

Biblical and Christian Grounds for a Psychology of the Heart

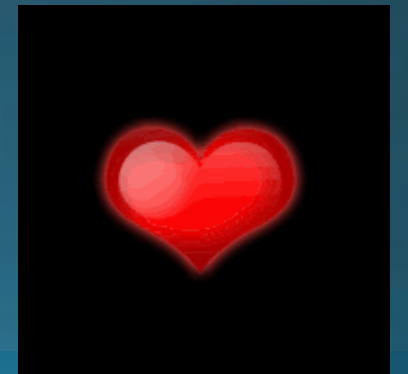
by Eric L. Johnson

Gideon Institute of Christian Psychology & Counseling
Houston Baptist University

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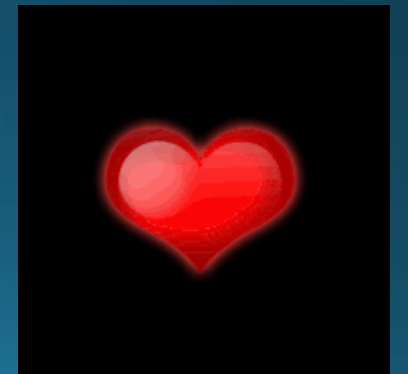
The term “heart” is used in three main ways in the English language

- To refer to a physical organ that is continuously keeping humans (and most animals) alive by pumping blood through our circulatory system
- The *psychological* heart is a metonymy, also located in the chest, that refers to an evaluative “organ” that interprets, guides, and unifies human life
- As a metaphor, pertaining to centrality or depth, as in, “the *heart* of the argument”
 - The second use is an example of lay psychology, since it refers to a psychological construct, distinct but similar to the “mind”



Why hasn't the second use of "heart"—a common lay psychology term—been a focus of modern psychology (which we'll call "psych-heart"), whereas the "mind" has been thoroughly investigated?

- To begin with, the available neurological evidence has not drawn much attention to the region of the physical heart (phys-heart).
- Modern psychology's discoveries of brain function have consistently demonstrated that the mind's activities are located "within the skull," and most of what we have learned about the psychological functions of the heart, like the emotions, point in the same direction, *to the brain*, particularly the limbic system (the amygdala, thalamus, and hypothalamus), and more recently, to emotional processing that occurs in the prefrontal and cingulate cortices, but nowhere near the physical heart
- As a result, the psych-heart is considered metaphorical—a pervasive literary and cultural symbol—but nothing worthy of scientific attention



Complicating matters further, the West has long had a bias towards the mind, stretching back to the ancient Greeks, and this bias increased during the Middle Ages and exploded in the Modern era, *even among Christians*

- By contrast, aspects of the soul commonly associated with the heart, for example, the emotions and desires, were generally considered to be *obstacles* to knowledge and truth—indeed, they have often been called *irrational* in the West—so Christians in the modern era have tended to emphasize rationality, objectivity, conscious awareness, Bible knowledge, reading the Bible intellectually, and education, and they've been skeptical of the activities of the heart—emotions, desires, feelings, subjectivity, the body, experience, intuition, the unconscious, reading the Bible experientially, and inner transformation—believing that sin is far more dangerous in these murky realms, that it is in our consciousness and intellect.



- We see this skepticism of the heart among many evangelical theologians and pastors, leading Christians to feel safe by living in their heads.
- We even see this tendency among some biblical counselors
- Not by rejecting the *word* “heart,” but by treating the heart as if it were the mind, and concentrating on learning intellectual truth and behavior, rather than working with human subjectivity and promoting Christian experience



Some Christians avoid working directly with the heart because the psychological terms in the Bible overlap considerably. Soul, spirit, and heart are all used to refer to thinking, feeling, and choosing. For that reason, they have concluded that these terms ought not to be distinguished and further that a psychology cannot be derived from the Bible. But is that true?

Modern science and modern biblical interpretation insist that valid words are *univocal*, i.e., they must have a single meaning, if they are to be used for science or are in the Bible, because there can be no ambiguity or difference in interpretation in science and understanding the Bible.

- But that is nothing more than a modern assumption



Calvin said that the Bible provides our “spectacles,” through which we see reality. Therefore, we are called upon to take seriously the psychology of the Bible, because it provides the “first principles” of the most scientific psychology we can come up with, one that conforms as closely as possible to God’s comprehensive psychology.

Consequently, our challenge is to read the Bible to help us develop that psychology. The Bible gives us the following principles:

1. Biblical psychology terms are fuzzy concepts, not discrete concepts.
2. They point us towards wholeness/the whole person, not division
3. NT psychology will be more complex than OT psychology (Vos)
4. It could still be the case that some uses of heart might have unique connotations

What changed my approach to the heart was reading Jonathan Edwards’ *Religious Affections*, John Piper’s “Christian Hedonism,” and John Frame’s Tri-perspectival approach to reality (normativity, objectivity, and subjectivity).

