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## On That Heart-Knotting Feeling: An Outline

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in  
Theory and Criticism

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## **Abstract**

The following feeling is what inspired this thesis and what this thesis aims to outline: the human heart is a knot, formed by a string, tying a human being to the divine. Simone Weil's notion of affliction will broach the topic of the heart-knotting feeling. In the first chapter of the thesis, five qualities of affliction will be identified. In the second chapter, we will make a connection between Weilian affliction and the heart, understood by Dietrich von Hildebrand as an organ of affectivity and by the author as a transcendent souvenir. In the third chapter, we will discuss Christian biblical accounts of circumcision and circumcision of the heart. With the building blocks laid down, we will finally speak of the heart-knotting feeling in chapter four, more specifically, the formation and resolution of the heart-knotting feeling.

## **Keywords**

The Heart, Knot, Simone Weil, Affliction, Soren Kierkegaard, Dietrich von Hildebrand, Circumcision of the Heart, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Existential Theology, 心結.

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## Introduction

An attempt will be made in this thesis to outline a condition of spiritual attunement that could provisionally be described as *a feeling of one's heart in a knot*. Simone Weil's notion of affliction is the wedge that we shall use to pry into the heart-knotting feeling. An effort will be made in the first section of the dissertation to identify five qualities of affliction that will steer us in the desired direction. We will strive to understand affliction as a lived as opposed to an abstract condition, an approach rarely employed by scholars. To do this, an event in Weil's life will be analyzed to concretize the five qualities of affliction highlighted.

Transition from a discussion of affliction to a discussion of the heart-knotting feeling will be accomplished through Dietrich von Hildebrand's writings on affectivity, some personal reflections on the heart, and Christian biblical accounts of circumcision and circumcision of heart. It will be shown that, for von Hildebrand, the heart is the organ of affectivity, a receptive organ; all affects and feelings make their way towards the heart. A connection will be made between Weilian affliction and von Hildebrandian affectivity such that the heart, understood as the organ of affectivity, becomes the organ of affliction.

By conflating the heart with affectivity and feelings in the broadest sense, von Hildebrand does not quite address literal and metaphorical significance of the heart. In view of this gap, some personal views on the heart will be offered, noting, among other things, that the heart is a transcendent souvenir. That is to say, since the heart's movements are not within our control, whether it beats or stops beating decided not by us, the heart is in this sense something left behind by the transcendent, by that which is beyond us. This proposition problematizes the human-divine relationship. For example, the heart by keeping us alive also sustains our insufferable struggles against Weilian affliction. If the heart is a

transcendent souvenir, our link to that which is beyond us, what might this say about the divine? Where do human beings stand?

There will be one more topic to be discussed before turning to the heart-knotting feeling: Christian biblical accounts of circumcision and circumcision of the heart. Three attributes of circumcision are worthy of attention in view of the heart-knotting feeling. One, there is a before and an after to circumcision: the uncircumcised becomes the circumcised. Two, circumcision is lived and permanent: there is an irreversible change that stays with one for life. Three, a correlation between the physical and the spiritual can be discerned: the circumcised penis mirrors the circumcised heart and vice versa.

We will begin by introducing the covenant of circumcision found in *Genesis* 17: 9-14, thereby addressing the spiritual purpose of circumcision and consequences for the uncircumcised. Consulting *Genesis* commentaries, it will be shown that circumcised male genitalia serve to remind the circumcised of the divine and the divine of the circumcised, a mediator between the two. Those who are not circumcised suffer excommunication from the divinely chosen or possibly execution. Physical circumcision becomes spiritual circumcision when we turn to the *Deuteronomy*, in which Moses exhorts the Israelites to circumcise their hearts. Everything said about physical circumcision is here spiritualized: circumcision of the heart concerns a radical change of heart, akin to cutting away the foreskin. Two procedures of circumcision, plain circumcision and subincision, will then be described. We will argue that plain circumcision is in accord with the divine, an act of obeisance, and subincision is in discord with the divine, an act of recalcitrance.

We will finally move on to the heart-knotting feeling after considering circumcision and circumcision of the heart. There are two sections: formation of the heart-knotting feeling and resolution of the heart-knotting feeling. It will be argued that the heart-knotting feeling is a relative of Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir, and biblical circumcision. There

are familial resemblances between them. It will be shown that the heart-knotting feeling's *closest* relation is biblical circumcision, on account of the three attributes raised: before-and-after, lived permanency, and physical-spiritual correlation. The heart-knotting feeling follows a comparable, but by no means identical, pattern. There is the heart-knot unresolved and resolved; the heart-knot after resolution is different from the heart-knot before resolution; formation of the spiritual heart (i.e. the heart-knot) correlates with formation of a physical heart, resolution of the heart-knot correlates with resolution of a physical knot. On the basis of this analogous relationship between biblical circumcision and the heart-knotting feeling, we will employ the same approach regarding formation and resolution of the heart-knotting feeling as we employed regarding Weilian affliction, that is, to understand the heart-knotting feeling as a lived as opposed to an abstract condition. To do this, we will endeavor to model the spiritual upon the physical, the elusive upon the concrete.

In the first section on formation of the heart-knotting feeling, an examination of how a physical heart is formed will teach us much about how the spiritual heart (i.e. the heart-knot) is formed. The key point: formation of the physical heart and formation of the heart-knot are, in a way, one and the same process. Consequently, the physical heart is in a way the heart-knot and the heart-knot is in a way the physical heart. We will also mention two defining characteristics of the heart-knot: the heart-knot can be experienced with relative ease thanks to the heart's physical-spiritual duality; the divine by means of the heart-knot is leading us onwards in our lives.

In the second section on resolution of the heart-knotting feeling, we will show how resolution of a physical knot correlates with resolution of the heart-knot. We will argue firstly that in the untying and tearing of a physical knot there is a possible momentary encounter between a perceiving subject, anyone who witnesses the untying or tearing, and what was once hidden. Merleau-Ponty's views on perception will support this argument. According to Merleau-Ponty, to perceive something properly implies a breathing-in of the thing as a whole, as a unity. This unity is primordial because it precedes and

makes possible our every-day, practical, activities. Primordial unity of percepts is usually hidden and rarely manifest. A description of lived experience by Merleau-Ponty will illustrate how primordial unity of percepts may now be hidden and then manifest, allowing us to affirm that a perceiving subject momentarily encounters a world usually hidden when a physical knot is untied or torn.

Conclusions reached concerning how a physical knot is resolved will be applied to an understanding of how the heart-knot is resolved. Two claims will be made. One, there is a possible momentary encounter between a human being and the divine when the heart-knot is untied or torn. This momentary encounter between a human being and the divine accompanying resolution of the heart-knot is not unlike the momentary encounter between a perceiving subject and the hidden accompanying resolution of a physical knot. Two, there is a kind of primordial unity to the heart-knot not unlike the primordial unity of a physical knot.

It will be well for the reader to remember always that this thesis is merely an outline of the heart-knotting feeling, covering mainly kindred conditions and how the heart-knot is formed and resolved. Not much will be said about what happens in between heart-knot formation and resolution due to limitation of time and space.



## 1 Affliction

### 1.1 The Nail and Hammer Motif

Concerning affliction, multifarious and contradictory things have been written by Simone Weil. If we are to take into account all that have been written, we will run helplessly round in a circle. Here, it is observed that “affliction is an uprooting of life” (Weil, 1973, 77); there, “affliction makes God appear to be absent for a time” (ibid., 80); and elsewhere, “affliction hardens and discourages us” (ibid., 80). In a word, at times it appears as if any and every disagreeable condition under the sun could be tied in with the state of affliction. Among such divergences, there is one formulation of affliction that is singularly salient, that is to say, more developed and extensive than any of the others, and scarcely mentioned by scholars. This is the metaphor of the nail and the hammer:

Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of soul<sup>1</sup> and social degradation, all at the same time, constitutes the nail. The point is applied at the very centre of the soul. The head of the nail is all the necessity which spreads throughout the totality of space and time.

Affliction is a marvel of divine technique. It is a simple and ingenious device which introduces into the soul of a finite creature the immensity of force, blind, brutal and cold. (ibid., 93)

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<sup>1</sup> The original French reads: “*L'extrême malheur, qui est à la fois douleur physique, détresse de l'âme et dégradation sociale, constitue ce clou*” (Weil, 1962, 104). Emma Crauford, the translator, rendered the French *l'âme* as soul, spirit and spiritual. Other translators rendered *l'âme* as mind, the psychological and the psychic. To go into detail regarding the word's linguistic and philosophical history is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is sufficient, for our humble purposes, to recognize this nuance and try to understand *l'âme* in terms of the spiritual as opposed to the mental.

