THE SYMBOLIC FORMATION OF THE HEART: ON THE ART OF CONVERSION

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"A good education is a soul-shaking discovery of what was always-already there, always-already given—which is precisely what it means to receive the real as a gift."

Toward the end of what is no doubt the most famous "image of education" in Western literature, Plato's Allegory of the Cave,[1] the Greek philosopher expresses the essence of this great human endeavor in a succinct formulation: Education is the "art of the turning-around, or conversion [*technē . . . tēs periagōgēs*],"[2] of the whole soul, from the shadows of derivative trivialities to the bright forms of original truth, which shine in the light of the Good, the supreme principle of all things. In my brief presentation, I propose to reflect on this characterization of education,

1. Plato, *Republic*, 514a–521b. Translations are from Allan Bloom's: Plato, *Republic* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

2. *Rep.*, 518d.

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both to uncover its anthropological presuppositions and to gain some insight into the nature of this noble task.

Let us begin by asking what it means for a "whole" soul to turn around. There is no scholarly consensus on the details, but Plato seems, by the phrase we cited, to be referring to a mechanism in ancient Greek theater, the "periaktos," by which the entire setting on a stage could be changed at once.[3] Whatever the precise nature of the mechanism, what is indicated in this image is quite literally a dramatic shift in perspective, in which not just one item or another, or even many items, but *everything* changes, from the bottom up. We are justified in calling the change radical, because we are talking of a movement in something like the very *ground* in which all things have their roots (*radix*). Referring to the image depicting the prospective students imprisoned in the depths of the cave, Plato specifies that the eye is not able to attain the desired vision unless the *whole body* is turned around, and infers that, by analogy, education requires a movement of *the whole soul*. Before we address the nature of this change and ask *from* what and *to* what it marks the transition, let us first pause for a moment to inquire into the movement's conditions of possibility.

Plato, as I said, insists that this *conversio* involves the whole soul; we would certainly want to make explicit, here, something only implied in Plato's description, namely, that the whole soul cannot be turned around without the body coming along with it, which is to say that what turns around in education is the entire person, body and soul, the integrated unity of the two taken as a whole. The importance of this point will become evident in a moment. Now, to speak of the turning around of the whole person implies two remarkable things: first, that the person can be said to be fundamentally *oriented*, or in other words that the soul is disposed at its root in one direction or another; and, second, that the person has a *center*, a point around which it is able to turn precisely as a whole.

Plato does not himself allude to a central point in the soul in his depiction of education, and indeed he does not elaborate the conversion in much detail, which means that, as often

3. Edward A. Langhaus, "Machinery," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

happens in reading Platonic dialogues, we are left to work out some of these basic questions for ourselves. So let us ask ourselves: what is the anthropological point around which the person turns? What is the proper *center* of man? The most obvious candidate for this role, I believe, is the *heart*, and I want to propose that reflecting on the heart precisely as fulfilling this role gives us a special insight into its nature. It should be clear that, in proposing this, I am departing in a significant way from Plato's own anthropology, and instead will be following the Aristotelian line on this point, especially as taken up by Aquinas.[4] It is common in our day, first of all, to conceive of the heart simply as a metaphor, which is to say a stand-in for, a figurative representative of, some abstract idea. The "idea" that the heart typically represents for us in this metaphorical way is that of feeling or sentiment. The heart, from this perspective, is the metaphorical center, not of the person per se, the unity of body and soul oriented in some basic way to the other, but simply of the emotional life. We often refer to the heart when we wish to speak of intense emotional and personal experiences. This is essentially (with some important qualification) how it is characterized, for example, by no doubt the best known philosopher of the heart of the twentieth century, Dietrich von Hildebrand.[5] Likewise, although Pope Pius XII referred to the heart as the "noblest part" of man in his encyclical on the devotion to the Sacred Heart, *Haurietis aquas* (1956), he explained it as "living and throbbing . . . with the power of feeling, and ever throbbing with the emotions and affections of [the] soul" (53). But it is not clear why feeling, emotion, and affections should be man's noblest part. Affirming the truth of these characterizations, let us nevertheless dig deeper.

Aristotle identifies the heart as the "first mover of any sanguineous organism."[6] Many of us are familiar with the Aristotelian conception, decisive for the whole classical tradition, of

4. Plato is said to have had a "cephalocentric" view, in contrast to the Aristotelian "cardiocentric" view: see Eliasy Engelhardt, "Cerebral Localization of the Mind and Higher Functions: The Beginnings," *Neuropsychologia* 12 (3) (2018): 321–25.

5. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2020).

6. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 3.4.666a20–23; cf., *Generation of Animals*, 2.741b15–24.

the Prime Mover, which sets in motion the entire cosmos, not in a purely extrinsic or mechanical fashion, as the initial domino to fall, but in a way that continues to govern what it moves. That is to say, the *archē*, or first cause, is the *archōn*, the ruling principle, an abiding source that communicates actuality and so in-forms the movements of the heavenly, and eventually also the terrestrial, bodies. For Aristotle, what the Prime Mover is to the cosmos, so is the heart to every animal, sub-human or human. The heart is the first mover, the animating principle, of the human being, not necessarily in the chronological sense, strictly empirically considered, but nevertheless in a metaphysical sense. Every activity of every part of the body, and indeed of every dimension of the person as a living whole, is enabled by what we might call the founding activity of the heart.[7] This activity, we could say, is the actuality of all of a living being's acts; it is what enables each of the various organs and vital systems of the body to carry out its own proper operation. In this respect, the heart bears a striking analogy, in Thomistic metaphysics, to *esse*, the universal act of being, which Aquinas describes as "the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections."[8] In both, we have an "activity," the essence of which is to enables activities other than itself.

This analogy is fitting insofar as, to quote Aquinas's translation of a phrase in Aristotle, *vivere viventibus est esse*,[9] "to live" is the "to be" of living things, and the beating of the heart is the paradigmatic expression of *vivere*, the act of being alive. It is only by virtue of such a founding act that we can in fact speak of the human being as one, as an actual whole, as a *per se unum*, as opposed to an accidental congeries of discrete activities or elements. To be sure, it is the soul, understood as the substantial form, that accounts for the unity of the living being, but, according to Aquinas, if the soul is the form of the body, it is *principaliter cordis*, principally the form of the heart.[10] We ought to say that

7. For a longer discussion of the themes we will treat in the following few paragraphs, see D.C. Schindler, "Hearts of Flesh: A Meditation on Human Nature and the Language that Gives Life," *Communio* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 453–506.

8. Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9.

9. Aquinas, *I Sent* d. 33, q. 1, a. 1 ad 1.

10. Aquinas, *De motu cordis*.

the soul gives form to the body, it makes the body to be a living whole, a single organism, in and through the mediation of the heart. In this respect, the heart is something like the effective representative of the soul in the physical order of the body. To be sure, it is not the only one: as Aquinas says in the *Summa*, the soul is wholly present in each part,[11] and there is something one could say about the significance of each organ (especially the brain) but it remains the case that the heart is central as the first mover of the living organism precisely as living.

Now, the motions of the heart include not just the vital activities that keep the human being alive, but also the motions introduced into the organism through its (constant) encounters with what is other than itself. Aquinas characterizes the heart as the seat of the passions, this latter word indicating etymologically anything meaningful that enters into the person from the outside: *passion* from *patior*, to undergo, to suffer.[12] (Incidentally, the classical word "passion" thus indicates something radically different from the modern word "emotion," which means a movement emanating from the inside-out.) Aquinas affirms that every passion, which is an event of the body-soul composite—i.e., neither of the body alone nor of the spiritual soul alone, but of both precisely in their unity—involves some disturbance of the heart.[13] In other words, every passion reverberates in the heart's own motion. To say that it is the heart that moves in the passions is to say that the encounter with the other takes place in the activity that founds the human being as a living whole: it enters into the core of the person. This point might be missed if we were simply to think of the heart as a mere metaphor for our "emotional life."

Let us dig even deeper. We have affirmed that the heart is the prime mover of the body of the human organism, and, at the same time, the place wherein the person is moved by *the other*. But we qualified this by saying it is moved by the "meaningful" other: the passions are distinguished from the merely corporeal reception of what is other that we see, for example, in breathing or eating or drinking. Clearly, these motions, because they are

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

12. *ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 1.

