

# The New Testament Psychology of the Heart

Robert C. Roberts

My task in this brief article is to give an accounting of the psychology of the heart in the New Testament. I will do so under five headings: The heart as a locus; the heart as moral and spiritual; the heart as a source of knowledge; the heart as changeable; and the heart as hidden and revealed.

*The heart as locus.* The human heart is a container, a site, a scene, a “place” where things can be found. A rather dizzying variety of things can be “in” the heart, among which are thoughts (Luke 24.38), beliefs (Romans 6.10), laws (Romans 2.15), desires (Matthew 6.21), concerns (II Corinthians 8.16), intentions (John 13.2), imaginings (dianoiva/, Luke 1.51), decisions (I Corinthians 7.37, II Corinthians 9.7), God’s love (Romans 5.5), songs (Ephesians 5.19-20), and emotions (John 16.16, 22, Romans 9.2, II Corinthians 2.4), the word of God (Matthew 13.19), Jesus Christ or the spirit of Jesus Christ (Galatians 4.6, Ephesians 3.17), and fellow human beings (II Corinthians 7.3, Philippians 1.7). Character-traits are in (or characterize) the heart (Matthew 11.29).

*The heart as moral and spiritual.* The psychology of the heart is strongly evaluative, not just in the sense that the heart’s contents can be healthy or unhealthy for the individual, but also in a moral sense. That is, the thoughts, emotions, desires, etc. of the heart can be good or evil; the heart can be pure or polluted (Matthew 12.33-35), its traits are virtues or vices. God can put good words in one’s heart (Hebrews 8.10-12; Jeremiah 31.31-34), and the Devil can plant evil ones (John 13.2). The pollution of the heart is the pollution of the whole person; the righteousness of the heart is that of the whole person. Adulterous or murderous thoughts, feelings, imaginings,

intentions or proto-intentions, at least to the extent that they are engaged and endorsed by the subject, have the same moral quality as the corresponding actions (perhaps they are a kind of actions; Matthew 5.28). In fact, it appears that the moral quality of behavior, verbal or otherwise, is a function of the moral quality of the heart from which the behavior issues (Matthew 15.8; Isaiah 29.13); forgiving only outwardly (say, in words or gestures) differs from forgiving “from one’s heart,” which alone is real forgiveness (Matthew 18.35). Thus the behavior of saying “I forgive you” might not be the action of forgiving; in fact, it could be the action of accusing.

The heart is the seat of moral and spiritual character; it is what has character. And character is a state, a way of being.

Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil that is stored up in him (Matthew 12.33-35).

A crabapple tree produces small, sour apples because it *is* a crabapple tree; while another kind of tree produces large, sweet apples because of the kind *it* is. Similarly, a person acts and speaks well because he is a good person, while from the bad person come bad actions, presumably because of the good and evil thoughts, desires, intentions, and the like, characteristic of him as a person, from which his actions spring. In a similar vein Paul says,

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the

heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God (Romans 2.28-29).

Circumcision is a mark, an impression, a character. The idea seems to be that a person is a spiritual Jew if he has a certain character, if he characteristically thinks in certain ways, desires certain things, feels certain feelings, and behaves in certain ways "from the heart." When his "heart" is thus attuned to the ways of God, he lives "by the Spirit," and is thus a real Jew.

Character is constituted of dispositions, not of actual mental events (thoughts, emotions, intentions, etc.). So behavior, according to the psychology of the heart, would be doubly mediated: the mental events arise out of the dispositions constituting character, and the behavior arises out of the mental events. It seems to me that we need to think of the dispositions constituting character in more than one way. Something like habit seems to characterize some of them, while others (or aspects of others) are constituted by hierarchical depth. For example, patterns of thought and perception, thought of in abstraction from concerns and desires, seem to be "ingrained" by practice; one falls into certain patterns of inference, or ways of seeing situations, by repeatedly practicing inference in that pattern, or seeing situations in that characteristic way. But desires and concerns seem to be hierarchically ordered: a person's desire to succeed at a certain task may be traceable to his desire to do well in a profession, and this desire may stem from a desire for prestige and social importance. On this reading, when Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6.21), 'treasure' would mean "what you most *fundamentally* desire." The actual events of the heart are not subject to the foregoing abstraction: "thoughts" of

the heart are virtually always laden with desire, and desires are infused with patterns of perception and inference.