This metaphor of the nail and the hammer expresses a particular, funneling, relationship between the divine and the finite. The head of the nail, or the mouth of the funnel, represents the whole weight of the world, threatening to crush the finite individual at each passing temporal moment. As water gathers and falls impetuously down a point of depression, so an existing human being is inculcated with life's hardships and sufferings. With the capacity of an ocean, the world rams into and nearly implodes the finite being, a fragile vessel. This is necessary. "The sun shines on the just and on the unjust [...]. God makes himself *necessity*" (Weil, 1987, 38). Insofar as one exists in this world, one bathes in the light of divine impartiality. Human hopes are indiscriminately crushed; famine and slaughter befall the innocent and weak; and a brief life and imminent death for all. "[T]o work in order to eat, to eat in order to work [...]. Only the cycle contains the truth" (ibid., 158). From birth to death and everything in between, twists and turns of fate, feelings, thoughts, spoken words, tears, etcetera: all ordained by the divine. Necessity is overwhelming.

Before moving on it is perhaps helpful, in view of what is to come, to examine other interpretations of Weilian necessity. Ann Pirruccello conceives of Weilian necessity to mean indifference, "the total indifference of Necessity" (1995, 69). "The fragile and ultimately illusory equilibrium between the ego's command of force and the indifference of the world is eliminated as superior force swings decisively to the side of what opposes the ego's desire" (ibid., 69). Try as one might, oftentimes what one wishes for simply cannot come to be. The world cares not for one's life; dying now or dying later, regardless, everything else shall move on. "What the human being experiences is a world that is pure evil, [...] for all of the ego's attachments or supports have been torn away" (ibid., 69). Necessity as indifference accentuates a sense of abandonment. A human being is born into this world and left here, hanging, at the mercy of powers that be.

Necessity is by no means something wholly disagreeable. Allen & Springsted understand Weilian necessity in terms of the cosmos, "the cosmos of necessity" (1994, 103). The cosmos can be likened to

“a nexus of necessary relations in which all things are related by compulsion” (ibid., 103). By confining necessity to a cosmos or a nexus in which a human being exists, suspicions are aroused as to whether there is an outside. “The purpose of affliction—the good it brings—is *contact* between that which is outside necessity and that which is subject to necessity” (ibid., 103). What is outside of the cosmos of necessity is the divine, “the *ruler* of necessity, so that the cosmos obeys God in its operations” (ibid., 103). If everything pertaining to an existing human being is necessary, that nothing ever escapes necessity, indeed one’s desire for escape is necessary, so is one’s consequent frustration, then one’s hopelessness, and so on, then it is only through necessity can one transcend necessity. “People who are afflicted are feeling God touching them through the cosmic order which the Creator wields!” (ibid., 103) At this very early stage of the thesis, the lesson we may take away is that Weilian necessity holds within itself a potential for transcendence, a potential to somehow go beyond this cosmos in which we live. How this can be so will be explored later on.

These two understandings of Weilian necessity, as indifference and as cosmos, respectively present necessity as an irredeemable and a redeemable condition. This is an important distinction. Now what seems to be lacking from the two understandings, and most other scholarly sources, is a certain lived dimension to necessity and affliction, a specific experience of necessity and affliction. To return to the nail and hammer motif, if the head of the nail represents worldly necessity, overwhelming, everything that has happened, is happening and will happen, then the hammer that drives the nail into an existing human being represents the force of the divine. And, as we have also learned from the above quotation, the sharp end of the nail is aimed at one’s soul. According to the nail and hammer motif, necessity and affliction are intertwined, almost one and the same; the nail of affliction enters one’s soul when smashed by the hammer of divine force. To be afflicted is to feel and suffer worldly necessity ordained by the divine. On an abstract level this is all very clear and straightforward: yes, the hammer equates to the divine, the nail’s head to overwhelming worldly necessity, and the point will pierce one’s soul, and

all of these elements are bound up as one. Yet, what does all this really mean for the afflicted and how might an un-afflicted reader engage with this formulation of affliction? In other words, how may one come to understand affliction existentially, as a lived condition?

The afflicted “struggles like a butterfly which is pinned alive into an album” (Weil, 1973, 93). Let us examine this “butterfly.”<sup>2</sup> Look at the spasmodic movements of its ligaments and the labored writhing of its penetrated body, the tortured beating of its wings. There is certainly expressed here an overwhelming degree of pain, physical and (if possible) psychological, but the pain is not yet fatal. The butterfly is condemned to suffer consistently unspeakable agony, each second passing by, ever so slowly. Physically speaking, its innards are shredded by an intruding object and, psychologically speaking, its desires for an escape are frustrated to no ends. Previously, it may have been busily seeking out blossoming flowers, flapping its wings with unconcern. Then, suddenly seized by its wings by who knows what, it is laid down flat, underside up, impaled, and exposed to the gaze of all. The butterfly is taken out of its natural habitat, its relationship to the everyday, and inserted into a one-to-one, face-to-face, encounter with the hobbyist. Pinned down, the butterfly is totally naked, with no way of covering itself up. As the hobbyist hangs and displays the album, the world gathers round and watches. Eviscerated, the butterfly is opened up to the world, its body splayed by force. If a butterfly could feel shame and humiliation, then no doubt in its present state of utter nudity the color of its cheeks would come to resemble that scarlet fluid seeping out of its wound.

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<sup>2</sup> This presentation of affliction by Weil, of a butterfly pinned down while still alive, resonates strongly with Ann Astell’s understanding of the condition of affliction. Astell considers affliction to be a summation of “traditional binary divisions of the spiritual life into action and contemplation or work and prayer” into “a more fundamental polarity between activity and passivity” (1995, 208). “The soul’s *active* reception of God in the most *passive* and constrained of human conditions”: this, for Astell, constitutes affliction (emphasis added; *ibid.*, 208).

This last metaphor leads us from the pinned down butterfly to the afflicted human being. Concerning the afflicted human being, one may first postulate that what had been physical in the case of the butterfly here becomes spiritual. This is partially valid. For, after all, it is not as if the nail is aimed at one's heart; rather, the nail is aimed at one's soul. Accordingly, if, as we have argued, the pinned down butterfly in its utter nudity is forcefully exposed to the world, then the afflicted human being as the bearer of worldly necessity is likewise destined for a comparable fate. There is, however, an overall difference in degree between the situation of the butterfly and that of the afflicted, a veritable gulf. In the former case, the relationship is between a butterfly and a hobbyist while, in the latter case, it is between that of a human being and the divine. It is its immediate surroundings that invade the butterfly, either the room of the hobbyist or at most a display hall. The nail that pins down the butterfly is really a nail, not an embodiment of the world's overwhelming currents, and the nail makes contact with the butterfly's physical form. What we have here is a particular scene from this world, a scene in the life of a hobbyist as she prepares a new specimen for display. Surely, the butterfly suffers and the hobbyist is caught up in her own thoughts and feelings, but everything is localized and stationary. The world at large, authored by the divine, is seemingly excluded.

Let us elaborate on the localization of this scene. There was something that we did not mention above when describing the state of the pinned down butterfly, that is, the nail is the point of intersection between the temporal and the eternal. After being impaled by the nail and suffering for some time ineffable pain, the butterfly slowly relents, its ligaments exhausted as its life-force steals away steadily. No longer flailing and struggling, the butterfly, near its end, gives off perhaps a slight spasm, signifying death's triumph, before becoming completely motionless and still. Thereafter, carefully preserved behind a pristine sheet of glass, the untouchable cadaver emanates longevity and permanency. The nail witnessed and did everything. It is responsible for both ending the butterfly's lively existence and ushering it into a lifeless existence, from a state when time had been a factor (there is a time for

scouring, feeding and procreating) to a state wherein time simply drags on and homogenizes, all the way to infinity and back. In this way, it would be well to re-evaluate the statement that the nail is merely a nail, a physical instrument employed by the hobbyist. All the agony and misery arising from worldly necessity are concentrated in the nail and, through physical contact, veritably shatter the butterfly. As a result, the dying butterfly comes to suffer, all at once, pains of the world ordinarily suffered by human beings in intervals, throughout an entire lifetime. This theory perhaps sheds some light on the extremity of the butterfly's condition. By means of the nail, the butterfly travels and experiences the world at lightning speed while remaining factually in one spot. By means of the nail, the butterfly passes from the temporal into the eternal, a common epithet of the divine.

In spite of an overall difference in degree separating the pinned down butterfly and the afflicted human being, there is still a correlative relationship between the experiences of the former and those of the latter. This is not as simple as a transition from the physical to the spiritual, for the above quotation states: "Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of soul and social degradation, all at the same time [...]" Though the nail is aimed at the center of one's soul, it seems there is a corresponding pain somewhere in one's body and one might also find oneself in a somewhat disagreeable social situation. *How does affliction bring about physical pain, spiritual distress and social degradation?* This question will serve as a guiding thread for us and will be answered completely at the end of the thesis's second chapter. From what we have said so far regarding the pinned down butterfly, there are five key qualities which can be extracted. These five qualities will be important in our transition from a discussion of affliction to a discussion of our theme, the heart-knotting feeling. We shall examine the qualities one at a time, relating each quality to the afflicted human being, demonstrating the need for the discussion of affliction to be connected to lived experience.