13. Ibid., q. 24, a. 2, ad 2; see also *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 3.

vital motions, inevitably involve the heart; but in this case they do so simply as the life-sustaining operations of the organism into which new material is, so to speak, incorporated. What is distinctive about the passions is that, in this case, the other that is received into the self remains other, and the self in these experiences *responds* to the other; the other *represents* something to the self, which adapts itself accordingly.[14] In this respect, the reality goes beyond, it bears on the self in a manner that is more than simple material presence; its weight is a matter of *significance*. To put the point in classical language, every passion involves not just the body, but body *and* soul, in their unity. The point I wish to draw out directly from this is that it reveals the heart to be more than a merely physical organ, but at the same time a function of the soul as well. We indicated as much a moment ago, but it is a point worth pondering. Once we see that the heart is not merely a bodily organ, but an organ belonging specifically to the body-soul unity, this opens up a further dimension of the reality of the heart, namely, its distinctively spiritual dimension. We in fact tend to speak of it as a place, not only of the passions, but of properly spiritual acts: Scripture for example describes Mary as pondering the mystery of her Son specifically in her heart (Lk 2:19). The heart is a place wherein we contemplate, we meditate, wherein we hold and keep our innermost thoughts. But the heart, in its spiritual depth, has not only an intellectual function; we recognize the heart, perhaps even more directly, as a kind of seat of appetite. We long for happiness in and from our heart, and this longing goes beyond the immediate passions, such as fear, desire, sorrow, or joy, which are essentially tied up with the body. The longing of the heart is a genuinely spiritual act, such that we can meaningfully ascribe to it the qualities of infinity and eternity.

Of course, it is just this sort of language that leads us to think of the heart as a "mere metaphor": what, after all, could this pulsing muscle inside my chest cavity have to do with my infinite longing for eternal life? But I want to question the presuppositions that would lead us to raise such an objection. It seems to me that we have come to take far too easily for granted a radical

14. This is precisely what distinguishes the sensitive operations of the soul from the vegetative operations. *ST* I, q. 78, a. 1.

kind of fragmentation, from which it is precisely the reality of the heart that can save us. We tend to think of spiritual meaning in completely abstract terms, on the one hand, and, on the other, we are virtually incapable of thinking of physical things as anything but so much "dumb stuff," which interacts with other dumb stuff exclusively through the imposition of some external force, however subtle. We then face the awkward problems of having to explain the relationship between physical events in the body (the firing of neurons in the brain) and non-physical realities (thoughts in the mind). Do the firing neurons cause us to have thoughts or do the thoughts cause the neurons to fire? Neither answer is adequate if causation is understood in the conventional sense, which is why whatever we say in response to such questions always tends to fall so flat and remain entirely unconvincing. The problem is that the very terms of the question falsify the reality of the person, who is not the result of the interaction of two things, a body and a soul, but is a single thing, a substance *per se unum*, of which body and soul are two constitutive *principles*, rather than two "parts."

I would like to suggest that the heart is the *symbol* of this unity. Note that the word is not "metaphor," but *symbol*, which comes from the Greek "syn," meaning "with," and the verb "ballein," meaning "to cast" or "to throw": a symbol is a "joining-together," in this case the joining together of physical presence in time and space with spiritual, or matter-transcending, meaning. A mere metaphor does not join anything together except in an accidental fashion, and therefore superficially: we have, in the case of a metaphor, a physical token of some sort on the one side, and then, on the other side, some concept or idea, to which the token is taken, rather arbitrarily, to refer.[15] A symbol, by contrast, is far more intimate and profound; it is a "proto-sacrament," a sign that not only signifies, but in some sense *effects* what it signifies. In a symbol, the meaning is, so to speak, physically present. To speak from this perspective of the heart as the symbol of the person is to say that the heart is the principal (and

15. We are describing the notion of metaphor, here, in its conventional sense. It would be possible to give a much more ontologically rich sense of metaphor, as for example Judith Wolfe does in *The Theological Imagination: Perception and Interpretation in Life, Art, and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

therefore not exclusive) place wherein the soul takes on flesh: *anima forma corporis sed principaliter cordis*.[16]

Note that, however "mystical" this might sound, it is simply a more responsibly philosophical way of saying that the beating of the heart is what keeps the organism alive. On this score, significant questions are currently being raised regarding the "brain-death" criterion for the legal/medical determination of the cessation of life and increasingly arguments are being made to return to the more traditional criterion of the termination of the respiratory-circulatory system, i.e., the death of the heart.[17] We might compare this to Descartes's radically different proposal of locating the soul, "physically," in the pineal gland in the brain: Descartes is trying to connect the *res cogitans* to the *res extensa*, but *without* the soul as the principle of life.[18] Thus, in short, we are arguing that the heart is not a physical thing that allows itself to be interpreted, metaphorically, as the center of emotional life, or other spiritual activities. Instead, it is simultaneously, and inseparably, a "physical" thing," a "spiritual" thing, and a "soul-ish" thing; as a symbol it is a multidimensional unity. The suggestion I am making is that this reality is the central point of the person, not only where body and soul meet, and so where *life happens*, but also the interior, "symbolic" place wherein the person encounters what is other than himself, where he encounters God, the world, and other people, an encounter expressed in the passions, and the place therefore wherein his deepest spiritual acts occur.[19] If this is true, it means that when we speak of the activity of the heart—longing, meditating, perceiving—we are saying that these activities emanate as it were from the whole person, from his concentrated center.

