with the heart following the eyes, or living according to the flesh, which (as we will see in a moment) designates precisely the *outer* aspect of the person. God prefers a “broken and contrite *heart*” to the act of sacrifice, not insofar as it is a ritual act of sacrifice but insofar as it is *merely* externally performed—without one’s heart being in it, as one might say (Ps 51:16–17). The best-known passage about the depth-dimension of words or deeds is no doubt the New Testament passages in which Jesus condemns the Pharisees for being concerned with the merely external reality of the food that one eats rather than the profound significance of what emerges from the heart, specifically the words that one speaks (Mk 7:18–19; Mt 12:43). We will come back to these passages at the end to reflect further on the connection between words and the heart.

## 2.2. ἡ ψῆ, Basar: *Flesh*

The difference between the “inside” and the “outside,” which is not at all an extrinsicist dualism that separates two different things, but rather has its unity in some sense precisely in and through the heart, leads us to our second basic theme, namely, the characterization of the heart as being either “of stone” or “of flesh.” Let us begin with an exploration of the word “flesh,”

---

32. In Greek, the passage runs thus: “Ἐν στόματι μωρῶν ἢ καρδία αὐτῶν καρδία δὲ σοφῶν στόμα αὐτῶν.” The Vulgate reads, “Et in ore fatuorum cor illorum et in corde sapientium os illorum” (verse 29).

*basar*, which is a relatively frequent term in the Old Testament (used 273 times).<sup>33</sup> Rather than designating a particular bodily organ or tissue, *basar* seems to indicate more generally the body's exterior, or to put it even more adequately, the outer aspect of the (whole) person. Thus, the word commonly means just "skin" (which is evident, for example, in its usage in the discussion of skin diseases: Lv 13, etc.), but evidently includes more than just the "epidermis," as we see in the common phrase "flesh and bones," which indicates the whole body, from its inner frame to its outward form. Through synecdoche, which is a figure of speech extremely common in Hebrew thought,<sup>34</sup> *basar* can simply mean the physically present body, the whole of a thing in its corporeal reality.<sup>35</sup> It is important to keep in mind that, to speak of *basar* as the external aspect or form is not to suppose that it represents an empty shell, dead stuff, which is subsequently filled with soul and thus set in motion.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the distinction between the interior and exterior of the bodily thing is "aspectual"; depending on the context, the word *basar* can refer to the whole living and embodied person, just as *nep̄hesh* or *leb*. It is just that each of these terms highlights a particular aspect of the whole person. This "aspectuality" is especially evident, for example, in the second line from Psalm 84, in which all three terms appear: "My soul longs, yea faints for the courts of the Lord, my heart and my

---

33. *TWOT*, 292. See Daniel Lys, *La chair dans l'ancien testament: "basar"* (Paris: Éditions Universitaires, 1967). Very much unlike the word *leb*, which is only rarely used for animals as we saw (but *is* used of God), the word *basar* is used more often for animals than for man (169 times vs. 104 times), and it is *never* used for God. See Lys, *La chair dans l'ancien testament*, 10, 131. Wolff connects the notion of "flesh" essentially with human frailty in *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 26.

34. This is also referred to as "stereometry" of expression. See Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 8. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Weisheit in Israel* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Neukirchener Verlag, 1970), 42ff.

35. Nm 8:7; 2 Kgs 4:34; Eccl 2:3, and so on.

36. "When in the story of the creation it is told that God breathed the spirit of life into the man of clay he had moulded, it must not be construed in the manner that the clay is the body, the spirit of God the soul, which is seated and acts within the body. The man of clay was a dead thing, but by the breath of God he was entirely changed and became a living soul. Soul and body are so intimately united that a distinction cannot be made between them. They are more than 'united': the body is the soul in its outward form" (Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 171).

flesh cry out for the living God.” Let us note, in passing, that the object of longing here is specifically the *living* God; it is difficult to imagine flesh crying out for an abstract first principle, and as we have just seen, the heart relates most fundamentally to what is concrete and actual. However that may be, if this passage is not simply a redundancy, it means that the whole person, designated by *nephesh*, gets spelled out, so to speak, and amplified by virtue of detailing the dimensions of that wholeness—specifically by making reference to the inner mystery of my being (heart) and my outer aspect (flesh), so as to say, in effect: “every bit” of me longs for God, from my innermost core to my outermost being.

But “flesh” is not only a descriptor of an individual person in his bodily aspect; it can also be used to indicate relationship, that which binds individuals together more fundamentally than their discrete acts of will.<sup>37</sup> Adam cries out with astonishment at the creation of Eve: “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gn 2:23), meaning that the two share a unity *in nature*. More generally, *basar* can be used to indicate a member of one’s family (see Is 58:7), and, combined with the word *kol* (“whole”), it indicates the solidarity of the whole human race: *kol-basar*, “all flesh.”<sup>38</sup>

For a full comprehension of the term, we have to reckon with the fact that the noun *basar*, flesh, is derived from the verb *basar*, meaning “to publish, bear (good) tidings, preach, show forth.”<sup>39</sup> At first glance, the noun and verb would seem to have nothing to do with one another.<sup>40</sup> But if we have trouble seeing any connection, it is no doubt due to what we might call our “materialist” bent of mind in the modern world: What could mere physical stuff have to do with preaching, sending a message? If we consider the question in relation to our brief exposition of

---

37. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 29–30.

38. See Gn 6:17, 9:16ff; Is 40:5, 49:26; Ps 145:21.

39. *TWOT*, 291.

40. Daniel Lys, for instance, mentions the derivation of the noun from the verb at the outset of his book-length study, but makes no attempt to interpret that fact or incorporate it (so to speak) into the account of *basar* he offers in the rest of the book. See *La chair dans l'ancien testament*, 23–24. Lys only suggests, with reference to the Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon entry, that bringing good news effects the expression of the person who receives it: there is, in other words, a connection between the verb, to bring good tidings, and the noun, flesh, because, when one receives good news, one’s outward form reveals it.

the meaning of flesh, however, a fairly clear connection presents itself: it is not difficult to see a similarity between the verb, to “show forth,” and the noun, “external aspect,” that is, “that which has been shown forth.” In light of this connection, we could say that the flesh is the showing forth of the person, his manifestation, his being made visible and accessible to others: his “publication.” The flesh fleshes, so to speak. A consideration of the noun in light of the verb from which it is derived adds to what we have already seen, on the one hand and most obviously, the “mediating” function of flesh. *Basar* means to convey a message, usually good, for example when news is brought to David of the death of Saul (1 Sm 31:9): “to flesh,” in this case, is to carry the report of an event, a thing of significance, to the one *for* whom it is significant. The noun “flesh,” seen in this light, would mean not only public manifestation but of a sort that conveys a message with a purpose: flesh is not only a presentation, but also a sort of revelation; the flesh is a communicative *medium*.

On the other hand, there is another, more subtle but deeply significant, dimension of “flesh” that comes out in light of the verb from which the noun is derived. Not only does the verb denote a “preaching” or “showing forth”; it also, and thereby, indicates a kind of realization, or a “making real,” as we see in the example just offered. In one respect, the death of Saul is a complete event in itself, something that has really happened. But in another respect, if the death occurred without anyone’s knowledge, its reality would be trivialized. For it to be what it actually is—not just a physical occurrence but an event that changes in a radical sense the standing (i.e., *substance*) of David and therefore the state of the people of Judah—it has to be proclaimed to the king; the proclamation is not just, say, a transfer of otherwise indifferent data; it is a kind of fulfillment of the event itself, its definitive “real-ization” in the public sphere. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Lexicon opens up the possibility of drawing a connection between the noun and verb by observing that the bringing of good news (*basar* as verb) “smooths out the face” of the recipient, or in other words makes manifest the result of the report through the joyful face, the radiant flesh, of the one who receives it.<sup>41</sup> We

---

41. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 142a; cf. 925a, 1085b.

might say that a thing reveals its reality when it is received and bears fruit, when its goodness is reflected back as a result. The fruit in this case is the *seal* of the proclaimed event's significance and reality, so to speak: for example, at the end of Isaiah, the power of God's hand is "made known" in the joy of the heart and the flourishing of the "bones," the substance or body, of the people (Is 66:14). The "fleshing" of the event is its "real-ization." Giving flesh to something is a fruitful achievement, an "accomplishment" in the etymological sense (i.e., a bringing of something to completion, to its full form: *ad-complere*).

If it seems a stretch to "read" this aspect "into" the noun "flesh," we ought to consider that something of this sense is evident even in idiomatic English: we speak of "fleshing something out" when we want to express the completion of some otherwise abstract idea through the provision of needed details. If we were to describe a person as "the living embodiment, that is, the 'enfleshment' of humility," what would we mean by this? We would mean that he brings humility to a certain concrete perfection in his life, a perfection that is evident to all who encounter him. Humility, in this case, is not a mere inward feeling (in his heart!); it is actually realized in the way that he lives, in the form of his existence, in his concrete words and deeds: it thus becomes publicly manifest, he communicates the meaning of humility in the whole of his person, and what he communicates bears fruit in the response generated in others. He gives this virtue "flesh." Along these same lines, we use the phrase "in flesh and blood" to insist on the actual reality of a thing, its real and effective presence, its manifestation of truth, its definitive and public significance. This sense is evident in a particular Old Testament use of *basar*: to cry out to God *in my flesh* is to present this disposition as complete, to announce it to God as the full truth of my being. If I cry out in my flesh, it means I could not possibly cry out any more completely than I already am.

It would be interesting, from the perspective we just set forth, to reflect on the phrase in Genesis describing marriage as a "one flesh" union between a man and a woman (Gn 2:24). A "materialistically" inclined mind would see this phrase as a straightforward description of the marital act, which involves an entwining of bodies in the physical sense. Does this imply that they are only one flesh episodically, only in the actual act of

intercourse? A deeper perspective would add that “flesh” is not just skin but the whole person, so that the union of “flesh” is a union of persons. This is true, and important, but it does not yet seem to grasp the whole significance of the phrase. What would be different if we were to speak of a union of hearts, or of being one soul (which is incidentally a fundamental notion in the Old Testament),<sup>42</sup> since these too would express the whole person joined to another? It seems that “flesh” adds precisely the sense of definitive “real-ization.” Friends, like David and Jonathan, may share a soul,<sup>43</sup> but a man and woman can bring that unity all the way to the flesh: in their bodily intercourse, and above all in the actual child that might arise from it and thus continue the family line in principle in perpetuity, the unity is *consummated*, brought to completion, and indeed in a way that is publicly manifest and recognized. In the proclamation of the flesh, the union is an established reality, an *institution* with a public significance. In the flesh, a bond is established that is more fundamental and enduring than any subsequent discrete act of the will can effect.

### 2.3. לֵב בָּסָר, *Leb Basar: Heart of flesh*

Let us now see if this elaboration of the meaning of *basar* illuminates the contrast between the heart of stone and the heart of flesh. What most obviously stands out in the juxtaposition of the two materials is a physical quality: flesh is *soft*, while a stone is *hard*. The significance of this quality finds reinforcement from the phrase “hardness of heart,” which appears many times in Scripture and seems intended to convey an idea similar to that of “heart of stone.”<sup>44</sup> But what is the idea exactly? One might initially think that the issue is flexibility: a heart of flesh can *beat*, and therefore carry out its organic function of giving life

---

42. Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 263–96.