The first quality pertains to what Soren Kierkegaard termed "to die death" in his discussion of despair (1983, 18). Despair for Kierkegaard does not revolve around something external to the individual. "An

individual in despair despairs over *something*. So it seems for a moment” (ibid., 19). Only at first sight and in superficial terms is despair outwardly oriented. In reality, despair is inwardly oriented, the despairing individual “in despairing over *something*, he really despaired over *himself*, and now he wants to be rid of himself” (ibid., 19). The self, however, cannot be rid of for Kierkegaard since the self as spirit is a divine vassal, everlasting. “The eternal in a person can be proved by the fact that despair cannot consume his self” (ibid., 21). The self in despair tries to run away from who she is in spiritual terms but, like the butterfly, is pinned down in place. “[H]e wants to tear his self away from the power that established it. [...] [H]owever, he cannot manage to do it [...], that power is the stronger and forces him to be the self he does not want to be” (ibid., 20). She rejects her self as ordained by the divine, striving always to be someone of her earthly choosing. But only the spiritual self remains, the self in contact with the divine; all earthly selves begin and end with the spiritual self. Thus, “despair is veritably a self-consuming, but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do” (ibid., 18). The self in despair wants to do away with what cannot be done away. Consequently, the self dies death, not a physical but a spiritual death, a death wherein one is made to suffer continuously the pain and agony of dying without closure.

A part of the afflicted individual’s experience is this feeling of dying death, this “impotent self-consuming.” Like the Kierkegaardian self in despair, there is an inward tension tearing apart the afflicted. For the pinned down butterfly, there is closure. When that nail penetrates its body, the butterfly wishes for a swift end to its misery more than for anything else. Its wish is granted; death soon whisks away the butterfly. This is because, after all is said and done, the physical takes the front seat there. With the nail aimed at the soul of the afflicted, however, there is no escape through death as we understand it, for the physical, the spiritual and the social are intertwined here. The nail impaling one’s soul also impales a bodily organ and, as we shall see how later, brings about social ruin. That inward tension tearing apart the afflicted has to do with a certain indecision: “There is a point in affliction where we are no longer

able to bear either that it should go on or that we should be delivered from it" (Weil, 1987, 73). The afflicted at times resembles a criminal being quartered, caught in between. On the one hand, affliction is a privilege; it is the divine that impales the afflicted with the nail of affliction. On the other hand, affliction is an abyss; the afflicted simply cannot endure the power of divine force. At this early stage of the thesis, we cannot address this issue adequately. For now, it is helpful perhaps to make a comparison and say that this inward tension is akin to a phobia. The sufferer of a phobia lives under a shadow. There is always something unsettling dangling above, a weight hindering every thought and movement. The sufferer knows of this sinister existence but dares not go near it and root it out. When it on its own accord comes to confront the sufferer, we have then an analogy to the experience of dying death.

Consider a trypanophobe (someone who is afraid of needles) who is obliged to transfuse blood with a family member. At first, goaded on by blind courage and with eyes tightly shut, he flexes his arm straight, leaving his veins bare. The suspense gradually escalates with each second that passes by. He senses the nurse disinfecting the needle, picking up some alcohol-soaked cotton and reaching out towards the spot. The cotton's chill shatters all his thin courage and, involuntarily, he wrenches his arm back and yells out, covering his face in shame. This scene for the sufferer plays out like a broken record, repeating itself for perhaps half a day until finally the impatient nurse grabs his arm and stabs it with the needle.

Throughout the ordeal, there is a stuttering in his gestures and an incessant ticking in his features, as if his entire body is engaged in a tug-of-war with another, each simple action strenuous and exhausting. How badly he wants to conquer his fears and how badly he fails to do so, just as the Kierkegaardian self in despair wants to die but just cannot! He wants to but he cannot, this is the inward tension tearing apart the trypanophobe.

There should also be something like a broken record, stuttering and spasmodic, in the afflicted individual's experience. Let us keep this at heart for the moment and go on to the second quality to be extracted, for we must put the pieces together before looking at the puzzle. The second quality answers



part of the question raised previously, that is: how exactly does affliction bring about social degradation?

If one may recall, the butterfly experienced a dramatic change in its environment, at one moment carefree in a meadow and in the next impaled in the abode of the hobbyist. There is also an environmental change in the case of the afflicted, though not one so literal. Divine force slams down on the head of the nail, a symbol of worldly necessity, in turn driving the nail into the soul of the afflicted. When the hammer meets the nail and the nail meets the soul, contact, mediated and indirect, is established between the finite and the divine. At the same time, acquainted with the world's impartiality and cruelty, great sorrow comes over the afflicted. The afflicted is distinguished by contact with the divine, set apart from the crowd, much as the pinned down butterfly is distinguished from its fellows outside in the wild.

In one sense, the afflicted is not as constrained as the pinned down butterfly while, in another sense, the afflicted is infinitely more constrained. Since the afflicted is spiritually impaled, she is free to physically move anywhere she wants, something which the butterfly strives for with all its might. For the butterfly, physical well-being is perhaps sufficient for living the good life; everything is fine if it could feed and procreate with little disturbance from the world. For the afflicted, on the other hand, freedom of movement and even bodily health do not mitigate the gnawing inner turmoil. In fact, to be out in the world, surrounded by others bustling on their way to their appointments, enjoying their meals, sweet-talking with their beloveds, exacerbates the afflicted individual's torments. The feelings she had been suffused with in solitude are now confirmed by the meaninglessness of everyday life: again, "to work in order to eat, to eat in order to work." The cuffs of spiritual constraint follow her wherever she goes; hardly is there a moment of relief and release in her life. To seek help and guidance from another is impossible: "Among the people they meet, those who have never had contact with affliction in its true sense can have no idea of what it is [...]. [C]ompassion for the afflicted is an impossibility" (Weil, 1973, 79). The afflicted is alone and on her own. "In affliction, if it is complete, a man is deprived of all human

relationship” (Weil, 1974, 95). This is the second quality: a degradation of the social through distinction and isolation of the afflicted.<sup>3</sup>

Before moving on to the third quality to be considered, it is important to reiterate that contact between the afflicted and the divine is mediated by the nail of affliction, or worldly necessity.<sup>4</sup> “God is joy, and

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<sup>3</sup> Weil’s account of factory workers may also be considered as an example of social degradation:

[W]e must do away with the shock experienced by a lad who at twelve or thirteen leaves school and enters a factory. [...] The child while at school, whether a good or a bad pupil, was a being whose existence was recognized [...]. From one day to the next, he find himself an extra cog in a machine, rather less than a thing[.] (Weil, 2002, 54)

The young factory worker and the afflicted who is spiritually impaled both undergo a change in their social environments. However, as will be made clearer below, whereas the young factory worker moves from a state of recognition in schools to a state of anonymity at the assembly line, the afflicted who is spiritually impaled moves from a state of anonymity (as just another creaturely being) to a state of recognition (before the divine).

Some scholars argue that the factory worker is afflicted. For example, Alyda Faber draws attention to how “Weil evokes the physical, psychic and social conditions of the factory worker as a particular image of affliction” (2006, 87). According to Faber, Weil “observes that factory workers suffer physical injury and psychic distress. Workers are harassed by constant noise; they become things that follow orders without any understanding of the larger processes of their labour” (ibid., 88). This demonstrates the interpretive diversity of affliction, something we noted at the beginning of this section.

<sup>4</sup> Ever since introducing the nail and hammer motif, there may have occurred and recurred to the reader some vague image of Christ crucified. Now that we are on the topic of the nail of affliction as mediator between the afflicted and the divine, we can briefly address significance of the Crucifixion. Eric O. Springsted on Weilian affliction and mediation notes: “[...] the inescapable void between God and creatures. This distance is an omnipresent factor in all human life, but it is most evident and seen as a problem in affliction” (1983, 90). There is an abyss separating the divine and the creaturely; a tenable proposition. Where does Christ come in?

creation is affliction; but it is an affliction radiant with the light of joy” (ibid., 98). Just as the firmament stands between us and the sun, sometimes clear and sometimes cloudy, so the veil of affliction can either clarify or obscure relationship between the afflicted and the divine. Insofar as the afflicted is spiritually impaired, this relationship is ubiquitous, in effect everywhere she goes. It is a bond tying her, via the world, to the divine. The world as middle term, however, can at times usurp the place of the divine, becoming everything for the afflicted. “In anyone who has suffered affliction for a long enough time there is a complicity with regard to his own affliction” (Weil, 1973, 81). The afflicted may develop a love for worldly necessity, for what the world has brought her and can bring her, that is to say, material and transient goods.<sup>5</sup> “[T]his complicity may even induce him to shun the means of deliverance” (ibid., 82). So enamored could the afflicted become with this world that gradually she comes to forget her previous convictions on the emptiness of earthly pleasures. The world eclipses the divine; the afflicted

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“The Son is, in fact, afflicted. Like every other person who is afflicted Christ must endure the scorn and calumny heaped upon him (the mocking and scourging), he wants to avoid his inexorable fate (the Agony), *his power of self-movement is denied him (being nailed to the Cross)*” (emphasis added; ibid., 96). The physically pierced butterfly and the spiritually pierced afflicted are reflections of Christ crucified. Christ, as the Son, as the point of intersection between the divine and the creaturely, is the Mediator. “Christ continues to love the Father even in affliction. [...] Christ is the Mediator for his act of unreserved consent and love on the Cross makes the very means of greatest separation the means of contact with God” (ibid., 99). We are straying into the realm of Christian mysticism. To say more in words, to attempt to explain the process of identification with Christ the Mediator, is equal to saying nothing at all, or worse, to further obfuscate the matter at hand.

