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RECOVERING THE LOST UNITY OF HEART AND MIND

by James Hoskins

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We've been sold a story—a cultural narrative—that has hindered both the intellectual and emotional life of the church. This story, like the air we breathe, is invisible, ubiquitous, and has existed long before any of us were born. The story I am speaking of is one of human progress, from religious ignorance to scientific knowledge.

It goes something like this: long ago, humans attempted to make sense of the world through poetic tales, myths, and superstition. As time went on, we learned more. A revolution in thought occurred; science was born. Eventually we discovered that many of the old myths were either false or unnecessary. Now we know better, and we are better for it.

An underlying assumption of this story is that there are two parts to a human being: the heart and the mind. The heart is the center of human emotions, intuition, love, and faith. The mind is the center of reason, knowledge, logic, and imagination. The moral of the story is clear: keep them separate. Those who accept the story (whether knowingly or not) feel the tension of a dichotomy and are compelled to choose between heart and mind.

The Same Story. Opposite Morals. Secularists tend to favor the mind over the heart. The moral they draw (and our culture has drawn) from the story is *Don't let the heart corrupt our knowledge*. Passion, love, faith—those are all good things, but they should yield to the mind. Reason, science, and education have provided the tools that help society to progress. We cannot allow our forward momentum to be stifled by things of the heart.

This overarching cultural story, along with the secularist moral drawn from it, has distorted how we interpret almost everything, especially the past. Many of the classic historical episodes of supposed conflict between science and faith (such as Columbus and the flat Earth

myth, the Galileo affair, and the Scopes “monkey” trial) have all been exaggerated or revised¹ to fit the bigger narrative of human progress. Historians have repeatedly attempted to correct some of these errors, but cultural narratives are more persuasive than facts. This is why so many secularists have fallen into crass scientism as of late.² The moral they draw from the story compels them to.

It is not only secularists who have been seduced by the cultural narrative, however. Many Christian evangelicals have been as well, albeit unknowingly. We’ve taken issue with little pieces of the story here and there. But its central premise—that the heart and mind are, and should be, separate—has gone largely unquestioned.

Instead, we’ve simply drawn the opposite moral from the story: *don’t let knowledge corrupt your heart*. Science, reason, logic, even theology are all good and needed, but they should yield to the heart. One’s desires, loves, and affections are what God really cares about. Putting too much importance on things of the mind can stifle one’s relationship with God. All we need is Jesus in our hearts—an encounter with Him. Everything else is vanity. This is the moral I was taught growing up, not by any particular person, mind you, but by the subculture around me.

My Chapter within the Story. I grew up in a Midwest Pentecostal church as the son of a preacher. From the moment I was born, I was immersed in a world of heart. Emotion, song, and passionate expression were the air I breathed. I’m not lamenting this fact. Growing up in that environment taught me how to love deeply. But there were problems. I was also in an environment where Christians demonized science, and pastors bragged that they had no formal theological training.

After high school, I followed the path of pure heart. Believing God had told me I would have a career in music, I bypassed college, started a rock band, and spent years as a working musician. We played in bars and clubs around the United States. Needless to say, I saw a lot of (broken) heart(s). But I did not feel whole. There was dissonance in my being. Questions of the mind began to catch up with me—questions like, “If God is good, why does He allow bad things to happen?” or “What about all those fossils? How does that square with the Bible?”

Eventually, I quit the band and went to a state university to study philosophy. It was there—in an environment where I was the only Christian and all my philosophy professors were atheists—that I saw where the path of unbridled reason led. As I sincerely wrestled with the arguments of atheist philosophers like Hume, Nietzsche, Russell, and Sartre, I realized that mind and heart, divorced from each other, lead to the same place. They both lead to a graveyard of fractured and dissonant people who cannot escape their own sin.

It was not until graduate school at Biola University that things began to even out for me. There I was required to study both science and theology in a rigorous yet nurturing environment. Through my studies, I became aware of the tenuous nature of our culture’s story, and I began to question its assumptions. I eventually came to the conclusion that God intended human beings to be a *unity* of heart and mind, that underemphasizing one or the other is harmful, and that proper biblical theology is key.