*The heart as knower.* Moral orientation is impossible without a kind of knowledge of the good that is at the same time an appreciation and proper perception. Thus, according to the Bible, the heart is also an epistemic faculty, a personal power mediating knowledge. What is known by way of the heart are various things of great positive value. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5.8). Paul prays for the Ephesians, that the eyes of their heart may be enlightened “so that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Ephesians 1.18). The properly disposed heart knows, not just anything about such wonderful objects as God and our glorious inheritance, but precisely their “glory,” the wonderfulness and high value of these things. “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4.6). If the heart is “hardened,” then it ceases to have its proper epistemic function: “Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?’” (Mark 8.17). “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes nor understand with their hearts, nor turn — and I would heal them” (Isaiah 6.10 / John 12.40). “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened” (Romans 1.21). And this darkening fundamentally undermines proper practice: “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4.18).

*The heart as changeable.* On the NT understanding of the heart, hearts can change: they can degenerate morally, and they can improve, and this depends in part on a property that the NT language describes variously in metaphors of the impressionability (Mark 6. 51b-52), openness (II Corinthians 6.11-13), direction (Luke 1.17), and translucency (II Corinthians 3.15) of the heart. Hearts can be hard, open, turned toward God, and accessible to light. God can change hearts; words can change hearts. But whether this occurs depends partly on the receptivity of the heart itself, as described in these metaphors.

Exploiting the metaphor of hardness, we can note that a stone, as compared with a hunk of wet clay, is comparatively difficult to make an impression on. The clay is impressionable. It readily adopts the shape and character that the potter wishes to impress on it. God is trying to leave an impression of himself on the heart. Or, exploiting the metaphor of openness, we might think of the heart as having a shell like that of an oyster. The shell can open, and only if it does so can nutrients be brought into the heart from outside. Or we might think of the heart as mounted on a neck, so that it can turn toward God or away from him, thus putting him in its view or not. Or we might think of the heart as surrounded by something like a shade or veil, perhaps like a Venetian style blind that can be adjusted to prevent or permit the incursion of light.

On the NT understanding of the matter, it appears that the condition of the heart as impressionable (or hard), open (or closed), turned toward God (or away from him), accessible to the light (or not), is partly subject to the will of the person whose heart is in question, and partly a matter of outside influences. Mysteriously, God is said sometimes to harden hearts (Isaiah 6.10 / John 12.40), and sometimes people are said to harden their hearts

against him (Hebrews 3.7-11; Psalm 95.7-11), though most passages assign no agent of the hardening (Mark 6. 51b-52; Mark 8.17). Something similar is true of the other metaphors.

We can make this psychologically plausible by applying it to a case. In II Samuel 12 the prophet Nathan comes to king David with the word of God concerning David's adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah. David is not unacquainted with God's commandments about adultery and murder, and yet he commits these sins with remarkable aplomb and equanimity. It is as though, in this case at least, the word of God is not making much of an impression on his heart; or that something like a veil is keeping the light of the word from shining into his heart; or that his attention is turned away from the word; or that he has shut the entrance through which the word might go into his heart. Then comes Nathan, an external factor bearing the word of God, but bearing it in a manner that has extraordinary rhetorical power. With this help, the word makes an impression on the hard heart, shining right through the veil, forcing open the passage, getting David's attention. Now at this point David could have hardened his heart further against the word; he could have tightened the blinds, refused to look. He could have treated Nathan as some of the other kings of Israel treated their prophets, ignoring and perhaps having them killed. He doesn't do this; instead he opens his heart, lets the light shine in, and repents, taking responsibility for his sin. His receptivity is a function of the condition of his heart, and its condition is to some extent within the power of his will. But the condition of a heart has a certain inertia, a certain habitual or dispositional character, that is to some extent reversed or forwarded by the free responses of the heart. One who *refuses* to "listen" thereby contributes to a *disposition* in himself of not-hearing, and thus contributes to a real

epistemic defect that will probably have ramifications throughout the personality. *Unwillingness* to see gradually degrades the *ability* to see, and inability to see in matters of great moral and spiritual moment has disastrous moral and spiritual consequences.

The heart can be trained in good and evil, according to the NT: “Their eyes are full of adultery, insatiable with sinning; they seduce the unstable, having hearts *trained* in greed ...” (II Peter 2.14, italics added). Behavioral expression is one of the ways in which the heart can be trained, either for good or for evil. Jesus comments on personality development in Matthew 15.17-20.