43. “When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to [*niqserah*, “knit together with”] the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul” (1 Sm 18:1).

44. Ex 9:7; Dt 15:7; 1 Sm 6:6; Ps 95:8; Prv 28:14, and so forth. See Zec 7:12, “heart of flint”: “They made their hearts adamant [*shamir*, “like flint”] in order not to hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his spirit through the former prophets.”



to the body, whereas a hard heart, a heart of stone, cannot. But if this were the principal point, the phrase “heart of stone” or “hardened heart” would be used most frequently to describe an individual’s death. While such a sense does appear in one very interesting context,<sup>45</sup> for the most part the phrase seems to indicate not the vital (biological) status of an individual person but the condition of one person’s relationship to another—in the Old Testament, most specifically to God. We recall that the heart implies a disposition, a directedness of the whole person from within. It seems evident that it is precisely this disposition or directedness that is at issue in the phrase. But what would it mean to speak of a “hard” or “soft” directedness? The contrast between flexible and inflexible is certainly more illuminating on this score, since only something flexible can be directed in one way or another. But, affirming this truth, we can discover yet another dimension: a stone is not only inflexible; it is also *impermeable*. Nothing can get through it, or indeed through *to* it. What might this point illuminate about the meaning of flesh? Here, the “mediating” or “relational” aspect of flesh, which we just spoke about, comes to the fore. A heart of stone is perfectly opaque, so to speak: it neither manifests itself in its truth nor responds to the presence of the other. It is not *receptive*, and in this sense open, *attuned* to the other. The word “flint” (*shamir*), which characterizes the heart in Zechariah 7:12, is also used for briars or thorns, that is, a place that does not allow access or free passage. In light of this dimension, “directedness” would concern not just flexibility in the sense of a material that allows itself to be turned one way or another, but a capacity to take direction from the other, to receive the point of reference that allows orientation, and thus to conform itself. Flexibility is part of this, to be sure: being receptive requires a flexibility, a capacity to adapt, to change in tandem or in harmony with the other. But the awareness of the other, the permeability to the presence of the other, is obviously more fundamental. We might use in this context the word that has been brilliantly expounded for years by William Desmond: porosity.<sup>46</sup>

---

45. See 1 Sm 25:37ff; Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 40–41.

46. See, esp., William Desmond, *God and the Between* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

The significance of the receptivity, the porosity to the other, is reinforced by other phrases used of the heart in the Old Testament to convey something similar, phrases that have nothing to do with flexibility but do indicate a kind of receptivity: for example, instead of a “hardened heart,” in the New Testament we have a “darkened heart” (Rom 1:24; Eph 4:19), which is unable to see, to attend to the other and grasp what is going on, because the communicative medium, light, is absent. What about the “fat” heart (Is 6:10, Ps 119:70)? It is full, that is, self-satisfied, and therefore not open to receive anything else, any “in-put,” from the other. Instead of being porous, it is “clogged.” By contrast, the heart that is “hearing” (1 Kgs 3:9–12) and “awake” (Sg 5:2) is one that is properly attuned to what lies before it. The aspect of porosity would not make much sense if we thought of flesh simply as bodily stuff, even “soft” stuff, and it would not help if we were simply to emphasize that “flesh” indicates the whole person in his outer aspect. But if we recognize that the outer aspect is a communicative medium, the “place” in which the person becomes manifest, a meaningful presence in the (public) world, and so that wherein one communicates with one’s other, “bonds” with the other, the aptness of the phrase “heart of flesh” becomes evident. A heart of flesh is one in which the directedness from the core of one’s being becomes manifest in truth, effectively displays an attentiveness to the needs or commands of the other. We see just this dimension indicated in St. Paul’s reference to the “fleshy tablets of the heart” (2 Cor 3:3), a phrase that obviously means a heart able to receive *into* itself the words God wishes to write.<sup>47</sup> The “tablet of flesh” is a figure of Mary, who is able to ponder, deep in her heart (Lk 2:19), the words her Son spoke to her, because she had previously received (conceived) the Word deep in the fleshy heart of her womb.

But what is conveyed in the phrase “heart of flesh” that would not be conveyed simply by speaking of being open to and receptive toward the other? The “earthy” phrase makes this openness precisely a matter of “flesh and blood”; it underscores the reality of this openness as a manifestation of one’s whole being, a perfect readiness to receive from the other, the perfection of which takes shape in the actuality of one’s existence; it emphasizes the

---

47. Cf. Jer 31:33.

immediate and tangible presence of the self to the other and the other to the self: the whole of the self, from its innermost core to its outermost form, is oriented to the other, to the reception, *into* one's being, of whatever the other happens to desire or command. This is an openness that one *is*, in the roots of one's being, not simply that one *does* in discrete acts, though its lying in one's deepest core does not mean it is just an interior disposition, but comes to expression in the actual reality of one's life.

Before we turn to consider our theme from a more directly philosophical perspective, it is worthwhile stepping back to observe something remarkable that has emerged from our reflections thus far, which we intend to deepen in what follows. We have seen that the heart is, on the one hand, the inaccessible mystery, the center of the person, his innermost reality. On the other hand, this inaccessible mystery is in a certain respect accessible in the flesh. That part wherein one cannot be touched is the place wherein one is touched; the interior and exterior meet; the heart is made flesh. The interior mystery of the person is also the seat of feelings, desires, thoughts, wills, and plans, which are the various activities in which one "inter-acts" with the outside world, and makes contact with other things, persons, and even God himself. But this means that one's innermost core, the place where one is most oneself, is precisely the place wherein one encounters the genuinely other.

### III. THE HEART OF ARISTOTLE

In his frustration at an interviewer's evident resistance to a point he was making by using scriptural imagery, Bob Dylan once quipped, "Just because it's in the Bible doesn't mean it ain't true!" Unlike the Hebrews, the Greeks are not often thought of as giving the heart a central place in their anthropology, and yet, as we will see, a great deal of what we have just drawn from the Old Testament finds an echo in Greek philosophy.<sup>48</sup> The

---

48. We will be focusing on Aristotle here, but a "cardiocentrism" is evident in the whole expanse of ancient Greek thought, especially in the more "materialistically" inclined thinkers in the early Greek period (see Richard Braxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951], esp. chaps. 1–3, pp. 13–65) and in the later, Hellenistic

pre-Socratic thinker Empedocles appears to represent an older tradition when he affirms that consciousness resides in the heart, and thinking is carried in the blood, or indeed even more “realistically,” that “the blood that flows around the heart in men is their thought.”<sup>49</sup> To be sure, Plato critiques the apparently reductivistic nature of such accounts, and insists that thinking, as a grasp of immaterial forms, can reside ultimately only in the matter-transcending soul itself, and most specifically in the intellect.<sup>50</sup> This may have some connection to his shift to what has come to be called a “cephalocentric” anthropology—the center of man is the head, or the brain—as distinct from the “cardiocentric” view, but we are not going to dwell on this particular issue here.<sup>51</sup> However that may be, Plato’s student Aristotle, who is known for giving the “organic” dimensions of existence more weight, so to speak, than his master—indeed, he is arguably the founder of the study of organic nature in the West—is decidedly “cardiocentric,” even if he arguably integrated in his own vision aspects of Plato’s insights into properly theoretical intelligence.

According to Aristotle, the heart, in sanguineous animals, is first in the order of generation and first in the order of motion (which includes not only all motor acts, but all sensory

---

thinkers, above all the Stoics (see Emmanuele Vimercate, “Cardiology and Cosmology in Post-Chryssipian Stoicism,” in *Cosmology and Biology in Ancient Philosophy: From Thales to Avicenna* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021], 190–207).

49. Empedocles, fr. 109: “αἷμα γὰρ ἀνθρώποις περικάρδιόν ἐστι νόημα.”

50. Plato distinguishes the “immortal soul,” which has its seat in the head, from the “mortal soul,” which lies principally in the heart. See his *Timaeus* 69c–70b. In the *Phaedo*, he famously criticizes a “materialist” anthropology and presents his theory of the forms (96aff). See Benedict XVI on the importance of the Stoics in the Christian “philosophy of the heart,” and the synthesis with Plato’s discovery of transcendent reason: *Behold the Pierced One* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 65–69. I am grateful to Joseph Lanzilotti for bringing this book to my attention.

51. For a general overview of the “progression” of the seat of the soul, see Giuseppe Santoro et al., “The Anatomic Location of the Soul from the Heart, through the Brain, to the Whole Body, and Beyond: A Journey through Western History, Science, and Philosophy,” *Neurosurgery* 65, no. 4 (October 2009): 633–43.

and cognitive acts as well)<sup>52</sup>—which is to say that the heart is first in the order of being (*esse*) and first in the order of action (*operare*). We might say that the heart stands as the principle of both what Aristotle calls first actuality and second actuality in a living being.<sup>53</sup> This astonishing claim represents the heart, so to speak, of what we want to draw from Aristotle. It is astonishing because, at first glance, it appears to be false in an obvious way—obvious not only to the sophisticated modern observations enabled by technology unavailable to Aristotle, but even to the simple bodily vision of the Greeks. On the one hand, it is clear that the emergence of the organ of the heart occurs within an embryo that is evidently already there, at least in a very rudimentary way, in the sense that the heart *itself* is in a certain respect brought into being through the activity of the blood;<sup>54</sup> and, on the other hand, there is no evident material instrument by which the heart is connected to all the various organs of movement, perception, and thought, such that it could govern these as their first principle.<sup>55</sup> But Aristotle thinks of “firstness,” principiality, most fundamentally in terms of the nature or intrinsic logic of a thing, rather than in the “empirical” sense, positivistically understood. The heart is first as the principle of the life that makes the organism what it is as a living being (and, indeed, for Aristotle, *to live* is the *being* of living things),<sup>56</sup> and it gives evidence of this in being the last to die:

What comes into being first is the first principle; this is the heart in the sanguinea and its analogue in the rest, as has

---

52. See, for example, Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 2.1.735a22–25 (hereafter cited as *Gen.*); *On Sleep* 2.455b31–456a6.

53. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 2.1.412a23–27.

54. *Gen.* 1.726a4–6.

55. To be sure, Aristotle believed he saw certain connections of the sense organs to the heart (for example, taste and touch), and reasoned that the other senses must also be connected in some way because of the governing role that the heart plays even if the precise means have not yet been detected. See Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age* 3.469a10–14. For an excellent overview and discussion of Aristotle’s thought on this matter, see Michael Frampton, “Aristotle’s Cardiocentric Model of Animal Locomotion,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 291–330.

56. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 2.4.415b13–15.

been often said already. This is plain not only to the senses (that it is first to come into being), but also in view of its end; for life fails in the heart last of all, and it happens in all cases that what comes into being last fails first, and the first last, nature running a double course, so to say, and turning back to the point from whence she started.<sup>57</sup>

What is crucial here is that the beating of the heart is for Aristotle a definitive sign, a seal, of the organism qua substance, that is, as a being existing in itself in relative independence of anything else, one that can be understood not as the accident of some other substance (the mother) but as a subject in which its own accidents inhere.<sup>58</sup> “No sooner is the embryo formed than its heart is seen in motion as though it were a living creature, and this before any of the other parts, it being, as this shows, the starting-point of their nature [ἀρχὴ τῆς φύσεως] in all animals that have blood.”<sup>59</sup> Why does the heartbeat make this evident? First of all, we note that it follows a rhythm of its own, not that of its mother’s heart, which indicates it has, or is, its own governing principle.<sup>60</sup> Aristotle actually likens the self-differentiation of the heartbeat to the child who moves away from his parents’ home in order to set up a household of his own; the heart, in its own movement, thus becomes the ordering principle of the rest of the body.<sup>61</sup> Second, along these lines, we note that the movement connected with the heart is an essentially self-directed activity, so to speak; it is the most basic form of *entelecheia*, which Joe Sachs (inspired here by Heidegger) has helpfully translated

---

57. *Gen.* 2.741b15–24.