The Story of the Logos. The Bible provides a remarkable bridge between the heart and mind that fuses the two together in a holistic way. The Gospel of John opens with this mystifying statement: “In the beginning was the *Logos*.” That term carried with it deep philosophical implications. The ancient Greeks used the term *Logos* to refer to the rational order underlying the universe. Thus, John was making a fascinating claim: Jesus *is* the rational order that holds all things together, and through which all things were made. Colossians 1:16 specifies that “all things” means *all* things, “in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (ESV). That would include invisible things such as the laws of nature, laws of logic, ethical truths, aesthetic truths, and so on. They’re all creations of, or grounded in, a rational God and reflect His nature in some way.

The implications of this are deliciously subversive to both versions of our cultural story. On the one hand, it challenges the evangelical moral that knowledge corrupts heart, and that subjective, emotional experience is the only way to encounter God. If it is true that Jesus is the rational order behind the universe, then all acquisition of genuine knowledge is an encounter with God. How could it not be? If Jesus is the rationality that holds the world together, then physicists encounter God whenever they discover a new law, whether they realize it or not. It is the same for those studying the laws of logic, ethics, art, and so on. Encounter with truth is encounter with God.

This should dissolve the fear and unnecessary suspicion some Christians have toward science and other intellectual pursuits.³ And it should cause us to celebrate new discoveries as much as secularists. Facts are not a challenge to the Christian faith; they are a confirmation of it. Paul confirms this when he says God’s invisible attributes and eternal power are clearly perceived through the things that have been made (Rom. 1:20). When we study creation, we encounter God and His glory.

At the same time, however, the Bible also challenges the secularist moral that heart corrupts knowledge. The rational order behind the universe is a *Person*, not some abstract law floating in a Platonic realm. Out of love, this Person chose to become a human being, to experience the diversity of human emotions and heartache, and to die in our place to save us. This Person cared more about reconciling *relationship* than being right. That is why He humbled Himself and suffered and died on behalf of His enemies—out of love for the Father and love for us. This should cause those who underemphasize the heart (Christians included) to realize that the purpose of truth is relationship, and that our heart (our intuitions, spiritual longings, and emotions) can point to the truth as much as science or reason can. Any intellectual view that requires us to deny the knowledge of our heart—knowledge we acquire through our direct experiences of beauty, love, and meaning—is inadequate and incomplete.

In conclusion then, truth and knowledge should matter greatly to Christians because the heart cannot exult in what the mind rejects. False beliefs, bad theology, and poor reasoning can cripple one’s joy, spiritual growth, and relationship with God. Moreover, truth and knowledge point us to God and help us encounter Him.

At the same time, those who put great value in things of the mind should not discount matters of the heart. Cognitive knowledge is not all there is; experiential knowledge is important, too. Neither one by itself can give us the full picture. Furthermore, we should be keenly aware of how the condition of our heart can greatly affect what we are willing to believe, for better or for worse. The mind will not assent to what the heart rejects.

Our culture tells us we have to choose between heart and mind, but that is a false dichotomy. If we can thoughtfully question our cultural narrative and its assumptions, and think deeply about what the Bible says, our hearts and minds can become one in harmony with each other. Only then will we experience the full joy, peace, and wonder that is possible with the God whose nature is the defining source of both reason and love. —*James Hoskins*

James Hoskins is a teacher, writer, and musician from Kansas City, Missouri. He teaches philosophy and science classes at a college prep high school. He writes about the intersection of reason, faith, and culture at his blog PhiloLogos.net, as well as christandpopculture.com.

NOTES

- 1 See Ronald L. Numbers, ed., *Galileo Goes to Jail: And Other Myths about Science and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
- 2 For a perfect example, see Steven Pinker, "Science Is Not Your Enemy," *The New Republic*, August 6, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114127/science-not-enemy-humanities>.
- 3 That is not to say we shouldn't question the philosophical assumptions of particular theories, especially if they are derived from the cultural story.