Don’t you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a person ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a person ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”

Is it the *coming out* of these things that makes the person unclean, or their *being in* him? I think the answer is, Both, but in different senses of ‘make.’ The presence of the evil thoughts in him makes him unclean in the sense of constituting him as unclean, not in the sense of causal agency. Expression, Jesus seems to be saying, has a causal power, a developmental influence on personality. The man who has adulterous thoughts is already adulterous by virtue of the thoughts, but the man who expresses his adulterous thoughts by having himself some adultery typically adulterates himself further, that is, he confirms himself in adulterous ways (of thought *and* behavior), predisposes himself further to rationalization, and puts himself in situations that make

further adulterous action easier. Perhaps he habituates himself to thought-patterns characteristic of an adulterer. (But I think this is not the only possible psychological trajectory. An episode of adulterous expression can be a wake-up call to clean up one's act [and one's heart]. Expression can be polluting, but it can also become part of a cleansing process.) In the same way, acts of compassion, of forgiveness, of generous contribution to the life of the church, originating in good impulses of the heart, can further confirm the heart in these excellent ways of thought and desire.

*The heart as hidden and revealed.* The heart is the scene of hidden thoughts and desires and dispositions to action, that may be revealed *in* the corresponding actions or revealed *to* persons (God, Jesus, apostles, and others) who are able to discern them.

The contents of a heart can be hidden in at least two senses. 1) *Occurrent* thoughts can be hidden from observers in the sense that the observers cannot tell with certainty what is motivating the person to say something or other, or to do something. More discerning people are better at telling what is in a person's heart in this occurrent sense than less discerning people. "Jesus, knowing the thoughts of their hearts, took a little child and had him stand beside him" (Luke 9.47). The apostles are sometimes said to have unusual insights into people's hearts (Acts 8.21-23). Because of self-deception (successful rationalization) or lack of self-awareness stemming from immaturity, people often do not know their own motives. 2) In a *dispositional* sense, what is in a heart can be very deeply hidden and, in many lives, never revealed in action, because the circumstances to which that disposition is indexed as a spring of response have not obtained and may never obtain. When I speak of a disposition being indexed to a situation, I mean that the disposition is such that a situation of that type elicits the type



of episodes that express the disposition — its thoughts, desires, actions, intentions. I will have more to say about situation-indexicality and its complement, situation-breadth, in the next section. I devote the remainder of this sub-section to the hiddenness and revelation of dispositions of the heart, because these are especially important to the NT's conversation with situationism.

The thoughts of hearts can be “revealed” by extraordinary circumstances, and concealed by ordinary ones. In the NT, the overwhelmingly important example of this principle is the coming of Messiah. In the Temple shortly after Jesus' birth, the prophet Simeon blessed the family and said, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2.34b-35). The dispositional thoughts (including desires) that were hidden in hearts, no doubt even from the owners of the hearts, will be brought to light in the new *situations* that will be created by Jesus' actions and words — say, by his teaching about the law, his consorting with tax-collectors and prostitutes, his works of mercy, his criticisms of members of the religious establishment, and his death on the cross and anticipatory teaching about this. The new circumstance created by his presence, his teaching, and his actions, brings out surprising behavior in just about everybody. A prostitute becomes bold and walks in on a dinner party at a Pharisee's house; tax collectors repent of their exploitative behavior and become self-sacrificing evangelists; Peter, by all accounts the leading disciple, engages in satanic behavior and betrays his master in his final hour, but later shows extraordinary courage; the upstanding citizens who are the chief exponents and defenders of the law of God become

slanderers, liars, and plot the murder of the innocent. The Apostle Paul looks forward to a similar revelation of the hearts when Christ comes again: “Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God” (I Corinthians 4.5). Indeed, even the Spirit-filled worship of Christ by ordinary Christians may have this revelatory effect: “But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” (I Corinthians 14.24-25).

The chief NT example is an *example*, because the psychological point behind Simeon’s prophecy about Jesus is a general one: the contents of a person’s heart may surprise himself as much they surprise those who know him; they come out only when special *circumstances* bring them out. Iago puts Othello in circumstances that are calculated to bring out, if possible, jealousy and murder. Neither Iago nor Othello knows, beforehand, whether these things are in Othello’s heart, but afterwards we all know that Othello had it in him to be murderously jealous. Jim (from Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*), who prides himself on his courage, surprises himself to his enduring shame by his cowardly behavior when the *Patna* seems to be sinking with 800 Muslim pilgrims aboard. Sydney Carton (from Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*), an aimless drunk, ends up sacrificing his life in a highly calculated act of courage and love, in response to the unprecedented horrors of the French Revolution.