58. We recall that Aristotle defines “substance” (*ousia*) as that which exists *in* itself, in contrast to accidents (*symbekēkē*), which exist *in* something other, whether that be another accident or, ultimately, a substance. See his *Metaphysics* 5.7–8.

59. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 3.4.666a20–23 (hereafter cited as *Parts*).

60. We are not entering into the abortion debate here, which would require further differentiation. It is not simply the case that the distinct organism comes into being only at the moment of the heartbeat, since, from the beginning, the very cells are different from the cells of the mother. It is just that this differentiation enacts itself enacts its substantiality as different in the motion of the heart.

61. *Gen.* 2.4.740a6–7.

as “being-at-work-staying-itself”<sup>62</sup>: the heart’s movement is the fundamental expression of the organism’s work to continue not just in existence, but in existence *as itself*. (Note that the subject and object of this work imply one another, which is why this self-sustaining is governed by intelligible form, and differs from a materialistic Darwinian “struggle for existence,” which recognizes no form.)<sup>63</sup> What is interesting about the motion of the heart is that it is a motion that does not go anywhere; it is a self-recurring motion, an endlessly repeated rhythm, which governs the movement of the blood out to the furthest extremities of the organism, only so that it can return back in.<sup>64</sup> This self-recurring motion is an imitation, within the living organism, of (what the ancients thought was) the perfect circular motion of the heavenly spheres.<sup>65</sup> The circle is perfect because it is the expression in space (as geometrical figure) and time (as motion) of being simply, the central meaning of which is substance.<sup>66</sup>

It is just this that also makes the movement of the heart a perfect expression of nature. One of the greatest achievements of Aristotle’s thought is no doubt his definition of nature: “Nature is a principle or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself and not accidentally.”<sup>67</sup> It is natural, so to speak, to interpret this definition

---

62. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe, NM: Green Lion Press, 1999), li–lii.

63. On this, see Michael Hanby’s chapter, “The Mystery of the Missing Organism,” in *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 250–95.

64. We are not going to enter into the details regarding the nature of the movement of the blood in Aristotle’s thought. For a recent article that corrects typical modern oversimplifications of Aristotle, see Claire Bubb, “Blood Flow in Aristotle,” *The Classical Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (May 2020): 137–53.

65. See Plato, *Timaeus* 33b; Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 1.2.269a19–20. Thomas Aquinas makes this point comparing the heart to the heavenly spheres in the *De motu cordis*.

66. Aristotle famously affirmed that the study of being is the study of substance (*Metaphysics* 7.1). While we cannot enter into what this means here, we point out that one of the fundamental reasons substance is absolute is that it exists “*kath’ auto*,” i.e., “in itself,” “according to itself,” or “by virtue of itself”: in other words, it is the beginning and end of itself, and thus forms what we might call a “metaphysical” circle.

67. Aristotle, *Physics* 2.1.192b21–23.

in the first place according to the order of operation: natural things exhibit a kind of self-motion: animals move, plants grow, and even the elements either rise or fall toward their proper place.<sup>68</sup> While all of this is true—and indeed profoundly important in the context of a modern physics that is governed by the principle of inertia—it fails to give proper attention to the allusion to “rest” in the definition. Of course, one recognizes that physical motion always both starts and stops, but to acknowledge this is not the same thing as to recognize it as part of the *logos* of nature: “natural things are self-movers” and “nature is an intrinsic principle of motion and rest” are profoundly different statements, however much they may entail one another. For Aristotle, the affirmation of “rest” is implied in the linking of motion to an intrinsic principle: such a principle institutes an order, and an order has a beginning *and* an end, not only a passage between. The motion issuing *from* a first principle comes to rest in some basic sense *in* that first principle: this is the root of the *exitus-reditus* pattern of activity that dominates classical thought. If natural motion is an expression of order, it means that it is in some sense always circular precisely to the extent that it is natural, and so begins and ends with the same principle. In this respect, insofar as the heartbeat is the animal’s self-recurring action of life and so analogously circular, it represents a paradigm of nature.

What this means for the natural operations of an animal that are *clearly* directed outward, to something other than the animal, is a question we will address in a moment. First, it is essential to see that the natural motion we are discussing in relation to the heart is in some sense *sui generis*, in a class by itself, and distinct from the more obvious kinds of motion we observe in the organism, but even more so in the world.<sup>69</sup> Heidegger offers some profoundly illuminating insights on this

---

68. The proper motion of natural things cannot be so easily separated from the question of a home, a proper place. We cannot enter into the question here but it would be interesting to reflect on the relation between heart and home, and thus how the heart represents an analogy to locomotion with respect to proper place.

69. Even the other apparently self-directed activities of breathing or digesting, which share certain features in common with the heart, differ nevertheless in conveying something from outside the organism *into* it, rather than simply “circulating,” as does the blood.



score, though they are arguably in need of some metaphysical fine-tuning. To summarize just one aspect of his important essay on the concept of nature in Aristotle, Heidegger argues that Aristotle's definition of nature ought to be interpreted as describing the *being* of nature most fundamentally, as distinct from its action or operation.<sup>70</sup> Specifically, Heidegger interprets the definition according to his well-known account of the Greek notion of being as "presencing": nature is a self-showing (*physis*, from *phuō*, related to *phainesthai*),<sup>71</sup> which is to say that it is essentially self-manifestive, coming forth from itself in a manner that is simultaneously a revealing and a concealing.<sup>72</sup> Here we have the essential meaning of being (as *das Seiende*, rather than *das Sein*), which is an abiding, an unfolding of one's essence, a kind of shining forth of presence. This radiant self-unfolding—which Heidegger expresses as essence (*das Wesen*) in its verbal sense (*das wesende Wesen*), as "essence-ing," so to speak<sup>73</sup>—is the most basic expression of nature, prior to any question of external motion. While we cannot enter into a thorough reflection on, and evaluation of, Heidegger's account in this context, it is worth noting that he obscures a potentially very fruitful insight by failing to distinguish between being and time (which is of course not an incidental point in his philosophy),<sup>74</sup> and so ultimately

---

70. "We of today must do two things: first, free ourselves from the notion that movement is *primarily* change of place; and second, learn to see how for the Greeks movement as a mode of *being* has the character of emerging into presence" (Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence and Concept of Φύσις in Aristotle's B, I," in *Pathmarks* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 191).

71. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Maquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), 51–52; and "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper, 2008), 317.

72. Heidegger's explanation of the simultaneity of revealing and concealing is often very obscure and quite dark. For a more evidently positive account of a similar insight, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Truth as Mystery," in *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 1: *The Truth of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 131–225.

73. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 334–36.

74. Heidegger apparently can think of eternity *only* as the simple absence of time rather than as fullness, which is arguably a key problem in his thinking. This is the heart of Edith Stein's criticism of Heidegger in her exposition of his early thought: "Martin Heidegger's Existential Philosophy," in *Maynooth*

collapsing each into the other. Thus, on the one hand, being tends to devolve exhaustively into (temporal) change (motion and rest), even if Heidegger insists on the distinctive character of this particular motion (and its difference from locomotion); on the other hand, the same lack of distinction between being and time ends up trivializing the real significance of operation and action, reducing this essentially temporal/historical order to the order of being.<sup>75</sup> To clarify what is at issue here in a manner that could allow us to reap the fruits of what we take to be Heidegger's insight, we ought to distinguish two radically different "kinds" of movement. On the one hand, we have what we might call the "vertical," or perhaps strictly *meta*-physical "movement" of substance, its being itself, which is movement only in an analogical sense, since, strictly speaking, it does not take place in time—this "movement" would correspond to what Aristotle calls first actuality, which is substance, an actuality that is not a temporally unfolding activity. On the other hand, we have the "horizontal" movement, which *is* temporal alteration of any sort, whether of place, color, size, condition, and so forth. A natural thing moves itself—the flower grows and blooms, the fly buzzes around the flower, the frog extends its tongue to catch the fly—but this horizontal motion is the extension in time of the "meta-motion," the *actuality*, that the being already *is* in itself as a substance in the paradigmatic sense.<sup>76</sup>

What may seem to be an abstract and very speculative point proves to be indispensable for us to grasp the significance of the heart in Aristotle's philosophy of nature. Aristotle says repeatedly that the motion of the heart is the *first motion* of the living

---

*Philosophical Papers* 4 (2007): 55–98. David Bentley Hart makes a similar criticism in "The Offering of Names: Metaphysics, Nihilism, and Analogy," in *Reason and the Reasons of Faith*, ed. John Griffiths and Reinhard Hütter (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 55–76.

75. Much more would have to be said, but consider the "Letter on Humanism," where Heidegger reduces action to the history of Being, in order to avoid what he calls the "'technical' interpretation of thinking" (in *Basic Writings* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008], 217–19).

76. It would take us too far afield here but it is worth reflecting on the extent to which the scholastic notion of *subsistence* could be interpreted as a more metaphysically grounded way of articulating what Heidegger means by essence in the verbal sense (*das Wesen des Wesens*).

being. Is this motion of the first kind we just described, namely, the “vertical” motion of nature in its substantial sense of “be-ing” what it is? Or is it motion in the second, “horizontal,” sense as a change that occurs in time? The answer is that *the heart lies right at the intersection between these two*. It is of course a temporal movement in one respect, insofar as one can count one’s “beats per minute,” and it is very clearly, and importantly, a *physical* action, vital to the actual organism. In another respect, however, it is, as we have seen, an essentially self-recurring motion, a motion that does not seek to progress, from one point to a further one, so to speak, down the line, but is repetitive, or in other words self-recapitulating, always starting over again. It is a “motion” that does nothing but what is most original and fundamental: it “makes be.” In this sense, we might say, using more strictly Platonic language, that it is the closest “moving image of eternity” that can be found in the earthly sphere, in time;<sup>77</sup> it is a kind of temporal unfolding of the eternal, or in any event meta-temporal, actuality of substance (as a living being). To use Aristotle’s categories, if motion (*kinesis*) is generally defined as “the actualization of potency qua potency,” and to that extent *always* essentially imperfect of its essence (“motion is a kind of actualization, but incomplete [ἀτελής]”),<sup>78</sup> circular motion is the most perfect instance of this imperfection; it is a kind of imitation of perfection in an essentially imperfect order, since it is in some respect always already complete. And the beating of the heart is the closest organic analogue to circular motion.<sup>79</sup>

When Aristotle thus affirms that the heart is the origin of all other motions of the sensitive (and sanguineous) organism—

---

77. Aristotle, *Physics* 3.2.201a10–11.

78. Aristotle, *Physics* 3.2.201b31. Note that this is strictly oxymoronic. For an interesting discussion, see L. A. Kosman, “Aristotle’s Definition of Motion,” *Phronesis* 14, no. 1 (1969): 40–62; and Joe Sachs’s excellent article, “Aristotle: Motion,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <https://iep.utm.edu/aristotle-motion/>.