<sup>5</sup> Springsted observes: “[T]he fortunate tend to confuse the necessary with the good, they do not see affliction as a real possibility of human life. The afflicted, on the other hand, [...] they are the first to see that good transcends necessity” (1983, 84). The fortunate, for Springsted, are not afflicted, they are merely human beings who happen to have profited from worldly necessity. Our account thus expands upon Springsted’s point, noting that the afflicted themselves could also “confuse the necessary with the good.”

learns to enjoy pain inflicted by the nail of affliction, blind to the hammer of divine might. Relationship between the afflicted and the divine is obscured.

An obscuring of the afflicted-divine relationship happens easily. There is no difficulty in giving oneself over to earthly pleasures; one simply has to go with the flow. On the other hand, a clarification of the afflicted-divine relationship demands utmost perseverance and focus, a going against the grain. "He whose soul remains ever turned in the direction of God while the nail pierces it, finds himself nailed on to the very centre of the universe" (ibid., 93). In spite of all earthly distractions, in spite of overwhelming pain caused by the nail of affliction, the afflicted with clear eyes maintains a steady gaze, looking straight ahead. "They alone will see God who prefer to recognize the truth and die, instead of living a long and happy existence in a state of illusion" (Weil, 1974, 98). To ingratiate oneself with the divine means a simultaneous distancing from the earthly; earthly pleasure but spiritual degeneration, spiritual enlightenment but earthly darkening, these are indeed paradoxes. To voluntarily suffer social degradation,<sup>6</sup> to feel oneself standing alone like a lamppost at midnight, signifies a moving away from this world towards the divine. The ground beneath one trembles and breaks away, raising one up high. The clear-eyed afflicted sees through worldly necessity; she salutes and dismisses the messenger, longing for her correspondent.

So affliction is not an irredeemable condition. This point will be reinforced by the three remaining qualities to be considered. The third quality that we shall discuss arises out of the second quality. It is

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<sup>6</sup> Not always does an afflicted person get to snub everyone around her. Sometimes, social degradation is suffered involuntarily as the afflicted is cast aside by the masses. The afflicted may "come into contact with other more fortunate human beings. But they do not come into contact with others as men, but rather as things, and they are treated as such" (Springsted, 1983, 74). And, again: "[T]he afflicted are invisible because the fortunate do not want to see them, since they cannot bear the sight of affliction. The afflicted are a reminder of their own fragility and mortality" (ibid., 74-75).

that of an existential one-to-one encounter with something greater than oneself. Weil writes that “[a]ffliction is essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity” (ibid., 94). In light of the nail and hammer motif, we must elaborate this statement by noting that the afflicted is anonymous in one sense and recognized in another. The loss of one personality, an earthly personality, due to affliction signifies the taking on of another personality, a spiritual personality. The butterfly was engaged in a one-to-one encounter with the hobbyist after having been isolated and, in turn, distinguished from other butterflies. Previously, the butterfly was not a one but a part of the multitude; it flowed alongside innumerable other organisms in the stream of the world, blind and spiritually anonymous. By suffering social degradation, by being lifted out of the stream like a fish out of water, the butterfly enters into a dramatically different mode of existence. No longer able to simply go along with the flow and hide in the world’s midst, the illusions that had guided the butterfly dissipate. No longer clothed and safe, the butterfly is naked and exposed. Disillusioned, the butterfly struggles wildly to recover its bearings, kicking with its ligaments and exerting its wings to no avail in the mighty grips of the hobbyist. Then, the nail invades the butterfly’s body. The butterfly is singled out and becomes a particular butterfly; the butterfly becomes a one in a one-to-one encounter, the other one being the hobbyist.

Shock and mortification characterize the transition from being a part of the multitude to being a one. The butterfly suffers this ordeal unwillingly, that is to say, having been lifted out of the worldly stream, it looks back longingly and would give anything to retreat to its hiding place, to cover up its naked body. The afflicted, like the butterfly, is also lifted out of the worldly stream and encounter the divine through the nail and hammer symbolism. She does not, however, look back with longing but with wonder. The afflicted quietly suffers her impalement and, in addition, finds the view above the stream to be quite enjoyable and breathtaking. Here, the one-to-one encounter unfolds differently. Rather than becoming an object as the butterfly is for the hobbyist, the afflicted is taken up and assimilated by the divine, however imperfectly that may be. “By fatigue, *affliction* and death, man is made matter and is

consumed by God” (emphasis added; Weil, 1987, 29-30). Now and then, the afflicted aligns with the divine. Seeing that the worldly stream is actually an embodiment of divine necessity, the afflicted throws herself back into the stream, splashing with joy. She is naked, ungirded by social conventions and willingly exposes herself to the ways of the world, its impartiality and pains; self-mortified, she, in contrast to the butterfly, understands the ways of the world and actively inclines herself towards asceticism. A guiding maxim for the afflicted: “Appearance clings to being, and pain alone can tear them from each other” (ibid., 34). The butterfly opens up to the world by being eviscerated by the hobbyist; the afflicted opens up to the world by eviscerating herself, smiling as she does so.

We arrive now at the fourth quality, that of nakedness. So far, the existential lived experience of affliction must include: dying death, distinction then isolation, a singular one-to-one encounter, and nakedness. The fifth and last quality we shall extract is that of a passage from the temporal into the eternal. The nail is the point of intersection between the temporal and the eternal. For the butterfly, this meant that the nail was responsible for both ending its physical existence and transforming it into a precious specimen behind glass, untouchable and seemingly to last forever. For the afflicted, the pain experienced as the hammer meets the nail and the nail the soul ends her life hitherto in the multitude and ushers her into a one-to-one encounter with the divine. “One must tenderly love the harshness of that necessity which is like a coin with two faces, the one turned towards us being *domination*, and the one turned towards God, *obedience*” (emphases added; Weil, 1974, 89). We may elaborate here how the nail of affliction, symbolizing worldly necessity, can either obscure or clarify the relationship between the afflicted and the divine. Obfuscation happens when the afflicted is fooled by the world, when the world eclipses the divine. In this case, necessity manifests itself as dominator; the afflicted is under necessity’s heel, happy or sad according to whether the world gives or withholds. Clarification happens when the afflicted pierces this world with her gaze, catching sight of the divine. In this case, necessity no longer manifests itself as dominator but a mere servant, obeying orders from above.

Two sides of the same coin are so close yet so far away, they are stuck together, but they are never meant to see each other face to face. Flip a coin; the two sides commingle and almost become one indistinguishable image. Similarly, for the afflicted, the world can alternate between being a dominator and a servant in the blink of an eye. "We are the slaves of necessity, but we are also the sons of her Master" (ibid., 90). For the butterfly, since impalement is physical, there is no turning back having once passed from temporality into eternity. For the afflicted, since impalement is spiritual, temporality and eternity must be understood differently as fluid, not rigid, states of being. Emil Cioran wrote of experiencing eternity: "When speaking of life, you say *moments*; of eternity, *moment*. The experience of eternity is void of life, a conquest of time, a victory over the moments of life" (1992, 65). Temporality and eternity as fluid states of being correspond respectively to an obscuring and clearing of the afflicted-divine relationship. Now the afflicted lives her life, a hungry and thirsty creature under the heel of worldly necessity; then a spirit triumphant, punching a hole through her hunger and thirst. "Eternity can be attained only if there are no connections, if one lives the instant totally and absolutely" (ibid., 64). She who lives temporally can be likened to a ship steadily sailing across the sea, circumscribed by a place of origin and a destination, always on the go. An eternal state of being can be likened to a maelstrom, something rare and extraordinary, that which suspends a ship's journey, whirling it round and round.