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16. *De motu cordis*.

17. See D. Alan Shewmon, "Arguments Rejecting Neurologic Criteria to Determine Death," in *Death Determination by Neurologic Criteria*, eds. Ariane Lewis and James L. Bernat (New York: Springer, 2022), 27–49.

18. See the fascinating book by Thomas Fuchs, *The Mechanization of the Heart: Harvey and Descartes*, trans. Marjorie Grene (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 198: with Descartes's reinterpretation, "the heart loses almost all the functions it had previously had. Above all, it is no longer the life-giving organ of the body. . . . The heart serves only as stimulating organ for the spirits en route to the brain."

19. This is the basic point of my essay, "Hearts of Flesh."

Pope Francis confirmed this interpretation in his 2024 encyclical, *Dilexit nos*. According to Francis, the heart is the "coordinating center" of the human person, representing as a real symbol the "unity of body and soul" (3). He goes on to say:

> The word "heart" proves its value for philosophy and theology in their efforts to reach an integral synthesis. Nor can its meaning be exhausted by biology, psychology, anthropology or any other science. It is one of those primordial words that "describe realities belonging to man precisely in so far as he is one whole (as a corporeo-spiritual person)."[20] It follows that biologists are not being more "realistic" when they discuss the heart, since they see only one aspect of it; the whole is not less real, but even more real. Nor can abstract language ever acquire the same concrete and integrative meaning. The word "heart" evokes the inmost core of our person, and thus it enables us to understand ourselves in our integrity and not merely under one isolated aspect (15).

The pope here reinforces our point that the heart is neither a mere metaphor (an important part of the body that we use to indicate an abstract idea or set of ideas), nor a mere physical organ, understood in nothing but materially functional terms. Instead, it *is* a physical organ, and indeed a central one in the living human body, but just because it is such it real-izes the spiritual activity that defines the human being. Thus, he says in short, "This profound core, present in every man and woman, is not that of the soul, but of the entire person in his or her unique psychosomatic identity. Everything finds its unity in the heart, which can be the dwelling-place of love in all its spiritual, psychic and even physical dimensions" (21).

Now that we have sketched, briefly and in basic terms, the heart of the person, let us return to Plato's description of the task of education, namely, as the art of the *conversio*, the *periagōgē*, or "turning around," of the whole soul, which we said includes inevitably the whole body as well. As we recall, I pointed out that there are two assumptions built into this description, which we are now in a position to reflect on more concretely: on the

20. Here the Holy Father cites Karl Rahner, "Some Theses for a Theology of Devotion to the Sacred Heart," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. III (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1967), 332.

one hand, the description assumes that the person is oriented in a certain way, that his being points so to speak in one direction or another, such that it can be turned around; and, on the other hand, that there is a center, a pivotal axis of a sort, around which the person turns. As it turns out, the ancient Hebrews conceived the heart, which we have identified as the center of the person, specifically as symbolizing (in the robust sense of the word!) the fundamental orientation of the person. As the Hebrew scholar Johann Pederson puts it, "The soul can never exist without volition, because its special character directs it along a certain course. Where special emphasis is put on the tendency of the soul, the word heart is often used. . . . The direction of the heart determines the act."[21]

If the human heart is indeed a symbol of man's basic orientation toward the world, toward his other, what exactly does it mean to describe education as a re-orientation? *From* what and *to* what? As we mentioned briefly at the beginning, Plato explains the *conversio* brought about by education as a transition from darkness to light—which was to become of course the canonical metaphor of learning, the enlightenment of the mind that saves it from the shadows of ignorance. In the context of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, the shadows are things thrice-removed from their actual reality: the reflections of imitations of real things. He arguably means *art* images—the poetic and dramatic figures by which education first occurred in ancient Greece, founded first of all on the epic poetry of Homer, but also more generally on the mythological tradition, given canonical expression in the work of poets such as Hesiod.[22] The essential point for us here is the direction of the movement: education implies an "introduction to Reality," as Robert Spaemann put it in his excellent reflection on the topic.[23] It is essentially an ever-deeper penetration into what is real, a movement we might say into the *heart* of things: heart

21. Johann Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1 (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991), 103.