79. To grasp this analogy fully, we would have to understand the difference between the ancient mind’s conception of the circle and that of the modern mind. The ancient conception of the circle is essentially “metaphysical,” so to speak: for example, in Plotinus, the center of the circle is “revealed” in the radii, which “grow out” of the center and so embody its power (which always exceeds the radii). See his *Ennead* 6.8.18. By contrast, the modern mind essentially thinks of the circle as a straight line that has been bent back upon itself in a uniform way so that its end joins its beginning.

living, sensing, and thinking—he has precisely this metaphysical conception of nature in mind. The beating of the heart is not the first movement of the organism in a merely temporal sense, positivistically conceived, which would simply juxtapose this motion to all the other vital motions in a linear series. Instead, it is first in the sense of being the ordering *principle*, *archē*, the abidingly governing origin, which makes sense if it is in fact the very enactment of the organism’s substantiality in time. The heart is “the principle of the nature [ἀρχὴ τῆς φύσεως]” of an animal.<sup>80</sup> As a general rule, the classical mind thinks *from* a center, conceiving events as recapitulative enactments that emanate from this essential point,<sup>81</sup> whereas the modern mind tends to think principally in a linear sequence, with one thing happening after another. Thus, Aristotle did not make his claim about the heart’s principality only because he discovered empirically various “connections” between the heart and these other functions; instead, he (also) reasoned to it because of his understanding of the relation between a substance and its accidents, or in this case its operations, and the relationship between act and potency, which is connected to it. As activities of the organism—it is *this* human being that lives, senses, and thinks—the operations must be extensions of the original motion that establishes the organism *in* its being. In other words, the operations must be a kind of further communication of the original (meta-)motion of the substance to the extent that they *belong* to the substance in question. If they had some other moving principle, that motion would belong to a different substance; if, instead, the motion did in fact appear to arise from a different point of origin other than the heart, that principle and the heart would have to share a more fundamental principle or point of origin, if there is to

---

80. *Parts* 3.4.666a23.

81. This is why dates given by ancient writers are notoriously unreliable from a modern “historical-critical,” and so empiricist, standpoint. These writers assume that a person’s great achievement occurs at the “*akmē*” of his existence, which is right at the center—i.e., when he reaches forty years old—and, moreover, in the case of a truly great person (what Hegel would call a “world-historical figure”), this achievement coincides with some great historical event happening in the world (an eclipse, a flood, a major military victory, and so forth). In this sense, understanding takes its bearings from *the center*.

be a single organism at all.<sup>82</sup> But Aristotle, for reasons we have already given, cannot see any other organ more fundamental in the life of the organism than the heart.<sup>83</sup> It thus follows that *all* of an organism's movements, to the extent that they belong to that organism as its own—to the extent, in other words, that they have the organism as the proper subject of the activity—are so to speak “emanations” of the movement of the heart.<sup>84</sup> This is why Aristotle describes the heart as being the “supreme power” (κυριωτάτη, from κύριος, meaning “lord”) over all the functions of the organism.<sup>85</sup>

To grasp what this means, let us dwell on the phenomenon of sense perception, which is of particular importance for Aristotle. The principle we just affirmed means that the heart is the “origin” of sense experience. Why and in what respect can the heart, rather than the eyes, the ears, the nose, and so forth, be the origin? To understand Aristotle's insight, we have to recall the properly metaphysical sense of firstness: just as the heart is what Aristotle calls the “principle of the nature” and thus is the *origin* of movement, even if it arises only within a prior context with the conditions that make it possible, so too is it the source of perception, even if the work of the particular sense organs precedes its own. The eye takes in light, and the ear takes in sound waves (or as Aristotle would put it, the movement of air), but the *act* of seeing and hearing arises from the heart. While this may initially seem very strange to us, it is not very different from the current conception, though we perhaps do not often think about its implications: we might say that the *eyes* see, but we also admit that the visual images are formed “in the brain,” so that, from this perspective, we might say that sight arises *in* and therefore in

---

82. We will address the point later (see note 86 below), but it suffices to say that positing an *ultimate archē* within a given order does not exclude the possibility of a plurality of relative *archai* that participate in that order analogously.

83. See *Parts* 3.4.666a25–666b1.

84. This does not mean that the form of all movements is contained in the form of the heart: the liver is not somehow precontained in the heart, and so forth (see *Gen.* 2.1.734a25–33). There is thus room for radical analogy, which is even *more* evident in Aquinas, who emphasizes the soul's transcendence, as we will see.

85. Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age* 3.469a3.

some basic sense *from* the brain.<sup>86</sup> Technically speaking, it is the *person* who sees with the eyes:<sup>87</sup> but this means that the substance as such is the subject of the activity, and we have seen that it is precisely the movement of the heart that is the first movement of the substance as such. For Aristotle, at any rate, the heart is the central place of all perception, the “common sense” (κοινὸν αἰσθητήριον) in which all the sense data come together from their various sources so that they can be simultaneously united to each other and differentiated from each other, which is what allows us to perceive a *real thing*, through the joint work of all the senses.<sup>88</sup> This work could not be truly common without a principle of unity, which is why the heart is the seat of the imagination and its phantasm-forming activity.<sup>89</sup> The heart is what allows us to perceive a manifest whole, a real being that lies before us in its unified multiplicity of aspects, its filling of time and space in a manner that sets our senses in motion.

There would be much to say about the various avenues of reflection that open up at this point, but we will restrict ourselves to drawing a connection between what has just emerged

---

86. We are going to qualify the notion of sense perception occurring “in the brain” below. It is important to see (especially in light of the modern discovery of the neurological system rooted in the brain) that the two need to be integrated, namely, the role of the brain and the role of the heart. It is not possible to address the issue in detail here, but we may at least make a basic observation: the discovery of the brain’s role in sense perception does not negate Aristotle’s argument regarding the role of the heart in principle, but it does require a further differentiation, which Aquinas’s interpretation of the transcendence of the soul enables. The transcendence of the soul can be said to imply *two* centers of integration, namely, the brain and the heart (in a manner analogous, we might say, to the irreducible difference between the spiritual and temporal powers in the political order revealed in the transcendence of divine authority). Each order contains the whole, but under a different formality, namely, that of intellection and that of life and appetite, or in other words the ideal order and the real order. Thus, we might say that the brain is the integrating center of the *rational* animal, and the heart is the integrating center of the rational *animal*; but the latter has a certain priority insofar as we are creatures who first receive our existence, which gives a foundational character to our natural, and embodied, mode of existence in space and time. On the transcendence of the soul implying a greater “diffusion” of principiality, see note 134 below.

87. Aquinas states this clearly in *ST I*, q. 75, a. 2 ad 2.

88. Aristotle, *On Youth and Old Age* 3.469a10–14.

89. See Aristotle, *On Sleep* 2.455a12–26; *On Memory* 450a10–13.

here and the discussion of the heart in the Old Testament. We ended that discussion by observing that the heart is simultaneously the mysterious center, the innermost core of the person and, precisely as such, the “place” wherein we encounter the other. The very same thing has emerged in our discussion of Aristotle, albeit in very different terms. If the distinctively theological, and what we may also call the “personalist,” element is not as obviously present in this Greek context—Aristotle gives little attention to the passions, for example, in his anthropology, and focuses instead on the vital functions and sense perception in his reflections on the heart—the philosophical dimension has certainly deepened. The heart is the center of the human being because it is the most fundamental enactment of his being, the act by which he *is*, he *bes*, what he is. The heart stands as a point of intersection between first and second actuality, integrating them so that they can in some sense be expressions of each other.<sup>90</sup> But at the same time, the heart is the seat of perception, by which the human being makes contact, through the senses, with a reality that is genuinely other than himself.

The picture of things that comes forth here is something quite different from our conventional way of thinking in this essentially positivistic modern era: organisms, we believe, are physical things with physical boundaries; they interact at their edges, so to speak, and this interaction sends information to their “internal” consciousness from the outside through a variety of physical (and electrical) mechanisms. Some more romantically inclined moderns might speak of the senses as the “windows of the soul,” which open out onto the world, but this image presupposes the same positivism. It suggests that we accept the notion of the soul, our “self,” as housed inside this body (a “ghost in the machine”). The world is thus exterior to us, *out there*, beyond the borders of our skin, our external packaging, and we somehow make contact with it through the open passages that are the senses. But, setting aside the fact that this image has never

---

90. It would be profoundly illuminating to develop this point in light of the role of subsistence in the metaphysics of Ferdinand Ulrich. See, e.g., *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being* (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 49–51.

worked<sup>91</sup> and has generated instead all the skeptical anxieties that have continued to haunt modernity, the image that appears in classical thought is fundamentally different: it is not extrinsicist, physicalist, materialist, bound to a banal interpretation of space and time.<sup>92</sup> For Aristotle, when I see a being other than myself, I do not take in abstract sense data through recipient organs at the surface of my organism that I then process into some internal image that (one hopes, but can never know) somehow *resembles* the outside reality. Instead, the being I encounter outside of myself *arises within me*; it proceeds, in and through my perception, *from* the center of my being, to the extent that perception is an act of which I am the subject. It proceeds from my heart. Its presence, we might say, radiates simultaneously from the other toward me, and *from within me* into my awareness. The “circular” beating of the heart, we might say, is a union of these two motions, the motion of coming toward me in my senses, the motion of proceeding from within my center—which are just the presencing of the other in and to and before me, a presencing that takes place right where my own being innermostly unfolds its own essence. To the extent that the activity belongs to the person it is in some sense a recapitulation of the motion of the heart, but a recapitulation outward, in increasingly encompassing circles, so to speak. Parmenides pointed to the heart’s desire as extending to

---

91. For a “naive” account of this image, see Sir Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), and the rebuttal of this image from the perspective of neuroscience by M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). James Gibson presented a definitive scientific critique, and proposal of a more comprehensive theory, in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (New York: Psychology Press, 1986), but as Wolfgang Smith has correctly observed in *The Vertical Ascent* (Los Angeles: Philo-Sophia Initiative, 2020), 59–70, Gibson’s insights require the recovery of something like Aristotle’s notion of the soul. As Aquinas points out, the colors *on a wall* (*esse naturale*) and the colors *in our perception* (*esse intentionale*) are radically different (*De spiritualibus creaturis* 1 ad 11); no amount of sophistication can cross the distance between consciousness and mere physical location, between intentional being and natural being. The color on the wall does not cause the wall to *see* but only *to be seen* (ST I, q. 76, a. 1).

92. Even the late ancient materialism that dominated the Hellenistic period (in Stoicism, Skepticism, and Epicureanism) did not arrive at this level of abstraction of the self from the “outside” world, but it arguably approaches this point to the extent that it was *reductively* materialist, as one sees in Plotinus’s various criticisms.



the furthest limit of being.<sup>93</sup> This capacity to hold what is furthest away within one's innermost core is precisely what defines our humanity.