Now that all the pieces of the puzzle are brought together, what kind of a picture are we being presented with? One may reply: a still incomplete picture. Affliction signifies simultaneous physical pain, spiritual distress, and social degradation. It appears that only social degradation has been sufficiently accounted for above through the distinction and isolation of the afflicted. One may quickly argue that the quality of dying death is an expression of physical pain and that the quality of distinction through isolation a possible expression of spiritual distress. On an abstract and speculative level, this is valid. However, this is more difficult to grasp on a more concrete level, on the level of lived experience and existence. How exactly is the quality of dying death an expression of physical pain? Where might this

physical pain be located? In what way is distinction through isolation spiritually distressing? In light of such questions concerning physical, spiritual and social implications of affliction, a case study based on real life seems to be appropriate. Such a case study would lead us further along in understanding affliction and, moreover, could gradually direct our attention toward our theme, the heart-knotting feeling.

## 1.2 Simone Weil's Dilemma

To this end, let us examine an episode in the life of Simone Weil herself. Our goal here is to refine the five qualities we have extracted previously so as both to clarify affliction and to orient ourselves toward the heart-knotting feeling. In her biography of Weil, Simone Pétrement alludes to Weil's departure from Marseilles and France in May 1942. Two reasons apparently goaded Weil towards deciding to leave: "to get her parents to a safe place [and] to be employed in actions useful in the war" (Pétrement, 1976, 463). In a letter penned on April 16 to Father Perrin, a Dominican priest whom Weil was acquainted with a year before, Weil wrote:

You know that for me there is no question in this departure of an escape from suffering and danger. My anguish comes precisely from the fear that, *in spite of myself and unwittingly*, by going I shall be doing what I want above everything else not to do—that is to say, run away. Up till now we have lived here peacefully. If this peace is destroyed *just after* I have gone away, it will be frightful for me. (emphases added; *ibid.*, 463)

According to our discussion of affliction so far, can we say that Simone Weil is afflicted by her situation? Hereafter we will argue the affirmative. She is faced with a dilemma: to stay or to leave France. She stands at an impasse, a crossroad with signs pointing and paths meandering every other way, as either of the two choices entails an infinite series of implications stretching beyond human imagination. This impasse thus cannot be resolved through human effort and intellect. Human intervention is actually part



of the problem and the source of one's possible undoing.<sup>7</sup> What Weil is afraid of is that "*in spite of myself and unwittingly*" she would make a decision that she shall regret and undertake a course of action that will cause her great agony. The solution to the impasse lies in the world, or, in other words, in the divine as necessity and impartiality. Only the divine could tell Weil where the present shall flow to and what position she occupies in the grand scheme of things, while the human could only writhe and squirm in uncertainty. The head of the nail of affliction hovers above her, shadowing her soul. In her dilemma, Weil is paralyzed and immobile, in the grips of the world as the butterfly is in the grips of the hobbyist.

There is another, more important, point to be made. Weil not only faces a dilemma but is also plagued by a sense of foreboding. She worries that "*just after*" she has left Marseilles the peace hitherto shall end and "she would find herself in the position of someone who had run away from danger and misfortune" (ibid., 463).<sup>8</sup> There is at work here a potential dovetailing of events (departure followed

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<sup>7</sup> In the same letter to Father Perrin, Weil writes: "I do not in the least wish to leave, I shall leave with anguish. The calculations as to the probabilities that are making me decide are so uncertain that they scarcely give me support" (Pétrement, 1976, 463). It is fairly clear that there is in fact a dilemma confronting Weil, a situation beyond human control. On the one hand, she wishes to leave Marseilles to protect her parents and contribute to the war effort; on the other hand, she is afraid that by leaving Marseilles she would inadvertently betray her suffering compatriots by seemingly running away. She is effectively caught in between two choices.

<sup>8</sup> We have reason to believe that Weil was really plagued by a sense of foreboding in her predicament if we peruse some letters written by her in the 1930's concerning the future of Europe. Weil had much insight and prescience, like other intellectuals of the day. In a 1934 letter penned to a pupil, Weil wrote:

Every military alliance is odious, but an alliance with Germany would probably be a lesser evil; for in that case a war between Russia and Germany (with Japan participating too, no doubt) would remain comparatively localized; on the other hand, if France and Russia marched together against Germany and

immediately by a destruction of peace) that is not only beyond human control but also in deliberate mockery of it. It is as if the whole world is holding its breath, just waiting for Weil to leave so as to exhale, blowing peace to smithereens and casting her into an abyss. This sense of foreboding can be compared to a sliver, piercing and lodging itself under the skin, painful and difficult to remove, driving one mad.<sup>9</sup> There are other instances in life, ranging from the most mundane to the most dramatic,

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Japan it would be another conflagration which would spread to the whole of Europe and beyond – an incredible catastrophe. (1965, 7)

And, again, in the same letter:

I foresee the future like this: we are entering upon a period of more centralized and more oppressive dictatorship than any known to us in history. But the very excess of centralization weakens the central power. One fine day (perhaps we shall live to see it, perhaps not) everything will collapse in anarchy and there will be a return to almost primitive forms of the struggle for existence. (ibid., 8)

As the 1930's culminated in the outbreak of the Second World War, seeing with her own eyes her predictions coming true, Weil may have become ever more assured of her feelings and intuitions. In light of this self-assurance, Weil's worry that peace will end just after her departure from Marseille could have taken on extraordinary urgency. A possible thought preoccupying Weil: the worst is bound to happen.

<sup>9</sup> There is a detail in Weil's experience that accentuates this metaphor of the sense of foreboding being a sliver under the skin. Weil's "departure was not as near as she had thought" (Pétrement, 1976, 464). Weil "thought at the beginning of May that she would leave on the sixth or seventh. But a few days later she wrote to [her friend Gustave] Thibon: 'Our departure has been delayed until about the fifteenth of May. Until then many things can happen'" (ibid., 464). Although Weil does not specify what she means by "many things," the possibility of peace ending due to a German offensive must have kept her awake at night. This unforeseen delay in her departure from Marseilles may have exacerbated that "anguish" Weil expressed in the April 16 letter cited above. In the interim, while waiting to leave, she could have pondered: "If I had left in time, perhaps everything would have turned out fine. I would not have had to suffer from possible guilt of abandoning my compatriots. But now, now that my

wherein this sense of foreboding can also be detected. A mundane example: A farmer wakes up minutes before the cock crows. Seeing the faint light of the rising sun in her room, she understands that she must work soon; but she is still tired. Closing her eyes, she tries to savor a few more moments of rest, knowing full well that time is running out. There forms within her a feeling of dread, that just when she falls back to sleep the cock will crow. A more dramatic example: A soldier prepares to maneuver through an open field, knowing full well that enemy snipers are perhaps watching. He fears that just when he manages to work up the courage to make his way across the field, within a few paces he will be spotted and killed.<sup>10</sup>

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departure is delayed, perhaps the stars are lining up and just after I leave the peace hitherto shall indeed be shattered. And, should a German offensive happen sometime this week, do I stay to suffer with my compatriots or leave so as to protect my parents?" That initial "anguish" experienced by Weil is prolonged and intensified, lodging itself ever deeper into the skin. The dilemma and the sense of foreboding become doubly complicated by the postponement of her departure.

<sup>10</sup> There are hints in other letters by Weil suggesting that she was concerned from time to time with issues of personal destiny and coincidences beyond human control. Almost a month after her letter to Father Perrin, in a letter penned May 12 to Joë Bousquet, a World War I soldier "permanently paralysed as the result of a wound," Weil observed: "for twenty years you have been repeating in thought that destiny which seized and then released so many men, but which seized you permanently" (Weil, 1965, 136). It is apparent here that Weil is sensitive to a connection between chance and suffering; a tragic occurrence beyond personal control remains with one forever, recalled again and again, embedded under the skin. In another letter penned in 1941 to Admiral Leahy, "the United States Ambassador at Vichy," Weil wrote: "Up to this moment, however, there has not been any need for heroism; we have not yet felt hunger. It may come, of course, even to-morrow" (ibid., 132). With the onset of war, Weil was certainly anxious about what the future may bring. Perhaps these two instances can assist one in imagining Weil's state of being in her predicament.

Herein one can find traces of the extracted five qualities. Weil, the farmer and the soldier are all confronted by a strange concatenation of events; strange because it seems as if the three of them are being pranked by a greater power. They sense something to be awry, but are in no position to pinpoint what exactly is wrong. As Weil deliberates whether to stay or to leave, the farmer whether to wake up or fall back to sleep, the soldier to wait or to cross the field, they are set apart from the common mass of human beings. There is passage from a temporal to an eternal state of being as life according to worldly necessity, that is to say, life circumscribed by birth and death, is put on hold. Usually, there are boosts and setbacks during one's day. To move forwards or be pushed backwards, this is ordinary. To be tied in place, unable to move at all, this is extraordinary. Weil, the farmer and the soldier are all being sucked in by their peculiar predicaments, as a maelstrom sucks in a ship. The three of them in the process of deliberation are turned round and round themselves, dizzy and indecisive. Not everyone may feel this sense of foreboding when placed in the same situation; this sense of foreboding can only be felt by those with a certain degree of inwardness. Someone who is bold and rash would simply decide on what to do and do it; it is silly to dwell on whether this or that could happen. The three of them cannot explain themselves clearly to another. They may say, "I've got a bad feeling about this," and be met with a blank stare even when their interlocutor holds a similar suspicion. In short, this sense of foreboding is beyond words.