22. For all of this, see the classic study, Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

23. Robert Spaemann, "Education as an Introduction to Reality," in *The Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111–20.

speaks to heart, *cor ad cor loquitur*, to cite Newman's motto. We will come back in a moment to the question why this movement should be conceived as a "conversion," and whether or in what respect it makes sense to speak of an *art* of conversion.[24]

Before we broach that theme, let us reflect a bit more concretely on the way education is able to move the heart, and therefore the whole person. It is important to note, first of all, that this movement, as we have been describing it, is a movement of the whole person precisely *as* a whole, and not simply as an accidental collection of parts—a "heap," to use Aristotle's language. One might be tempted to think of an "education of the whole person," which is rather fashionable these days, as indicating a program that addresses each of the parts of human existence: we offer not only math and science, but also literature, and art, and religion, and gym, and perhaps also home economics or computer programming. Such a program of education, as a collective totality of parts, would inevitably conceive the endeavor as an addition of various bits into the soul, one after the other, a transmission of information and a piecemeal accumulation of skills. This is, incidentally, precisely the model Plato criticizes in the *Republic*, and to which he presents the *conversio* as an alternative.[25] The point of our search for the center of the human being was of course to be able to see it as capable of being moved *as* a whole, all at once, so to speak, like the stage setting through the "periact." It is not possible to educate the human being properly without addressing the very center of man. That center, we have argued, is the heart; what then does it mean to address the heart?

As we have seen, the heart is essentially symbolic by nature; it "joins together" (*sym-ballein*) the whole of man because it

24. The reason education is a conversion, according to Plato, is because the "instrument with which each learns—just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body—must be turned around from that which *is coming into being* together with the whole soul, until it is able to endure looking at that which *is* and the brightest part of that which *is*. And we affirm that this is the good, don't we?" (518c). As we will explain, seeing the truth requires a *love*, specifically of the good that is the ultimate cause of truth (508e–509b).

25. *Rep.*, 518b.

joins together spirit and matter, among other things.[26] Indeed, as the paradigmatic organ of life, it *is* the joining together of spirit and matter; every beat of the heart is a *sym-ballein*. Because the heart is thus symbolic by nature, it is most properly moved precisely by symbols. A symbol, we have said, is embodied meaning, the actual presence, in the flesh, so to speak, of spiritual significance. Symbols are potent signs—signs that effect what they signify. An education that aims to move the whole person *as a whole* will do so principally by means of symbols: instruction not so much as the transmission of abstract information (though there will also be an essential place for such things), but as the cultivation of a dramatic encounter with embodied meaning, with meaningful *realities* that stand before the soul and require the soul to come out of itself to rise up to meet them.[27]

It is not possible in the present context to lay out all of the details of a program of education that takes the *conversio* as its model, and it would be presumptuous in this limited space even to sketch out the essential principles in an exhaustive sense. Instead, I will simply mention four things that would seem to me to be basic, principally as a way of illustrating the thrust of the argument. If the heart is the center of man, then those things closest to the heart and its proper activity should lie at the center of education. One of the things that stands out from this perspective is the essential importance of *form*: there is no symbol without form; a symbol joins many parts into one whole, and form—here understood as *Gestalt*—just *is* a one-in-many, a whole constituted in the inter-relation of parts. This connection between form and symbol allows us to see, first of all, the pedagogical importance of ritual, or what used to be called "manners."[28] There is something directly, even *basely*, physical in the communication of praxis as form: *This* is the proper way to sit, to stand upright,

26. We do not mean that the heart as a physical organ is *the* cause of life; instead, we are saying that the heart, as a *symbol*, is a kind of paradigmatic and communicative realization of the unity that is life.

27. The classic example of what we have in mind here is Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (Garden City, NY: Dover Publishers, 2004).