As for the "higher activities" of thought, Aristotle is less concerned with locating them within an organ, since, at least in its most theoretical acts, the intellect does not seem to depend on the body.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, there are two observations to make on this score before we end this brief exposition of Aristotle. First, to the extent that it involves physical movement, some alteration of the body, *at all*, the intellect also necessarily takes the heart as its principle *qua* animal motion.<sup>95</sup> Second, because of the fundamental unity of being in Aristotle's thought (and indeed Greek thought in general), there remains an analogy between natural movement, the κίνησις (*kinēsis*) of physics, and νόησις (*noēsis*), or what we might call spiritual movement. The highest level of thought for Aristotle is not the linear vectorality of abstract, discursive reasoning, which leads out to one disjointed conclusion after another, but is instead an essentially *contemplative* act: θεωρία (*theōria*).<sup>96</sup> But what kind of activity is contemplation? It is clearly circular rather than linear, resembling the beating of the heart rather than the pursuit of an external object, insofar as it is an abiding *with* the object contemplated in a meditative fashion, an endlessly renewed *beholding* of that upon which the mind gazes (note how the analogue of visual perception fits here), which is like a taking of the other into the movement of one's own heart. In contemplation, one *thinks* the other, not in order to come to a conclusion and move on, but in order to become ever more aware of, and ever more appreciative of, the presence of the other, a presence that simultaneously arises from without and

---

93. Parmenides, frag. 1, lines 1–2. We hear an echo of this notion in Christ's words: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). Parmenides, incidentally, uses the word θῦμος rather than the word καρδιά, but the *thumos* was understood by the ancient Greeks as having its seat in the "pericardial" region of the chest.

94. Aristotle, *On the Soul* 3.4.429a22–27, 429b25–26.

95. Even if the intellect does not depend in an *essential* way on bodily imagination to know, it does depend on it *in fact* in its exercise, and in this way the act of knowing always requires a movement of the body (and therefore of the heart). See Aristotle, *On the Soul* 3.7.431a14–17.

96. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072b17–23; *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7.

proceeds from within. One's "being-at-work-staying-oneself" is simultaneously a "being-at-work-keeping-alive-the-presence-of-the-other-to-oneself." When Aristotle describes the highest activity of the universe, namely, the "thinking upon thinking," which is the essential activity of God, the activity that sets the whole world in motion as its first principle just as the heart does within the body, he describes it not just as contemplation in the sense of an immediate, abstract knowing of an immaterial essence, but at the very same time as *life* (ζωή): "And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal."<sup>97</sup> He can do this because the spiritual/noetic and the bodily/organic are not opposites but analogous expressions of the very movement, the self-recurring circle of *physis*. To refer to God's self-thinking as the most perfect *life* is to say that its divine motion is analogous to the beating of the heart.

#### IV. THE HEART OF AQUINAS

The heart is more basic in Aquinas's thought than is often realized. Granted, the majority of the more than six thousand appearances of the word in his corpus occur in quotations from Scripture,<sup>98</sup> but the word nevertheless occurs in decisive places in his expositions of philosophical anthropology, as well as in his more theological discussions of, for example, the infusion of charity, the reception of the Holy Spirit, and the Eucharist.<sup>99</sup> Significantly, he wrote a (small) treatise devoted to the heart toward the end of his life: *De motu cordis*.

---

97. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 12.7.1072b26–31. Indeed, Aristotle insists that God's self-thinking involves *pleasure* (1072b16). Note that ζωή indicates life in its natural, or "biological," sense, in contrast to βίος, which means life in the broader sense of human existence.

98. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, "Aquinas's Natural Heart," *Early Science and Medicine* 18, no. 3 (2013): 266–90.

99. Regarding charity, see *ST* II-II, q. 24, a. 2 ad 2; regarding the Holy Spirit, see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Apostles' Creed*, a. 8; and regarding the Eucharist, see *ST* III, q. 72, a. 9 ad 2: "Sacramentum Eucharistiae . . . pertinet ad cor."

For the most part, Aquinas stands clearly within the classical philosophical tradition, of which Aristotle is a principal source;<sup>100</sup> and he essentially takes up the line of reflection we have just laid out: for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the heart is first in the order of the human being's generation as embodied soul and first in the order of operation.<sup>101</sup> Aquinas, however, differs from Aristotle in his direct discussion of the human heart in two respects: first, he gives more central attention to the place and role of the heart in the passions, which lie in the appetitive order, rather than focusing mostly on sense-perception in the cognitive order as Aristotle does (though Aquinas *also* affirms that dimension).<sup>102</sup> And, second, he emphasizes the soul's transcendence of the body more than does Aristotle. With respect to the first point, we might read Aquinas, the Christian, as integrating the Jews and the Greeks: on the one hand, the Old Testament foregrounded the heart as the place wherein the whole person is oriented toward the other; and, on the other hand, Aristotle deepened the understanding of the heart's role in recapitulating the substance of an organism and, through perceptive awareness, taking the other *in* to that self-recapitulation. With respect to the second point, we might see Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle as opening nature up to a theological dimension. Let us consider in some detail how he brings these different emphases together.

The passions, significantly, are paradigmatically "psycho-somatic" events, which is to say that they are experiences in which body and soul are inseparably intertwined, so to speak. If the principal subject of the vegetative powers (nutrition, growth, and reproduction) is the body (though of course always in union with the soul), and the subject of the spiritual powers of intellect and will is the soul specifically in its transcendence of the body

---

100. While it was long thought that Aquinas took up Aristotle in a certain opposition to the largely Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, it is now generally accepted that he took up Aristotle from within that tradition.

101. As we will explain, Aquinas gave a much more philosophically nuanced and qualified explanation of the role of the heart as the principle of the organism in the order of being. See his *Quaestiones disputatae de anima* 9ad13, 10ad6 (hereafter cited as *An.*); and *De spiritualibus* 3ad4.

102. In the *De motu cordis*, Aquinas affirms Aristotle's claim that the senses, like all motions of the organism, originate in the heart, and he also adds that they *end* there: "principium et finis omnium motuum."

(though always, more or less, in union with it)<sup>103</sup> as spirit,<sup>104</sup> the subject of the sensitive powers—both sense perceptions and the passions—is *precisely* the body-soul unity.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, if the intellect and will are essentially powers in which the person transcends himself in relation to *being*, as true or good, in contrast (more or less) to the vegetative powers, which are directed in a basic way to the individual self,<sup>106</sup> the sensitive powers represent the point at which the *body* transcends itself, opening to (universal) being, and specifically to the other, and at the same time the point at which the spiritual soul “takes root” in the body: in sense perception, the other is related to the self (taken into the self’s awareness) and in the passions the self relates itself to the other.<sup>107</sup> The relatedness to the other becomes especially clear in the passions, in which one is affected by, *moved* by, the other *prior* to one’s deliberate moving of oneself.<sup>108</sup> Aquinas highlights the connection between these basic passions, that is, experiences of the soul—love, fear, anger, and so forth—and the notion of passion as a “suffering,” an undergoing that entails being wounded.<sup>109</sup> It is important to note that, even so, and certainly contrary to prominent currents in Greek thinking, Aquinas is able to affirm the passions as *essentially* good.<sup>110</sup> There

103. For Aquinas, though the spiritual power does not depend on the body in an *essential* way for its operation, it is natural for the human spirit to operate *with* the cooperation of sense and imagination, i.e., the powers connected to the body. See, for example, *ST I*, q. 90, a. 4, and q. 89, a. 1.

104. See *ST I*, q. 97, a. 3. Aquinas defines spirit as the soul’s transcendence of the body in its intellectual powers.

105. See *ST I*, q. 78, a. 1; q. 81, a. 1; q. 81, a. 3 ad 2; I-II, q. 22, a. 3.

106. While the vegetative powers are directed to the individual in its material existence, already in its generative power it transcends its individuality, which is why Aquinas says this is the “noblest” of the vegetative powers. See *ST I*, q. 78, a. 2.

107. We make the point schematically here (and the reality is much more complex and interesting), but the principle guiding this schematic distinction is that the order of truth has its terminus in the soul (specifically, the intellect), while the order of the good has its terminus in the real thing, “outside” the soul. See the two movements characterized in *ST I*, q. 78, a. 1.

108. See *ST I-II*, q. 26, a. 3 ad 4.

109. *ST I-II*, q. 22, a. 1. On love as a “wound,” see *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 5.

110. Aquinas attributes this positive view of the passions (interpreted as ordered by reason) to Aristotle, over against the Stoics: *ST I-II*, q. 24, a. 2.

is no a priori problem for Aquinas (as there is, for example, in the Stoics) in being moved by what is other than the self.

Now, in spite of the fact that the passions are essentially “passive” in the sense that they are experiences in which one “undergoes” the other and is acted on by the other, Aquinas affirms that the passions originate essentially in the heart.<sup>111</sup> Insofar as the passions involve a movement of the body, in the subjective sense of the genitive and not only the objective sense, that motion has to be rooted in the original motion of the body, and the “first principle of movement of the body” is the heart.<sup>112</sup> We recognize here the Aristotelian insight, now extended in a more direct and explicit way to embrace the Old Testament theme of being directed, that is, moved by one’s other, in the heart’s affections. To say that the passions originate in the heart, again, is to say that the other that moves me moves me precisely from within the innermost core of my being. As Aquinas explains, this profound activity becomes apparent in the fact that all the basic passions “show up” bodily in different stirrings of the heart: “In every passion there is an increase or decrease in the natural movement of the heart . . . [whence] it derives the character of passion.”<sup>113</sup>

There is, for Aquinas, a special connection between the passion of love and the heart, because love is indeed the first of the passions, not just temporally, but as the ground of all other passions.<sup>114</sup> One of the effects of love, according to Aquinas, is a “mutual indwelling” of the lover and the object that is loved: on the one hand, the lover “seeks to possess the beloved perfectly, by penetrating into his heart,” and, on the other hand, “the beloved is contained in the lover, by being impressed on his heart.”<sup>115</sup> This is dramatically put, and seems to describe only the most intense experiences of love, but the point is quite universal. To the

---

111. See Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate* 26.3.

112. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*.

113. *ST I-II*, q. 24, a. 2 ad 2. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* [= *SCG*] 3.103.4–5: “Passions . . . occur along with a definite motion of the heart, from which there results afterwards a change of the whole body”; “by means of the motion of the heart, [apprehension] causes a change in the body that is united with the soul.”

114. *ST I-II*, q. 26, a. 2.

115. *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 2 ad 1.

extent that love is the “first motion of the will and appetite,”<sup>116</sup> and thus that *every single act without exception is done* “out of love of some sort,”<sup>117</sup> it follows that all human action, from top to bottom, arises from the heart specifically as the place wherein the beloved object dwells within us (and we dwell within the other). This means that everything we do arises from the intimate presence of an other within us.<sup>118</sup> The various themes we elaborated above obviously lie implicit here: the flesh of the heart is the place wherein the soul and body meet, and it is also the place wherein the heart expresses one’s most fundamental orientation; it is the place wherein the person encounters the other and is both moved by him and made aware, first contemplatively we might say, of his real and actual presence; to have a “heart of flesh” is to be properly open to and disposed toward—indeed, moved by—the other *in* the actual and real center of one’s being.<sup>119</sup>

The theme of the passions is one in which Aquinas might be said to extend and make explicit what is implicit and incidental in Aristotle, but an actual difference between the two thinkers lies in the relation between the heart and the soul. This difference becomes most evident when we ask the question that frames the treatise Aquinas devotes specifically to the heart: what causes the beating of the heart? A contrast between Aristotle and Aquinas emerges here.<sup>120</sup> Curiously, and arguably in some tension with

116. *ST I*, q. 20, a. 1.