When we were discussing the quality of dying death and its relation to phobias, drawing from Kierkegaardian despair, we noted that to die death means to suffer from a certain stutter and spasm resembling a broken record. The trypanophobe, if one may recall, acts as if he is engaged in a tug-of-war with another. Something of that sort happens here. Weil at her impasse is not physically constrained but she is nonetheless constrained in some peculiar way. Outwardly speaking, there is nothing hindering her from deciding on what to do and to carry it out. To stay or to leave France, her feet shall oblige. Inwardly speaking, the situation is rather different. Let us put ourselves in Weil's shoes and briefly recall a

previous confrontation with a dilemma. After a good deal of consideration, we finally seem to be settled on a decision. At the moment when that decision is about to be sealed once and for all, however, there is more often than not a pull from the back of our mind, a pull undoing all the progress we have made so far. We scold ourselves for our rashness and sink back again into contemplation. Our certainty and resolution a moment ago dissolve and to our starting point, uncertainty and doubt, we return. As the trypanophobe in great anguish repetitively extends and rescinds his arm, so one may imagine Weil standing literally at a crossroad, her toes now pointing this way and now that way, but move she cannot.

What is holding the trypanophobe and Weil back? If one were to pose this question to the two seemingly paralyzed human beings, they would very likely reply with some anger and irritation: Can you not see that I have a fear of needles or am in a grave dilemma? Immediately, a fear of needles and a dilemma are accused of being the culprits. They are the most obvious and perhaps the only responses which occur to our two subjects. To say that fear or dilemma is holding one back is the same as to say that one is a passive sufferer, a victim of external forces, of needles and wars. This is undoubtedly true. At the same time, however, there is also an active element in play. It is helpful here to recall again Kierkegaardian despair for comparison. He who is desperate in Kierkegaardian terms does not suffer passively from an outward event but is in reality an active agent who wishes to efface his spiritual self. The initial impression that an outward event is the source of one's despair is an illusion; it is really the inward self that is at issue. The latter as divine vassal, however, cannot be effaced. In a similar way, Weil and the trypanophobe are also fooled by an illusion. They are not merely passive sufferers but also active agents, striving to do away something which cannot be done away, and their respective predicaments bear a mark of the divine.

Immediately speaking, dilemma and fear of needles are factors to be considered. To speak in grander terms, however, we may postulate that what is holding Weil and the trypanophobe back and pinning them in place is the nail of affliction, or worldly necessity ordained by the divine. When the nail

penetrates the butterfly, the hobbyist staples the butterfly to an album, specially selected and fitting for the specimen in question. Once carefully placed inside the album and put on display, the butterfly has fulfilled its vocation with respect to the hobbyist. Likewise, insofar as the butterfly and hobbyist metaphor is reliable, when the nail of affliction penetrates the trypanophobe and Weil, divine force staples the two of them to their ordained vocations. With undue audacity, for the sake of convenience, we will presume that the divine ordained blood transfusion vis-à-vis the trypanophobe and imminent departure vis-à-vis Weil. In light of this ordinance, both Weil and the trypanophobe are postponing the inevitable. They are struggling to loosen themselves from the nail, much as the butterfly is flailing its ligaments. Sooner or later, however, the needle will enter the trypanophobe's arm and Weil will leave. It is necessary. "Men can never escape from obedience to God. A creature cannot but obey" (Weil, 88, 1973). Both Weil and the trypanophobe are looking to buy more time, but that which has time, has all the time in the world, the divine, is not selling. There is then conflict between buyer and seller, between she who tries to arrest time and time which cannot be arrested. Here are the competitors in the tug-of-war mentioned. At this side, the nail of affliction is infinitely steadfast, bearing within it the momentum of divine force. At that side, the afflicted is persistent but feeble, pulling at the nail as an ant tries to move a boulder.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one is not quite satisfied with this line of argument, wherein everything seems to be derived from Weil's comparison of affliction to a butterfly nailed alive to an album. By grounding everything in a scene from ordinary life, does the profane not threaten to take over the thesis? Can the divine really be found in such quotidian scenes? These are fatal questions, not easily resolved, as we struggle to apprehend affliction concretely as opposed to abstractly. It should be emphasized, however, that we are here merely trying to better understand affliction under the nail and hammer motif. Some of what is being discussed will be pertinent to the body of the thesis and some will not.

Now that we are somewhat clear about what is holding back and pinning in place Weil and the trypanophobe, we will tackle first the issue of physical pain and then the issue of spiritual distress accompanying affliction. Both physical pain and spiritual distress revolve around the question of what it feels like to be pierced by the nail of affliction. This question has been partially addressed above in approximations of Weil and the trypanophobe's conditions: there is in both cases something resembling a broken record, a certain stutter and spasm. Viewed under the aspect of our new discovery, that the nail of affliction and the afflicted are two competitors in a tug-of-war, those earlier observations are clarified. The stutters and spasms originate from a struggling against the steadfast nail of affliction, or worldly necessity ordained by the divine. It is a bit of a stretch, however, to say that mere stutters and spasms constitute physical pain. At most, they are discomforts. To arrive at a feeling worthy to be called pain, we must attempt to gather everything to a single, critical, point. When faced with a dilemma, aside from a certain stutter and spasm, the afflicted may also feel a tingling on her forehead as perspiration begin breaking out, a furrowing of her brows, a tightening up of her complexion, a pounding of her *heart*, a binding of her feet, etcetera, as she racks her brain for a solution. It appears that physical discomforts manifest themselves everywhere on her body, from head to toe, as she competes in a tug-of-war showdown with the nail of affliction.<sup>12</sup> Is there, however, a full-bodied feeling which could possibly tie

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to always remember that the nail of affliction symbolizes worldly necessity, overwhelming, everything great and small which has happened, is happening and will happen. Thus, to say that the afflicted is competing with the nail of affliction is the same as to say that she is competing with the world. Weil in contemplation is pitted against the invading forces, the defenders, her worried parents, the setting sun, the rising moon, so on. The world according to the divine cares not for Weil's predicament, moving on. Perhaps Weil herself actually felt the pull of the world, the sting of the nail of affliction. In a letter composed to Maurice Schumann sometime after arriving in New York from Marseilles, Weil wrote apropos of supporting the war effort: "The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way

up all scattered discomforts into a concise whole, a primary sensation summarizing the manifold inconveniences of the afflicted? We ask this question so as to move closer to the heart-knotting feeling.

To answer this question, let us turn to the heart.

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I can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting for myself a large share of danger and hardship" (1965, 156).



## 2 Affliction and the Heart

We are currently addressing the issue of physical pain accompanying affliction, holding off for the moment the issue of spiritual distress. We have argued that Weil in her predicament is pierced by the nail of affliction; the dilemma and a sense of foreboding induce in Weil symptoms found in that pinned down butterfly. To begin our inquiry after physical pain, we will attempt now to draw a connection between Weil's experience and the heart, more specifically the heart as conceived by Dietrich von Hildebrand and the heart felt by the author. We said that the scattered discomforts experienced by Weil in her predicament must be gathered to a single, critical, point in order to arrive at a sensation worthy to be called pain. That point is the heart.

### 2.1 The von Hildebrandian Affective Heart

There are few works of philosophy and religion that deal exclusively with the heart. Dietrich von Hildebrand's book *The Heart: An Analysis of Human and Divine Affectivity* is a rarity in this regard. In it he posits: "We may refer to the heart as the root of all affectivity. Thus just as the intellect is the root of all acts of knowledge, the heart is the organ of all affectivity" (2007, 21). The heart and affectivity for von Hildebrand are nearly synonymous, both terms denote a realm of experience concerned with feelings, with "all 'being affected'" (ibid., 21). The heart is thus a receptive organ, at the mercy of forces beyond ourselves. A human being has no say over what the heart should feel or not feel; this human helplessness in relation to the heart will be elaborated below. Between the heart and affectivity there is a key difference. The heart as "the root" and "the organ of all affectivity" is "the focal point of the affective sphere, that which is most crucially affected with respect to all else in that sphere" (ibid., 21). From this we may say that the heart is singular and affectivity multiple; the heart is that one destination

towards which all affects flow, a vessel of great capacity. Moreover, since the heart is what is “most crucially affected,” it is in touch with the apexes of feelings. “In saying that something ‘struck a man’s heart,’ we wish to indicate how deeply this event affected him” (ibid., 21). If experience of a particular feeling can be graphed, a shape resembling readings of a cardiogram, plateaus punctuated by sharp peaks, then the heart is located at the head of each peak, shining like a sacred treasure.