28. For a meditation on the significance of ritual and its place in human life, see Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Ritual* (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2020).

to hold oneself, to move in space, to dress for this occasion or for that, to shake hands, to interrupt to ask a question. More elaborate forms of behavior constitute the higher social and cultural activities, all the way to the highest rituals of worship that culminate in the liturgy. But these physical movements are not only physical, merely locomotive, matter's change of place, but are also and inseparably meaningful, the manifestation, and so communication, of significance. By entering into the shape of such movements—or perhaps at some level perhaps even being forced into them—one comes bodily to indwell the meaning, which is just what allows the understanding to grasp it, precisely in the mode of a rising up into it. Aristotle pointed to the necessity of this in ethical education, the formation of character, and in doing so confirmed his general metaphysical insight into the priority of actuality over potency.[29] It seems to me we need to expand this point analogically, and see that because truth is inseparable from goodness, learning at every level and in every area will inevitably express something of an appetitive movement towards what is desirable. By giving form to our activity, we complement the external measure of activity—namely, the end sought—with a properly *internal* measure: the action is meant to be performed *properly*, in relative independence of the outcome. Form thus liberates action from a pragmatic reduction, and introduces a properly contemplative spirit. In this respect, the symbolic formation of ritual provides something like a habitual ground, a proper disposition, to aspire to know things as good realities in themselves.

The second thing that stands out in relation to the centrality of the heart is the importance of the imagination—I am tempted to say the supreme importance of the imagination, at the risk of appearing to exaggerate. Nevertheless, though a certain qualification is necessary, the characterization can be defended. We tend in general to think of the imagination essentially as the human faculty by which we produce and enjoy *fiction*. It is from this perspective the exact *opposite* of reality; and so, if education is an introduction, or a conversion, to reality, it would have a

29. Aristotle argues that only a person who has actually been *living* in an ethical way, formed by his parents and the way of life imposed on him, can properly pursue ethics as a discipline: see *Nichomachean Ethics*, I.3.1095a1–12. Aristotle's explication of the priority of actuality over potency can be found in *Metaphysics*, IX.8.

place in education only to the extent that it can be used as a vehicle to deliver some truth, a moral precept or conceptual insight. It would be the proverbial spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. But this is precisely a non-symbolic understanding of the imagination. Things look profoundly different if we view them from the perspective of the heart, such as it is being described. Already to the classical tradition, the imagination is only derivatively a faculty of invention (unless we read the word according to its etymological roots; to "in-venire" is to come upon—or in other words, to discover); principally, it is one of the fundamental interior senses, the faculty by which we perceive the world around us.[30] I would like to suggest, using a spatial metaphor, that the space of the imagination lies closer to the heart, closer to the center of man, than the exterior senses, and, as such, it also lies closer to the spiritual perception that belongs properly to the intellect.[31] It is the place where meaning is not simply grasped conceptually, but contemplated as actually present, which is to say in symbolic form. If we indwell meaning bodily in ritual form, meaning indwells *us* in the *soma pneumatikos*, the spiritualized body, of the imagination.

We can only gesture toward the point here, but it seems to me that the imagination ought to be conceived as something like the home we are tasked to make in our soul that can be offered to truth. The various things that we experience as we grow and develop as persons leave an imprint on us, which is to say they impart a certain abiding shape on our imagination. These experiences are not only the real encounters and events in our lives, but in what is perhaps a more intense and concentrated way the things we hear and see, the books we read and—heaven help us!—the shows and video clips we watch, and the images we scroll through. The power of such things is incidentally precisely why Plato depicted the consumers of images as prisoners in a cave. These images give shape to our heart, and make our soul hospitable, or not; they dispose us, or *in*dispose us, to the

30. *ST* 1.78.4.

31. For a beautiful reflection on the role of imagination in both coming to *see* the truth and becoming properly *disposed* toward it, see George MacDonald, "The Imagination: Its Future and Its Culture," *A Dish of Orts* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, and Co., 1893), 1–41.

welcoming of truth. It is in and through the imagination that we take truth to heart; it is in the imagination that we come properly to rest in the truth that has come to rest in us. The imagination is in this respect not a mere means to concepts or actions. Again, it is not possible to explore and justify the point here, but I would suggest that the imagination is the ultimate faculty in man precisely to the extent that the Incarnation—the Word's being made flesh—is ultimate in our relation to God.

The third thing is memory. One of the things a person notices in the renaissance of classical education in the United States during the last few decades is what we might call the "rediscovery of memory," which I think many of us recognize as a good thing, even if it may be difficult to say exactly why.[32] The centrality of the heart offers us at least one reason why this is good. Intuitively, I believe we all sense that there is a particular connection between the heart and memory, and this is something that the classical tradition recognized. I want to make just two points in support of this connection. First of all, Augustine—whom we might call the *Doctor Memoris*—described the memory as the stomach of the soul (though he also apologized for the crassness of the image!).[33] His point seems to be that, just as we digest and physically appropriate the material we receive, through our eating, from the outside world by means of the activity of the stomach, so too in the memory do we appropriate, i.e., take to ourselves and make our own, realities that belong to the spirit. We have seen that the heart is precisely the vital principle that establishes me as a being in myself *and*, as the seat of the passions, the place wherein I encounter what is other. In this respect, the heart lies between the two things Augustine compares, and so gives life to the image: the stomach is the physical manifestation, and the memory the spiritual manifestation, of the essential movement of the heart, the recapitulation in oneself of what one receives from the other. The second point is the fact that, when I memorize something, or as we beautifully put it, when I "learn it by heart," I am taking into my soul a *form*, a reality that has already been accomplished, some real, great thing—