117. *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 6 (emphasis added).

118. Aquinas explains the word “nature” as derived from “nativity,” i.e., the generation of movement from the presence of another, conjoined principle. See *ST I*, q. 115, a. 2. There is a connection, then, between an action’s having its foundation *in nature*, and its arising always in relation to the presence of an other. To put it in a nutshell, one can move oneself only in being moved by another. For a brief reflection on this point, see my discussion in *The Dramatic Structure of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 108–10.

119. Aquinas confirms the interpretation of the flesh of the heart being “porous” to the other in his explanation of the difference between a hardened heart and one softened by love, “whereby the heart shows itself to be ready for the entrance of the beloved” (*ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 5).

120. To be sure, Aquinas himself does not acknowledge this: in fact, he cites Aristotle in support of his position and appears in fact never to dispute Aristotle in strictly philosophical matters. This, of course, requires him to give a particular interpretation of Aristotle. We will not enter here into the question of whether and to what extent it is a faithful one.

his basic principles, Aristotle presents the heart in essentially passive terms: for him, it is the heating and subsequent cooling of the blood (and with it the walls of the heart), and the expansion and contraction the change in temperature implies, that produces the heart's characteristic motion.<sup>121</sup> The temperature of the blood is heated by the "fire," the center of warmth, in the heart, which can be modulated through perception and imagination; in a certain cooperation with "pneuma," the interaction with things in the world, which stokes the heart, also produces the organism's local motion.<sup>122</sup> There is no room here to elaborate Aristotle's sophisticated analysis of these various dimensions of animal life, but the "upshot," for our purposes, is that, for Aristotle, the heart is more *moved* than *moving*, and its moving is moreover caused largely by the material things that act upon it. As Michael Frampton puts it in his study of locomotion in Aristotle, "the heart is resilient and reactive to external forces, but not intrinsically active."<sup>123</sup> Marjorie Boyle observes that, for Aristotle, it is the physical occurrence of change in the heart (the fluctuation of temperature and therefore speed of the heartbeat) that produces the experience of the passion in the soul.<sup>124</sup> For Aquinas, it is precisely the contrary: "For the sensations of the soul are not caused by changes in the heart, but just the opposite is the case."<sup>125</sup> What is the significance of this difference?

As is well known, one of the challenges that the appropriation of Aristotle's philosophy (beyond the organon) in

---

121. Aristotle, *On Respiration* 20.479b27–480a16. The notion of the heart being the locus of warmth in the body is more interesting than may initially appear if we read it as more than a merely empirical observation. Aristotle identified the heart as the "acropolis" of the body (*Parts* 3.7.670a25). The acropolis, we might say, is the "heart" of Athens. The analogy is especially fruitful if read in light of Fustel de Coulanges's classic work *The Ancient City* (Garden City, NY: Dover, 2006), which explains that human community in the ancient world was constructed, or, perhaps better, grew up organically around the "sacred fire," which was the *presence* of God (and one's forebears) in one's midst. The home was thus built around the *hearth*, which is etymologically connected to "heart." (Aristotle also called the heart the *hestia*, or hearth, of the animal.)

122. Frampton, "Aristotle's Cardiocentric Model of Animal Locomotion," 304–15.

123. *Ibid.*, 317.

124. Boyle, "Aquinas's Natural Heart," 285.

125. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*.

the Middle Ages presented is a tendency toward “naturalism” in the body-soul relation: Aristotle had so centrally emphasized the unity of body and soul that the substantial transcendence of the soul with respect to the body threatened to become obfuscated. For Aristotle, the body and soul are not different realities that come together (somehow) in the living being, but are more like *aspects* of a single substance.<sup>126</sup> The medieval Christians were generally happy with the unity, but the eclipse of transcendence posed a problem. Whether Aristotle himself denied the immortality of the soul is notoriously ambiguous. We might say that the interpretation of the functions of the heart in the organism, to which we just alluded, seems to be evidence of a certain “collapse” of the soul into its bodily reality. However that may be with respect to Aristotle, there is no such ambiguity in Aquinas, who is perfectly clear regarding the soul’s transcendence, not simply as a radically different *aspect* of a single substance, but as a substance unto itself, even in its (relative) independence of the body.<sup>127</sup> This recognition of transcendence opens Aquinas’s causal reasoning to a “from-above” dimension. For Aquinas, it is not the blood that pumps the heart but the soul that pumps the heart; or, to put the matter no doubt more adequately, the heart itself pumps—actively, rather than as the mere passive recipient of external forces—but it does so by virtue of the soul immanent within it. Because the soul is immanent in the heart, the heart is able to carry out its function, and this in turn gives life to the rest of the organism. Aquinas quotes Aristotle to make this point: “With the soul present in the principle of the body, the other parts live and perform their own special work as nature made them.”<sup>128</sup> The soul is the principle of the heart, which in turn is the principle of all the motions of the organism. As Aquinas puts it, “The motion of the heart is a natural result of the soul,” and “the heart is both the beginning and the end of all of the animal’s movements.”<sup>129</sup>

---

126. *Soul* 2.1.412b6–9, and 413a4–8.

127. *ST I*, q. 75, a. 6.

128. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*. Aquinas is referring to Aristotle, *On the Movement of Animals* 10.703a30–703b2.

129. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*: “*Cor [est] principium et finis omnium motuum qui sunt in animali.*”



While it may seem strange to say that the soul is what most basically moves the heart in its moving the rest of the organism, this is simply the implication of the more commonly recognized notion that the soul gives life to the body; the body is a living reality only by virtue of the soul dwelling within it. We see here one of the implications of the point made earlier, namely, that the heart represents a kind of “hinge” between first and second actuality: the heart, with its self-recapitulative motion, which establishes the being as a living reality (first actuality), is the principle of all the body’s operations (second actuality). Aquinas moves decisively beyond any materialist reduction of the soul by stressing that, because of its perfect transcendence, it can be immanent as a whole within every part of the body,<sup>130</sup> and therefore it does not need to have its presence to the various parts of the body mediated through, and in that sense apportioned by, the heart.<sup>131</sup> Yet Aquinas nevertheless affirms a primacy of the heart even in the essential order: “The soul is the form of the body, and principally of the heart [*forma . . . principaliter cordis*].”<sup>132</sup> Once again, we see that the heart is first in the order of *esse* and first in the order of operation.

The transcendence of the soul, even with respect to the heart, is, as Boyle rightly explains, what allows Aquinas to emphasize the more directly voluntary actions of the person, originating in the intellect above and beyond the body, which Aquinas is thus able to affirm more clearly than Aristotle.<sup>133</sup> Moreover,

---

130. *ST I*, q. 76, a. 8.

131. See *An.* 9.

132. This is why he can say, in a perfectly nonmaterialistic way, that it is the soul that contains the body rather than the reverse: *ST I*, q. 76, a. 3. The only way to reconcile these affirmations—namely, that the soul is principally the form of the heart but also that the soul dwells wholly in each part of the body—is to say that the heart mediates an immediate relationship to the soul as a transcendent principle. One might explain this by analogy with the priest and the faithful, or the ruler and the subjects.

133. The human soul “has an operation and a power in which corporeal matter has no share whatsoever. This power is called the intellect” (*ST I*, q. 75, a. 2; and q. 76, a. 1). It is generally agreed that Aquinas affirms the *will* as a distinct power of the soul more clearly than does Aristotle. On this, and for a general account of freedom in Aquinas, see my *Retrieving Freedom: The Christian Appropriation of Classical Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 225–77.

it allows him to see a plurality of vital principles in the living person (as a “political” order of the soul, in contrast to the evidently “monarchical” tendencies in Avicenna and Albert the Great, for instance).<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, this does not mean that such spiritual activities of intellect and will are somehow separated from the embodied person, as “floating” somewhere above the body and having to find some way to connect: such a problematic vision is paradigmatically expressed in the Cartesian separation of the *res cogitans* from the *res extensa*, but is arguably already present *in nuce* in the medieval Franciscan tendency to interpret the body and soul as two distinct substances.<sup>135</sup> Seeing love at the origin of acts of will, and as having its seat in the heart, roots even the most voluntary acts firmly *in nature*, in a dimension that is not subject to the *liberum arbitrium*.<sup>136</sup> In fact, Aquinas insists that “the principle of every human action is natural,” and that this natural origin does not impede but supports, and thus in some way reinforces, the free voluntary character of human action. The natural desire for happiness is the ground of human acts, and Aquinas connects the naturalness of this desire specifically with the heart. The fact that the acts of will are rooted in the desire for happiness means that “these movements can still be voluntary, while the first movement, that of the heart, is natural.”<sup>137</sup> For Aquinas, even if certain activities originate in the soul in its transcendence

---

134. For the sense of the soul’s order as “political or regal,” as opposed to “despotic,” see *ST I*, q. 81, a. 3 ad 2. It is precisely the *transcendence* of the soul that allows the heart to represent the soul’s governance in an effective but nonexclusive way. The tendency to make the heart the exclusive principle in the body would thus tend to correspond to a compromise of the soul’s genuine transcendence. For the sense of the heart controlling the whole soul on its own, see Avicenna, *De anima* 5.8, as cited in Boyle, “Aquinas’s Natural Heart,” 284n81. Cf. Albert the Great (who follows Avicenna on this point), *Metaphysica* 5.1.1, as cited in Boyle, “Aquinas’s Natural Heart,” 285n82.

135. See *SCG* 2.56. The tendency toward an anthropological dualism is evident, for example, in Peter Olivi (see Robert Pasnau, “Olivi on the Metaphysics of Soul,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 6, no. 2 [1997]: 109–32), if not already in Scotus and Bonaventure. See also Gordon Wilson, “Henry of Ghent and René Descartes on the Unity of Man,” *Franziskanische Studien* 64 (1982): 97–110.

136. For the proper distinction between the *voluntas*, which has a natural love of the good, and the *liberum arbitrium*, which makes a choice on the basis of this natural love, see *ST I*, q. 83, a. 4.

137. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*.

of the body, they nevertheless pass through the heart, as it were, to the extent that they involve the body at all, and indeed to the extent that they are *natural*, which, if they are acts of the body-soul unity that is the person, they inevitably do and are. There is no human act that does not have a natural dimension, a given context from within which whatever is voluntary in the will proceeds.<sup>138</sup> The acts of will arise from the heart, just as the passions and the imagination's phantasms, and in that respect they arise from within the flesh.