Von Hildebrand laments that throughout western philosophy the heart has for the most part taken a backseat to the intellect and the will. “According to Aristotle, the intellect and the will belong to the rational part of man; the affective realm, and with it the heart, belong to the irrational part in man” (ibid., 4). If the heart is a receptive organ, then the intellect and the will are active faculties. A human being does have some authority over her thoughts and volitions. Von Hildebrand declares that “it is high time we lifted the ban on the affective sphere and discovered its spiritual role” (ibid., 16). Devaluation of the heart and affectivity is due partly to a careless homogenization of feelings when, in reality, not all feelings are made equal. The affective realm “embraces experiences of very different levels—experiences ranging from bodily feelings to the highest spiritual experiences of love, holy joy, or deep contrition” (ibid., 5). Bodily, psychic and spiritual feelings are all felt by the heart.<sup>13</sup> There is a clear gulf separating bodily feelings from psychic and spiritual feelings: “In bodily feelings the body speaks to us, we know them to be its voice” (ibid., 29). It is quite simple. Our stomach calls out to us in hunger, our mouth calls

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Tallon summarizes von Hildebrandian affectivity in a four stage process:

First, is an initial affective state [...] which is an ability to be affected, a vulnerability [...]. Second, there is the act itself of being-affected [...] which is primarily a receptive or quasi-passive moment [...]. Third, there is my affective *response* [...]. Fourth, there is a *new* state of affectability, [...] ability to be better disposed or better able to be affected. (1994, 215)

Von Hildebrandian affectivity is a cycle. The fourth stage “becomes one’s *new* affective tonality [...]. Thus the fourth moment becomes the first” (ibid., 215).

out to us during a bout of toothache, our foot calls out when we sprain an ankle. Bodily feelings are marked by a “bodily index,” pointing to our body as place of origin (ibid., 22).

Difference between psychic and spiritual feelings is much more difficult to detect. According to von Hildebrand, a psychic feeling “lacks, in the first instance, the character of a response, that is, a meaningful conscious relation to an object” (ibid., 25). “Secondly, psychic states are ‘caused’ either by bodily processes or by psychic ones, whereas affective responses are ‘motivated’” (ibid., 26). On the one hand, there are psychic *states* which are caused; on the other hand, there are spiritual *responses* which are motivated. Von Hildebrand compares two ways of “being out of our mind,” one a psychic state and the other a spiritual response. There is a “low way of ‘being out of our mind’ [...]. It implies a blurring of our reason which precludes its most modest use” (ibid., 30). This low form of self-forgetfulness is immanent, that is to say, the affected is kept in the dark by what has affected her. Relationship between source of affection and the affected is here unilateral; the affected is totally lost in anger, sadness, joy etc., blinded by passion. This low form of self-forgetfulness is that which we experience and speak of in daily life. There is no object, as the affected is hermetically sealed off, and consequently no response. It is right to say that this affective state is caused as opposed to motivated. Causation connotes a mechanical process. As one billiard ball strikes and propels another, so the source of affection interacts with the affected. Only “a brutal biological dynamism” is present (ibid., 30).

There is a “higher way of ‘being out of our mind,’ that is, being in ecstasy, or in every experience of being ‘possessed’ by something greater than we are” (ibid., 30). This higher form of self-forgetfulness is transcendent. The affected “is elevated above the normal rhythm of his life [...]. He abandons the comfortable situation in which his reason sovereignly oversees everything” (ibid., 30-1). In both low and higher forms of self-forgetfulness, there is a suspension of reason and control. However, whereas the lowly affected when deprived of reason is left in the dark, the highly affected loses reason so as to gain something greater. “So far from being antirational is this higher way that instead of darkening our

reason it fills it with a great light" (ibid., 31). If we take anger as an example: the lowly affected thrashes around like a bull seeing red, consumed by passion; the highly affected, though angry, is not consumed by passion but through passion arrives at a clearer view of the world. Anger in its higher form leads to reflection. The affected in the heat of the moment suddenly recognizes the ultimate futility of human affairs and the primacy of death. A curious calm washes over her; she does not thrash around like a bull seeing red but, staying still, her eyes stare agape into the distance, in awe. Relationship between source of affection and the affected is here bilateral. The affected is taken up by the source and enlightened. An object, roughly speaking, exists for the affected and between the two there is a "meaningful conscious relation." It is right to say that this affective response is motivated. Motivation connotes guidance and a pulling towards. As a caterpillar is inexplicably drawn onwards to becoming pupae, so the highly affected is edified by the source. In sum, the low form of self-forgetfulness is a psychic state and the higher form a spiritual response.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> To better understand spiritual response, transcendent and motivated, one may consider von Hildebrand's argument that love is a value-response. John F. Crosby provides a good exegesis on the matter. Commonly speaking, "there are these two ways in which something can take on importance for me: either by being subjectively satisfying for me and/or by being objectively beneficial for me" (Crosby, 2015, 458). "Love" can be a subjectively satisfying experience, when "there is nothing more to [a man's] interest in the woman than his own sexual gratification and that apart from his sexual gratification he cares nothing for her" (ibid., 458). In this case, "I stand in a consuming and using relation to that person, and this is the very opposite of love" (ibid., 458). "Love" can also be an objectively beneficial experience, that is to say, an experience of universal human acclaim. Perhaps a man's "love" for a woman "makes him flourish, that it draws the best out of him, that it makes his character grow, that it is in his true interest," in a word, "love" could turn him into a better person (ibid., 459). This is, again, not love proper as "[h]is love is deformed by a self-centered approach to the woman, who for her part will certainly not feel loved by the man" (ibid., 459).

There are two main insights to be drawn from von Hildebrand: the heart is the organ of affectivity, a receptive organ, and affectivity is an umbrella term encompassing bodily, psychic and spiritual feelings. Taken together, these two points shed new light on Weil's predicament. The heart plays a key role in affliction insofar as affliction is an affect, a force whose origin is beyond ourselves, as opposed to being a concept or something willed. There is perhaps a correlation between physical, spiritual and social implications of affliction and the states and responses listed under affectivity. Whether or not such speculations are valid will be addressed later. Presently, we want to address a flaw in von Hildebrand's account. By conflating the heart and affectivity, von Hildebrand ends up devoting much more attention to the latter at the expense of the former. Affectivity is merely one facet of the heart. The heart in its literal and metaphorical significance is overlooked. In view of this deficiency, some personal reflections on the heart will briefly be espoused.

## 2.2 The Heart as a Transcendent Souvenir, Among Other Things

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Love proper, that is to say, love as value-response, is neither subjectively satisfying nor objectively beneficial. Value is what gives rise to love and "[a] being has value when it is important for me all in its own right," independent of personal gain and societal approval (ibid., 459). There is "simply a certain splendor or radiance" emanating from the beloved, drawing the lover closer, loving her. Von Hildebrand "wants above all to capture that self-transcendence of the lover who is caught up in the beauty of another" (ibid., 460). Detached from himself, from society, maybe even from space and time and the world at large, the lover is totally immersed in the beloved. If we compare love as value-response to high self-forgetfulness, we may notice that in both cases there is a certain directness, between the lover and the beloved, the affected and the source of affection, a relationship cutting through all distractions. This is transcendence. As well, in both cases the lover and the affected are drawn or pulled towards the beloved and the source of affection respectively. There is just something special about the beloved and the affected just, for some reason, sees through her anger, catching sight of the source. This is motivation.

The heart is fundamental for a living human being. Very simply, pierce the heart and we pass away. The heart is there and beating the moment we arrive into this world and not until our final breath does it stop. From beginning to end, in sunshine or rain, the heart keeps us company with its steady thumps, like a tireless street musician whose tunes, no matter day or night, enliven the changing pedestrian scene. We can choose whether to close or open our eyes, to inhale or exhale, to be mobile or stationary, to speak or be silent, but the heart is outside our jurisdiction, a receptive organ. Whether it beats or stops beating, expands or contracts its muscles, is decided by what transcends us. “[I]t is not in our power to control our heart” (Pascal, 1988, Fragment 100). In turn, we may postulate that the heart has been endowed to us by what transcends us, a souvenir left behind by the transcendent. Whenever we listen to our heart, we are in a way listening to otherworldly murmurings; whenever we put our hands to our breasts, sensing the heart’s rhythms, we are in a way in contact with a force out of this world.