32. A longer discussion of this point can be found in D.C. Schindler, "Notes Toward the Definition of Memory," *Communio* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2023): 218–54.

33. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.14.

which is to say a symbol, a meaningful reality, complete *in itself*. I am not simply learning abstract and empty skills and techniques that could be applied indifferently to anything. It is not an accident that at the heart of the overthrow of traditional learning that took place in the sixteenth century lay a displacement of the art of memory by a "method," that is, an apparently universal technique of information and skill acquisition.[34] A radically new vision of the nature of reality, of God, man, and creation, is implicit in this change. The contemporary rediscovery of the art of memory is in this respect a sign of hope.

Finally, the fourth thing, which I think is sufficiently obvious as not to require much elaboration. As we have seen, the centrality of the heart implies a heightened importance of the real, the concrete, the embodied, the present. All of this points in a vivid way to the inevitable role of the teacher in education.[35] Of course, no one would deny the significance of the purveyors of education; no matter how we conceive it, we all admit that the endeavor cannot succeed without competent teachers. But our reflections thus far set into relief another dimension of this point. The heart is formed by symbols, and the most significant symbol, at least in the early years, is the presence of the teacher himself. The teacher embodies the education he offers, which means in some sense prior to anything he communicates verbally and conceptually, he *models* the ideal; he shows in himself what education is before he says it—and after, too. This inevitable reality places a deep responsibility on the educator: he is to facilitate the relation to reality by being a signpost, in his very person, that points to the truth, beauty, and goodness of reality. Robert Spaemann has observed that education is in a basic sense a natural implication of living, which is to say that we educate our children first and foremost by our living with them, our gradually increasing and deepening inclusion into the form of life of the household, and at

34. This story is told marvelously by the great observer of culture, Walter Ong, in *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

35. See the reflections on the teacher in Bishop Stefan Oster, "Freely to Give: Ferdinand Ulrich as Teacher and Spiritual Father," *Communio* 46, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 11–26.

the same time displaying this form symbolically to them.[36] This teaching by modeling continues, whether deliberately or not, also in the classroom and in the school more generally. From the perspective of the centrality of the heart, we need to be conscious that the school itself, even in its physical structure and layout, is a symbol of human existence, and to cultivate this dimension in a fruitful way.

We have just said that, conceived symbolically as the formation of the heart, education is something that happens naturally, and so in this respect "organically." This raises a profoundly important question: why, therefore, does Plato describe education as a conversion, which suggests a dramatic *change*? We have been talking about formation as a kind of turning of the soul: why does it need to be turned *around*? This would seem to imply that education is *not* natural, but rather the *reversal* of the natural. Is it the case that, to attain to reality, we need to be transformed, to pivot so to speak at the very core of our existence? Are we not always already *in* reality? How are we to understand this? Education evidently *forms* the person, but is it proper to expect it to *transform* him? And if the point is to effect a conversion, is it possible to make this a programmatic purpose? Is there, in short, such a thing as an *art* of conversion?

It is not possible at the end of this presentation to explore these questions with all the care they warrant, but I wish to conclude by making three observations. First, the language of *periagōgē*, *conversio*, in this context does not have to—indeed, I would insist *ought* not to—be interpreted as indicating a shift from a natural condition to what would therefore seem to be a non-natural condition, the artificial forms of culture and social existence, which is how Rousseau presented it in the hyper-artificialized culture of seventeenth-century Europe.[37] Instead, I propose as an initial comment that we see it as an indication of the truly radical character of the introduction into reality and genuine transcendence it requires: a transcendence of the self, and of the relatively trivial concerns that tend to encroach on our attention from day to day. To come to appreciate some thing as

36. Spaemann, "Education," 111.

37. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992).