But even more fundamentally, it is natural, according to Aquinas, for the human soul to be embodied.<sup>139</sup> While it is possible for the soul to exist in separation from the body, because the soul exists by virtue of itself and therefore cannot *not* exist,<sup>140</sup> the separated soul is in an unnatural condition.<sup>141</sup> In a profoundly significant formulation, Aquinas says that the reason that the essentially transcendent soul, which possesses existence (*esse*) by virtue of its own essence, is able to exist *truly as one* with the body, which is not simply "tacked on" to an otherwise separately existing thing, is that the soul shares the existence that is intrinsic to its essence with the body; we might say that it does so as *imago Dei*, in (analogous) imitation of God's creation of the world, whereby God gives the *esse* that he *is* in a certain sense to what is other than himself. "The soul communicates that existence in which it subsists to the corporeal matter, out of which and the intellectual soul there results unity of existence; so that

---

138. In sharp contrast, for example, to the Franciscans, such as Scotus (see Bonnie Kent, *The Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Late 13th Century* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995]), it is interesting to note that Aquinas points to the sensible appetite, i.e., the *heart*, as the subject of moral virtue: if the intellect is the subject of virtue absolutely speaking, the sensible appetite is the subject of *human* virtue, and as such the place wherein the act of appetite is "consummated" (*ST* I-II, q. 56, a. 4, and a. 5 ad 1). As Gustav Siewerth points out, the sensitive appetite means essentially "the heart" (*Der Mensch und sein Leib* [Freiburg: Johannes Verlag-Einsiedeln, 1953], 58).

139. "It is inconsistent with the perfection of the production of things that God should have made either the body without the soul or the soul without the body, since each is part of human nature" (*ST* I, q. 91, a. 4 ad 3).

140. *An.* 1 ad 1, and 14 ad 11; *ST* I, q. 75, a. 6.

141. "To be united to the body belongs to the soul by reason of itself" (*ST* I, q. 76, a. 1 ad 6).

the existence of the whole composite is also the existence of the soul."<sup>142</sup> It is crucial to note that this does *not* mean that the soul "first" exists and then, after it possesses in itself its own existence, gives a share of that existence to the body; instead, the soul "naturally" exists only as already giving its existence to the body. This is precisely the way in which it receives its *esse* from God.

The implications of this point are quite stunning in relation to our overarching theme: it is the very nature of the soul to give what belongs to it by essence, what is most intimate to it, namely its *esse*, to the body, its radically different, material "other," so that the two might become one (in) flesh.<sup>143</sup> This union, which we might truly, though of course analogously, describe as nuptial, occurs most basically within the heart. The soul is naturally ordered to embodiment, the taking on of flesh, and the soul becomes flesh *principaliter* in the heart—or indeed the heart itself *is* the flesh of the soul, the place wherein the soul first *has place*, the place wherein the soul "principally" gives its very own existence (and not just some "part" of itself) to the body, wherein it thus "enters" into space and time, wherein it makes itself manifest in the world, the place wherein it reveals its innermost being, declaring it, so to speak, to the body, and, in and through the body, to the world. To use Old Testament language, the heart is the place wherein the soul "fleshes," both disclosing itself and thus "real-izing" itself, coming to completion. To use New Testament language—in an analogous way, it must be stressed—the heart is (something like) the incarnation of the logos of the soul, or indeed the incarnation of the logos that the soul essentially is.<sup>144</sup>

---

142. *ST I*, q. 76, a. 1 ad 5.

143. "Among all [principles] the act of existing [*esse*] is that which most immediately and intimately belongs to things. . . . Hence the form which gives matter its act of existing must be understood to come to matter prior to anything else, and to be present in it more immediately than anything else, because matter receives its act of existing from a form. . . . However, the soul by its very essence is the form of the body giving it its act of existing. Hence it is united to the body essentially and directly" (*An.* 9 ad 18).

144. Aquinas insists that the soul is an intelligible principle, but *precisely as such* it is the form of the body (*ST I*, q. 76, a. 1). Note that there is a kind of "scandal of particularity" in identifying this bodily organ as a meaningful center that is reminiscent of the scandal of particularity in the Incarnation, and indeed of the communication of grace through the sacraments. These all belong together.

It is interesting, in relation to this point, to review some of the dimensions of the heart that we have elaborated thus far, and see what new light is cast on them. We have talked about the presence of the other to (and in and before) the self that occurs in the passions. The dimension that has opened up in Aquinas adds a new depth to the matter: the heart is not simply the center of the physical organism, first in the order of generation and in the order of operation, but is the center of the human being *simply*. As the first expression of the soul, in which the soul gives what is of its essence, namely, its being (*esse*), the heart is in a way the center of the soul, the event of the *esse* that realizes the human person, so to speak. We might draw a connection, thus, between the heart and the subsistence of the person. To the extent that the heart thus implicates the human person's *esse*, it follows that for the person's other to "enter into" him through the passions is therefore to enter in some sense—without any confusion, it is essential to add<sup>145</sup>—into the very *esse* of the person, which is what is most intimate to him. It is to coexist with him in perhaps a deeper sense than we generally recognize, to share with him a "common being" (*esse commune*). In this respect, the equiprimordiality of substance and relation, the "arrival" into being of the person at once with the other(s) to whom he is related, is revealed in the heart. And if we add that God, who creates the human soul immediately,<sup>146</sup> is present in a special way to the human soul *in* its essence,<sup>147</sup> we can say that the heart, in which the soul "resides," in which the person encounters all that is other than himself, and in which he is most profoundly open to God, reveals that these three relationships—to oneself, one's neighbor, and God, the three dimensions of the essence of Christian love—are inevitably bound up with each other. In our discussion

---

145. Because *esse* is an ontological principle that transcends essence—or, to use Ferdinand Ulrich's language, because it is "superessential" (see *Homo Abyssus*)—two beings can share in *esse* without any compromise of their distinct forms. Of course, the metaphysical details of this would have to be worked out, which is not possible in the present context.

146. *ST I*, q. 90, a. 3.

147. To say that God is present *in* the essence does not mean, of course, that he is constitutively part *of* the essence. On God's special presence to man, see the discussion in my forthcoming book, *God and the City* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2023).

of the heart in Aristotle we saw that, in perception, the other simultaneously presents itself before the soul through the senses and, so to speak, wells up from within the soul. Affirming all of this, we can include another dimension that emerges with the introduction of the soul as a substantial form that communicates its *esse* to the body, principally in the heart, but, in and through the heart, immediately to the whole. There are three dimensions that stand out in the encounter between a person and what is other to him: the encounter arrives at once *from without*, as mediated by the senses; arises *from within*, as proceeding from the heart; and descends *from above*, as being received, along with one's own existence, in and through the soul and its created *esse*.<sup>148</sup> This last dimension also makes evident that God is always at least implicitly present in the encounter, and that God—especially the incarnate God of Jesus Christ, the God in the flesh—can in actual truth be the *tertium inter nos* that effects a true Christian friendship.<sup>149</sup>

Thus, the heart is a point of intersection between the soul and the body; it is, as the seat of the (sensible) passions, a point of intersection between the spiritual and the vegetative powers; as the seat specifically of *love*, it lies between the cognitive/apprehensive and the appetitive orders of the powers;<sup>150</sup> as the original movement of subsistence, it lies at the intersection between first actuality (substance) and second actuality (operation); combining the last two, it represents the point of intersection between the self (substance) and the other (relation); and, finally, in a manner

---

148. An extraordinary meditation on the phrase “God has given you to me,” can be found in John Paul II, “A Meditation on Givenness,” written in 1994, but not published until 2006. Available in English translation in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 871–83.

149. See the opening line of book one of Aelred of Rievaulx's *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 2010), 55 (emphasis original): “You and I are here, and I hope that Christ is between us as a third. Now no one else is present to disturb the peace or to interrupt our friendly conversation. No voice, no noise invades our pleasant retreat. Yes, most beloved, *open your heart* now and pour whatever you please into the ears of a friend. Gratefully let us welcome the place, the time, and the leisure.”

150. Note that this position also connects the heart in a particular way with beauty, which is so to speak the point of integration of goodness and truth. This argument was made elsewhere: see my “Love and Beauty, the ‘Forgotten Transcendental’ in Thomas Aquinas,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 334–56.

we have simply identified but would require more elaboration elsewhere, it is the privileged place of encounter between the human person and God.

But our earlier reflections allow us to see yet another decisive thing in this respect: if the soul takes flesh in the heart by virtue of its essence, its inner nature, and the flesh represents a kind of “real-ization,” a coming to perfection in (public) significance—and if, on the other hand, the heart has a special role in the passions, through which the self is moved by the other—we can infer that this being moved by the other, the stirring in one’s depths by the presence of the other, this receptive openness by which one takes into oneself what the other communicates of *himself*, is never just a means to some subsequent, deliberate act, but already represents a kind of perfection in itself. The encounter with the other is part of the meaning of the soul’s taking flesh in the heart. It is therefore not an intrusion on the self but a proliferation of the soul, a communion that gives life. The heart, we recall, is simultaneously the source of life and the place of meaningful personal encounter. Communion is a blessing, in the strong sense of the word.<sup>151</sup> In this sense, being moved by a reality other than oneself is a perfection and more than a perfection.<sup>152</sup>

We can say something similar with respect to sense perception. The heart is the “common sense,” or in any event the “common *sensorium*” of the person, the place wherein the various acts of the different sense organs come together and *therefore* have their proper origin. The heart is therefore closely connected, as we saw, to the imagination, the power that synthesizes the spectrum of experience into a “phantasm” (which, let us recall, is not a separate picture that may or may not correspond to anything in the outside world, but is the *presence* of the other precisely as having been received in, and proceeding from, the sensitive, or essentially psychosomatic, powers of the heart). Along the lines of what we just said regarding the passions, we can see that this

---

151. For this sense, see Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 182–212.

152. We can recall Iris Murdoch’s description of love here: “Love is the difficult realization that something other than oneself is real” (“The Sublime and the Good,” in *Existentialists and Mystics* [New York: Penguin, 1997], 215). We see here the perfection of love, which is in principle fruitful, making its presence felt in a way that Aquinas describes as “wounding” the self. Again, see *ST I-II*, q. 28, a. 5.

dwelling of the other in the imagination, and therefore in the heart, is not in the first place a mere means that enables conceptual knowledge and then judgment. It is, instead, and for the reasons already given, itself a perfection, a realization, and therefore a place of rest, so to speak. This affirmation of the distinct perfection of *phantasmari* does not in the least, it is important to add, exclude the proper instrumentality of sense experience for the various spiritual activities of knowing and willing, but it nevertheless allows these to be seen more as a kind of *fruit* of what is already complete in itself. This point, incidentally, gives reasons to think of poetry, music, and, in short, the infinitely various experiences of beauty, as intrinsically good (and true) in themselves, without needing to be justified by some further use.<sup>153</sup>

Here we see how the “contemplative” activity of the intellect, its remaining with the other appreciatively and affirmingly, which we briefly discussed above, moves naturally, as it were, into the center of the soul’s activities, and we see more clearly how closely this abiding is connected to sense experience, properly understood.<sup>154</sup> The classical tradition, both Greek and Latin, recognizes that the highest activity of thought is not a reasoning to conclusions, in one act after the other (*ratio*), but is the simple act of beholding, the direct intellectual grasp (*intellectus*), in which the other remains present to the self, just as the self does to the other.<sup>155</sup> If there is a certain tendency in the Greek tradition to “internalize” the other so completely that the abiding presence tends to get eclipsed,<sup>156</sup> the

---

153. Thomas Pfau has recently published what promises to be the definitive study of the significance of the image in Western thought (and imagination): *Incomprehensive Certainty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022).

154. Compare this to the beginning of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which connects the (essentially contemplative) delight we take in our senses with the affirmation of knowledge as a good in itself, and thus as essentially free (1.1).