The heart is the dominant psychological term in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Wolff, 1974), occurring over 1000 times total, and over 800 in the OT alone. The following are just a few exemplary verses from the OT:

- “Hear, my son, and be wise, and ***direct your heart*** in the way” (Pr 23:19)
- Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but ***the LORD weighs the heart*** (Pr 21:2)
- “***The heart is deceitful above all things*** and desperately wicked. Who can know it? (Jer 17:9)
- God promised to make a new covenant with his people: “***I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.*** And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jer 31:33)
- “***Pour out your heart like water*** before the presence of the Lord.” (Lam 2:19)
- We also learn that God is described as having a heart:
 - “And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and ***it grieved him to his heart***” (Gen 6:6)

The heart is found 172 times in the NT (in the RSV). The following are a few exemplary verses from the NT:

- Jesus said, “For ***where your treasure is, there your heart will be also***” (Mt 6:21)
- “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For ***out of the heart come*** evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” (Mt 15:18-19)
- “And hope does not put us to shame, because ***God's love has been poured into our hearts*** through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Ro 5:8)
- “God has shone ***in our hearts*** the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Co 4:6)
- Paul prayed that “Christ may ***dwell in your hearts*** through faith” (Eph 3:17)
- “Love one another deeply, ***from the heart***” (1Pe 1:22)

Christians skeptical of the heart point to Jer 17:9 and Mt 15:19, and they're important. But the heart is even more important than the mind in a biblical psychology, and we have to bring it back into the center of biblical and Christian counseling.

The psychology of the Christian tradition has been shaped by this emphasis and has referred to the psychological heart in profound and moving ways

- ***“The heart is restless, O Lord, until it finds its rest in You”*** (Augustine, *Confessions*)
- ***“Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God”*** (Martin Luther, *Larger Catechism*)
- ***“The heart has its reasons which reason does not know”*** (Blaise Pascal, *Penseés*, #277)
- ***“It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason”*** (Pascal, #278)
- ***“Where his ‘heart’ is attached, there, for him, is the ‘core’ of the so-called essence of things”*** (Max Scheler, “Ordo Amoris,” *Selected Writings*)
- ***“Your heart is your inward self, your personality, your ‘actual you;’ and what you treasure—what is important to you, what you are centrally attached to—determines what that self is like.”*** (Roberts, 1997, p. 85)

In spite of the modern emphasis on the “mind,” contemporary Westerners still frequently use the word “heart” in various “idioms”

“From the bottom of my heart”

“Take heart”

“Follow your heart”

“I had a change of heart”

“She has a heart of gold”

“He lost heart and gave up”

“He wears his heart on his sleeve”

“She has her heart set on going to college”

“We had a heart-to-heart conversation”

“He’s heartbroken”

I’m currently doing a study on the use of “heart” on Twitter.

So, English-speaking people continue to use the term “heart” to refer to a wide variety of psychological activities, suggesting it is very complex psychological concept.

The linguistic equivalent of “heart” can be found in cultures all over the world and throughout human history.

I’m also doing a couple of studies of the Mandarin term for “heart.”

In light of this evidence, perhaps Christians ought to do research on the heart

- 1) It would help us develop a psychology that is closer to God's understanding of human beings than modern psychology is
- 2) It would glorify God to develop a psychology of the heart
- 3) Studying the heart could help us develop a Christian therapy model that works with the heart
- 4) It would help everyone by a science of human nature that corresponds to human life as it is really lived, undistorted by modernity, a psychology that Charles Taylor calls the *Best Available Account*.

Where did the psychological heart come from, developmentally? It is an embodied metaphor.

- On the one hand, the psych heart takes the physical heart, and a number of relevant associations, as its source domain. On the other hand, however, the psych heart itself communicates depth, so it serves as a source domain for communication meaning in countless other target domains, as suggested by the English idioms we have looked at
- From whence did this metaphoric usage derive? Research is needed, but we can at least speculate for now that children from birth are experiencing feelings and emotions in their bodies in the course of their relationships and activities, and they are developing a body awareness that can distinguish between what happens in their extremities and what goes on in their torso or the center of their bodies. It seems possible that such experiences could provide the embodied basis for the distinction between superficial and deep, which in turn, could signify significance and meaningfulness.
- Neuropsychology and neurocardiology have already begun to contribute to our understanding of the neural basis of these felt experiences throughout the body, especially in the chest, for example, studies in heart-rate variability and the role of the vagal nerve in emotional responses to stress and meditation

To what does the “heart” refer, in contrast to the mind?

- The “center” or “deepest” region of our body and soul
- Where we first experienced the love of others. It’s where we experience others and the quality of our relationships; it’s where we empathize.
- Where our *core* beliefs reside, including our worldview beliefs and our beliefs about our self
- The region in our chest where we experience our emotions, as well as episodic memories charged with emotion
- Our knowledge and understanding of our own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others
- As we get older, it’s where we love others; it includes the topography of the loves and hates of our life; the *ordo amoris*.
- Where our values dwell, particularly our highest values—what we care most about, what we live for, what makes our life most worthwhile,
- Where our *telos* exists, the goal towards which we are becoming

To what does the “heart” refer, in contrast to the mind?

- The source of original sin, which contaminates all of our soul, especially showing up in our disordered loves and hates
- That which is unconscious
- Where personal agency originates; where the will is active
- Where the virtues that compose our moral character are formed
- Where our truest self is found
- Where the old self is being undermined and destroyed and the new self is being created
- Where the *imago Dei* is based and where we worship God, love, and depend upon God
- Where the Holy Spirit indwells us/lives in us

So, what does it matter?

- In God's design of human life, the mind understands the outer world, the heart discerns significance and meaningfulness
- A goal of childhood is to subordinate one's heart to one's mind
- A goal of adulthood is to subordinate one's mind to one's heart
- One of the most important goals of human maturation is to collaborate with God in the cultivation of a well-formed heart. This is called "heart-work."
- "Heart-work" is also what we do in Christian psychotherapy

Tomorrow morning, at 9am, we'll pick up where we're leaving off tonight:

"Carditive Therapy: Working with the Heart in the Care of Souls"

References and Resources

Pascal, B. *Pensees*. (many versions)

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