a good in itself, as expressing a beauty that tells us there is more to this world than appears on the surface, as a truth that is bigger than us, is an experience that can occur only with something like a *periagōgē* of the soul, which changes everything. We have spoken of education as a function of the heart; insofar as it aims at an encounter with truth, goodness, and beauty, it is indeed a transformation. Reality *breaks* our heart, and that is its glory. To quote T.S. Eliot, "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." Even if reality is in some sense obvious, a radical change of heart is required to appreciate the extraordinary significance of the ordinary. We might think here of the character, Emily, at the climax of Thornton Wilder's still oft-performed play, *Our Town*, who is given permission, after death, to revisit a day in the life she has recently left behind. She is cautioned by the wiser long-dead that she will regret it, and advised to choose the most ordinary day she can. But even that proves too much for her; it is crushingly *full* of reality, and she returns quickly to the peace of death. "Does anyone ever realize life while they live it . . . every, every minute?," she asks the Stage Manager, who answers: "No. Saints and poets maybe. . . . They do some."[38] To say that education is a *conversion* of soul is to say it aims at giving rise to the "artists, saints, and philosophers" that the young Nietzsche wrote about in his extraordinary essay on education.[39]

But can we deliberately produce such exceptional souls in fact? The second observation I want to make is that, precisely because of the transcendence in the encounter with the real, there is something ultimately gratuitous about it. We all recognize that a conversion in the properly religious sense requires grace: faith, as a theological virtue, is a gift given by God. It seems to me that the *periagōgē* of the whole person is something of a natural analogue to religious conversion. The recognition—or to use Plato's term, the recollection, the *anamnēsis*[40]—of truth,

38. Thornton Wilder, *Our Town* (New York: Samuel French, 1965), 83.

39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161.

40. Plato unfolds the great drama of recollection as an encounter with beauty, which inflames the soul and generates the wings that allow the soul to return to its proper place, in the "heaven above the heavens." See *Phaedrus*, 249c.

goodness, and beauty cannot be produced in the soul through an educational program, no matter how carefully and thoughtfully designed, but can occur in the end only as something *given*, as the dawning of a realization, that arises through the utterly unique circumstances and history of each individual person. It is a drama of freedom that will play out in the secret depths of every soul. The real encounter with reality is something like falling in love, which we know never simply results from a plan. To be sure, the conversion of education is not strictly speaking a "supra-natural" event like the gift of faith, but it nevertheless confirms in a perhaps surprising way the Lubacian paradox that the end that is most natural to man is one that cannot but arrive as a gratuitous gift. Although Plato does speak of an art, a *technē*, of conversion, which would suggest a deliberate and rationally-designed program, it is important to note that he also asks in other dialogues whether it is possible in truth to teach virtue, and leaves the question open.[41] It is an aporia, which is to say, education remains a genuine mystery; and we ought always to appreciate it as such.

Finally, though one cannot produce a conversion, it seems that one can provide propitious conditions, at least to some extent. The question of conditions becomes especially urgent in particular historical moments, when something as fundamental as reality itself is conceived as little more than an option. We do not educate in a vacuum, but in a particular time and place, in the context of a culture and the shape it both has and gives. It is not only the human person that has a heart and therefore a particular orientation; a culture, too, has something like a heart, and it too inevitably points in one direction or another, either toward the real or away from it. A culture, too, has its rituals, its practices that give form to life; a culture, too, has an imagination—Charles Taylor has reflected at length on what he calls the "social imaginary"[42]—which gives a certain shape and color to every thought and action that takes place within it; a culture too has a memory, which not only binds it to its past history but guides in a determinate way to the future. A culture, too, has its teachers, its effective representations of its most basic convictions

41. See, for example, the *Meno* and the *Protagoras*.

42. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

and values. In a culture, like ours, that forms us in superficial attachments and erodes habits of attention, that weakens our capacity to care—the *Sorge* that Heidegger claimed presents the heart of the distinctively human way of being-in-the-world[43]—the task of education becomes truly a matter of life and death. The turning-around of the soul Plato intended was not the shift from a natural condition to an artificial one, but precisely the opposite: given a culture that insinuates the forms of unreality into the most intimate dimensions of human existence, the task of education is to provide a nurture that leads *to* nature. A good education is thus a soul-shaking discovery of what was always-already there, always-already given—which is precisely what it means to receive the real as a gift. And at the center of this task is the heart that, with each beat, recapitulates what is already there as if coming into being for the first time. The conversion of the whole person is a beautiful act of life. □

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43. Heidegger presents this thesis in division I, chapter six, of *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962): "Being-in-the-world is essentially care" (237).