155. See the classic text from Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 12–13.

156. Note that Aristotle, because he does not have the benefit of the revelation of the Trinity, has to reduce the apparent difference in self-thinking thought (between thinker and thought) into the pure act of possession: “The possession rather than the receptivity is the divine element which thought seems to contain” (*Metaphysics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*,



presence of the other is more clearly evident among the Latins, especially those, beginning with Augustine, who receive the classical tradition only within the transforming light of faith. For the scholastics, the movement we described above, intimated in Aristotle, becomes quite explicit: the taking *in* of the other coincides with the other's movement *out*; to know a thing is, indeed, to impress its intelligible species onto the (possible or potential) intellect, but this achievement of knowledge cannot occur without the simultaneous "procession of the word," the birth of the "concept" from the intellect as something distinct from it. This word, which we might say harbors the abiding presence of the other, now as known, arises from the very depths of the knower as an "interior" word, but has what we might call a natural inclination to be spoken *externally*, given the *flesh* of voice, so to speak (and in a more extended sense, of ink, of melody, of paint, of stone, and so forth).<sup>157</sup> The Latins had a distinctive name for this interior word, which proceeds from the innermost core of the person in his act of knowing what is other than himself. They called it the *verbum cordis*, the "word of the heart."<sup>158</sup>

#### V. THE SPEAKING OF THE HEART

The reference to the word finally brings us back to the point from which our reflections began. In the New Testament, Jesus says that eating unclean food does not defile a person as much as speaking unclean words: "Do you not understand that nothing that enters a person from the outside [τὸ ἔξωθεν] can defile him? For it does not enter into his heart [εἰς τὴν καρδίαν] but into his stomach" (Mk 7:18–19). The comparison to food here is interesting, because it suggests that, though unclean words and the "evil

---

12.7.1072b22–24). Plotinus, of course, reduces the highest to pure unity, which admits no difference whatsoever.

157. It would be interesting in this context to reflect on Aquinas's affirmation of declaration, or manifestation, as the fruit of the union (*intellectus et rei*) that defines truth in its formal sense (*De veritate* 1.1). See my discussion of this in *The Dramatic Structure of Truth*, 230–37.

158 Hans Arens, "'Verbum Cordis': Zur Sprachphilosophie des Mittelalters," *Historiographia Linguistica* 70, no. 1–2 (January 1980): 13–27.

thoughts” they express (οἱ διαλογισμοὶ οἱ κακοὶ)<sup>159</sup> arise principally “from within, out of a person’s heart” (ἔσωθεν . . . ἐκ τῆς καρδίας), and proceed outward (ἐκπορεύονται) to the other, the words that come forth also in some sense *enter into* the heart from which they proceed. In spiritual matters, “entering into” and “arising out of” are not mutually exclusive movements.<sup>160</sup> Matthew’s gospel elaborates the image from Mark: words proceed forth “out of the abundance of the heart” (Mt 12:34), revealing the inner truth of a person in a decisive way. Words are the *fruit* of the heart, an outpouring of its treasure (ἐκ τοῦ θησαυροῦ, of its “thesaurus”), whether good or evil.

Let us consider the aptness of this image in relation to our reflections in the preceding parts of the essay. The heart is the principal point at which the spiritual soul becomes flesh. A spoken word is a spiritual meaning that has taken on the flesh of imagination, and ultimately the flesh of voice, some external sign with a “reality” of its own in space and time. In this respect, there is an evident kinship between words and the heart. The speaking of words is a giving flesh to meaning in imitation of the soul’s “incarnation” in this central organ of the body. And let us recall that this imitation is not a mere external resemblance. Instead, the speaking of words is a recapitulation of the movement of the heart, the “vertical” movement of entry into being and the “horizontal” movement of unfolding in space and time; it is thus in a certain respect an extension of the heart, the heart’s taking flesh further out beyond itself in relation to the other: words are the “fruit” of the heart.

But, indeed, words reveal the heart not simply in the particular sense of disclosing *this* person’s secret thoughts; we can also say that the *nature* of language reveals the *nature* of the heart. Words are essentially metaphorical, not only in the sense that they express a meaning by means of some concrete image—the word “companion,” for example, expresses the concept of friendship by means of the image of two people breaking bread together in

---

159. Notice that the word for “thoughts,” οἱ διαλογισμοὶ, indicates etymologically a logos that is stretched out, so to speak, between two people.

160. Consider the story in John (4:1–42) wherein Jesus offers to give to the Samaritan woman the water of life to drink (4:10), the reception of which is a spring that irrupts *from within her*. This is God precisely as *spirit* (4:24).

the context of a journey (com-pan-ion), and “breaking bread” is an etymological redundancy, since both words appear to come from the root *bhreg-*, meaning, “to divide up and distribute”<sup>161</sup>—but the very reality of language is the expressing of such images in a medium that is of a radically different order, in the “flesh” of vocal or written (or gestural, etc.) signs. Language not only *uses* metaphors but is itself *metaphorical* in its essence. But this is just what the heart is: the “translation” of the spiritual soul into the flesh of the body. The *heart itself is a metaphor*, a real, “flesh and blood” metaphor—a transition point that carries over (*metapherein*) one reality (spirit) into the terms and conditions of another (flesh). Or, better, the heart “metaphors” by its essence; in every beat it recapitulates the spiritual person in space and time, along with his relations to others in the intimacy of being. The heart is the place wherein this profound event breaks forth into the visibility of the body. If this seems to be a strange notion, it is once again simply a more reflective and philosophical way of saying that the heart keeps us alive. But we now know that life itself is not a merely biological matter but essentially includes relationship—to the world, to other people, and ultimately to God—and human relationship inevitably happens *in words*.

In this respect, it seems that it is no accident that all languages apparently have an abundance of metaphors concerning this vital organ: not only does the heart lend itself naturally to metaphor, but language, which is essentially metaphorical, bears a special affinity with the heart. The expression “heart of flesh” is especially relevant here, insofar as it underscores the bodily dimension of the heart’s function, and the perfection that this realization in the body represents. Flesh matters; *matter* matters. Speaking is not (only) a movement away from material conditions but simultaneously an entry into them, an embrace of material conditions, a transcendence of matter *in matter*.<sup>162</sup> By now, it should be clear

---

161. It is also possible that the word “bread” derives from *bhreu-*, meaning to boil or bubble, perhaps referencing the action of yeast.

162. This point is reminiscent (not incidentally) of Friedrich Schiller’s definition of beauty: the overcoming of form by form. See my discussion in “An Aesthetics of Freedom: Schiller and the Living Gestalt,” in *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 49–110. In other words, beauty “occurs” when the apparent limitations of form are “transformed” into expressions of

how much more comes to expression, comes to realization, in the phrase “heart of flesh” than in the more abstract language of “openness” or some equivalent. The “earthy,” image-laden language in the Old Testament not only communicates a detachable meaning, which could be translated by other such words, though of course it *also* does this. Rather, it brings forth this meaning in what we might call an organic way; it communicates the meaning along with a way of being, specifically the profoundly human way of being as fundamentally embodied spirit, able to *present* meaning and *be present in* what is meant, only as a whole person in flesh and blood. Such language both reinforces our human nature and directs it to its proper destiny. To speak of hearts of flesh is itself to give flesh to the heart, and thus to help realize the human way of being. It is to give, and to receive, life. This “bodying forth of meaning,” which is as important as *what* is said, gets lost when we separate form and content and conceive language as a wholly abstract medium “mechanically” effecting the transmission of equally abstract content. One might be able to be “open” in the “social media” that occupy “cyberspace,” but one cannot have a “heart of flesh” there, insofar as the point of the medium is to render the flesh, with its essential limitations, irrelevant. The normalization of such a mode of communication represents a greater affront to our humanity than we tend to realize. It is an affront because, as Plato insisted, the word is essentially organic, and has its paradigmatic form in its being spoken in the real presence of a face-to-face encounter, in flesh and blood, in which it can be “alive and ensouled” (ζῶντα καὶ ἐμψυχον), and so able to be “written into the soul” (γράφεται ἐν τῇ . . . ψυχῇ) of the hearer in a life-giving way.<sup>163</sup> To have a heart of flesh is to be genuinely capable of metaphor, capable of real speaking, allowing one’s meaning to enter fully into words.

Far from being merely the “seat of the affections,”<sup>164</sup> or the center of our “emotional life,”<sup>165</sup> the heart is the home of the

---

what exceeds form. Here we see the essence of language, and yet another argument why “poetry” is the oldest form of language.

163. Plato, *Phaedrus* 276a.

164. Dietrich von Hildebrand privileges this dimension in his book *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (1965; South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007).

165. Beáta Tóth foregrounds the “emotional” significance of the heart in

word, the place from which language arises and to which it goes. The heart is the *principium et finis* of all human action (*De motu cordis*), and the action that defines the *zoon echon logon* is of course *legein*, the generation of the logos, the thought-filled word. It is therefore not enough to say that “the heart has its reasons that reason cannot know,”<sup>166</sup> however true that may be; instead, the heart is essentially a matter of reason, as logos, and reason has its essential root in the heart. Explaining Origen’s view, Benedict XVI writes, “It is the Logos which is at the center of us all—without our knowing—for the center of man is the heart, and in the heart there is the ἡγεμονικόν—the guiding energy of the whole, which is the Logos.”<sup>167</sup> The heart of flesh is not just a heart disposed to being moved by an other, but is in particular a tablet on which the other can write—the “other” being God above all. And what God writes is a word that has arisen from his own heart: *verbum cordis*.<sup>168</sup> In this respect, in fact, all language is ultimately a speaking of heart to heart—*cor ad cor loquitur*, to use the phrase that the great master of language, Cardinal John Henry Newman, adopted as his life’s motto. All language has this form because it is an “incarnation” of meaning in the flesh of the word, which is sent out abroad, from which journey it does not return without bearing some fruit, and prospering the thing in which it is received.<sup>169</sup> Speech arises from the “abundance of the heart,” which is to say that it is the exuberance of life and its most proper purpose is to give life, so that we might have it in abundance. The word bears fruit, like the grain of wheat, by dying into the soul of the heart that receives it, so to speak, wherein it is “resurrected” as genuinely spiritual meaning. This meaning

---

her recent book *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Towards a Theological Anthropology of the Heart* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

166. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1995), no. 423.

167. Benedict XVI, *Behold the Pierced One*, 67, citing Origen, *In Joannes* 94, 18.

168. According to Aquinas, the eternal Son proceeds first as the Word “in the heart of the Father” (*in corde patris*), and then, like a word that has been vocalized, is made perceptible to us in the flesh in the Incarnation (SCG 4.46.2).

169. Is 55:11. The prophet compares the fructifying word to the rain from heaven that makes the earth flourish.

is not “pure,” that is, abstract spirit, but more like a “spiritualized body” (*sōma pneumatikon*, 1 Cor 15:44), which ever after continues to bear in its spiritual flesh the marks of its history, its natural origin, its embodied sense. The flesh is never left behind. In this speaking and listening, this entry of meaning into the flesh and this rising from the flesh as spirit, true “dia-logue” between one person and another—*cor ad cor loquitur*—itself exhibits the rhythm of a beating heart, a systole and diastole, in which the two are joined in the concrete word (*tertium inter nos*), made one with hearts of flesh. □

*D.C. SCHINDLER* is professor of metaphysics and anthropology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America.