The heart is a transcendent souvenir, an ever-present reminder of that which is beyond us. We wish to invoke here both English and original French connotations of the word souvenir. On the one hand, the physical heart is a material reminder of a past experience, similar to some bric-a-brac one purchased on a trip somewhere that when seen reignites memories of the journey. This is the English connotation. *Souvenir* in French can be either a pronominal verb (to remember) or a noun (a memory). If we break apart the word we have constituents *sous* (under, below) and *venir* (to come). Thus, supplementing the word’s English definition, a material reminder, *souvenir* hints at how exactly the heart may be a reminder and what exactly does the heart remind one of. There is firstly the fact that the heart is hidden under ourselves, never directly seen or touched but its thumps could be heard faintly, barely audible. From deep within us, the heart’s drumbeats emanate, echoing. Secondly, the heart as a transcendent souvenir is rarely felt in bright daylight, when one is running about and taking care of business, when one is trying to get everything under control. The heart as a transcendent souvenir is more likely to creep up on us, perhaps in the dead of night, taking us unawares. Only when we are left alone with our

hearts can we begin to ponder the heart's transcendence; only then do we recognize that nothing is really within our control as this life could end in a flash, whenever the heart decides to cease beating. The heart comes to us from below, a *souvenir*, reminding us of our impotence and of the transcendent. A vivid memory strikes us when we behold an external souvenir. Similarly, perhaps when we behold our internal souvenir, our beating heart, the transcendent is here with us.

There are connections between Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, and the heart as a transcendent souvenir. The following paragraphs will highlight some such connections. Framed with respect to von Hildebrand, the heart as a transcendent souvenir is always in spiritual response to something greater than ourselves. Physical feelings and psychic states of the heart, though they frequently occupy the foreground of our experience, are superficial; they conceal a deeper reality, a spiritual attunement. Only in select moments are we occupied by spiritual responses; the heart is a *souvenir*, sneaking up on us when we least suspect it. The transcendent by means of the heart oversees each and every one of us. That is to say, since we are alive thanks to the beating heart, the transcendent by means of the heart is guiding us onwards in our separate lives, shaping our destinies. Everything which has happened, is happening, and will happen to us has depended, is dependent, and will depend on the beating heart for its manifestation. Without the heart, if we are dead, our experiences of this world cease. Thus, the heart at once mediates a bilateral finite-divine relationship and is in tune with the changing world, reminiscent of the nail of affliction symbolizing overwhelming necessity. We through the heart get to live our lives and are acquainted with the transcendent; the transcendent through the heart unfolds the Plan.

All discomforts of the body are dependent on the fact that the heart is pounding. The heart is pounding, circulating blood, feeding the body vital nutrients and, at the same time, poison. This is the paradox of the heart: at once liberating and constraining. The heart supplies one energy to compete with the world and, by the same stroke, prolongs one's torturous struggles against an insurmountable enemy. The

heart sustains the body so as to take pleasure in the latter's pain and suffering. We may be more specific regarding the heart's function in the case of she who is afflicted, faced with a dilemma and plagued by a sense of foreboding. The heart fulfils its basic duty by feeding Weil poison, leading her by the hand towards death. While feeding her poison, the heart does something else. A dilemma comes to confront Weil from outside herself, the result of an ongoing war. In response, there emerges from within, from the heart, a sense of foreboding. If one may recall, this sense of foreboding concerns a peculiar dovetailing of events, a suspicion of being pranked by what is beyond us. Weil is afraid that as soon as she leaves France peace will immediately be broken; a soldier is afraid that as soon as he stands up he will immediately be shot. Indecisive, they are sucked in by their predicaments as a ship is sucked in by a maelstrom. The blood pumped throughout one's body then becomes, as it were, sanguine threads, travelling round and round. Aside from feeding Weil poison, the heart weaves for her a straitjacket, severely constricting her body, mind and soul.

In von Hildebrandian terms, we may ask whether this sense of foreboding from the heart is a psychic state, immanent and caused, or a spiritual response, transcendent and motivated (for it is certainly not a physical feeling). There are two aspects to this sense of foreboding: ignorance and enlightenment. Seen one way, it appears to be a psychic state. Weil is left in the dark, unable to decide on a favorable course of action, apprehensive of the future. The war is set to collide with Weil and Weil, indecisive, knows not whether to stay or to get out of its way. This is sense of foreboding as ignorance, a psychic state. Earlier, we argued that this sense of foreboding extricates Weil and the farmer and the soldier from temporal existence, life delimited by birth and death, lifting them up temporarily to an eternal existence, life mesmerized by the moment. How this transition happens can now be elaborated. It is not entirely right to say that Weil is left in the dark. We cannot deny that there is an insight about the future here, however faint and confused it may be. A sense of foreboding entails a certain estimation about the future, an estimation that is inexplicably attractive and compelling. After all, this is a reason why Weil is



indecisive. She takes seriously her foreboding, she feels that there is a real possibility for peace to be broken right after she leaves. Weil is not only apprehensive but also fascinated by her fancy, possibly asking: why am I so particularly sure of myself, of this sudden suggestion? Wherever this self-assurance comes from, perhaps from the divine, Weil is wholly taken up by it. Her sense of foreboding becomes, as it were, a scaffold, elevating her and providing a murky view of what lies ahead. To put it concisely, this sense of foreboding is an imperfect prophecy. Weil is let in on a secret but, of course, she is not told everything, only bits and pieces. This is sense of foreboding as enlightenment, a spiritual response.

There is a correlation between the inward heart and one's outward comportment. When the heart is calm and at peace with itself, this is often outwardly mirrored by the composed individual; when the heart is agitated and restless, the individual usually follows suit. See here how the heart may take pleasure in the body's suffering; see how the heart bops with joy and excitement when the body is in dire straits while maintaining an indifferent profile when the body is at ease. If the beating heart by circulating blood is at once feeding the body poison and tying the body down, then this paradox ought to be expressed in some way by the living individual.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Weil or the trypanophobe described above, their outward stutters and spasms are an indication of inward turmoil, turmoil of the heart. Moreover, if the uncontrollable heart is a souvenir (and *souvenir*) left behind by the transcendent and, in light of this fact, enlivens the existing individual, then there must also be a liaison here between the transcendent and the finite. This is a stormy and ambiguous liaison. The transcendent, via the heart, is married to the living individual. The living individual is then abused by the sadistic heart but also consoled and caressed by its steady thumps. We have at hand a number of questions to be addressed

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<sup>15</sup> By no means is the heart omnipotent, always with an upper hand over the individual. One may observe that a person can always distort what the heart feels. A disingenuous person could, in spite of the heart's indifference, act as if he is excited. A contemplative person could, in spite of the heart's agitations, show no obvious signs of disturbance at all.

later on in the thesis when the heart-knotting feeling becomes our concern: How might the heart's paradox be expressed by the living individual? What, more specifically, is this liaison threading through the heart, the existent, and the transcendent? How does this liaison affect the existent, the middle term? What are some implications of this liaison?

For the time being, let us return to the connection between the heart and the body. We queried above how exactly affliction may implicate physical pain and, if this physical pain existed, where would it be located on the body. For an individual faced with a dilemma, we noted that discomforts seem to be felt everywhere on the body, leading then to a question of whether there is a primary sensation tying together scattered discomforts experienced. Given the heart's position as the ground on which all other bodily functions rest and depend, we may say that everything can be traced back to the heart; the heart is something primary. Strictly speaking, according to the nail and hammer motif, the nail of affliction is aimed at the soul of the afflicted. However, when considering physical pain implicated by affliction, we ought to take into account the heart as well; we ought to say, perhaps, that the nail of affliction penetrates simultaneously the soul and the heart of the afflicted. Moreover, if the heart's paradox holds, that is, is at once liberating and constraining, then aside from location of the primary sensation we can also understand what this sensation may feel like. Therefore, to answer questions posed about physical pain: primary physical pain implicated by affliction is located in the heart. The nail of affliction, a symbol of overwhelming necessity ordained by the divine, pierces both soul and heart of the afflicted. In general, this pain concerns a torturous releasing and binding; the heart keeps the afflicted alive so she may continue to suffer the cold and impartial world.

Affliction implies social degradation by distinguishing and isolating the afflicted; she moves away from the multitude, encountering the divine. Affliction implies physical pain if we focus on the affective heart and on the heart as a transcendent souvenir (and *souvenir*). If the reader has gotten this far, it may be somewhat superfluous to explain how affliction could implicate spiritual distress. Really, spiritual

distress is perhaps the defining feature of Weilian affliction understood through the nail and hammer motif, while physical pain and social degradation are secondary and derived. It is because the nail of affliction has pierced both heart and soul of the afflicted that she is set apart, like a butterfly in an album, and begins to suffocate from the whole weight of the world pressing against her chest. The afflicted is separated from the divine by the nail of affliction, overwhelming necessity; this is the main thing. She can never, so long as she is a living human being, bypass necessity and arrive at an unobstructed relationship with the divine. Everything which has happened, is happening, and will happen troubles the afflicted. She ponders, with her heart: "Is there a connection between that beautiful swirl of snail shells and a roadkill on a hot day? One is merely a few feet away from the other." There are no consolations. Having thus endeavored to answer for physical, spiritual and social implications of Weilian affliction, we shall now move on to a discussion of biblical circumcision.

### 3 Circumcision and Circumcision of the Heart

Perhaps the reader is becoming impatient and confused. How are Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, and the heart as a transcendent souvenir relevant to the heart-knotting feeling? The author asks the reader to endure a while longer; an attempt will be made soon enough to respond to such a question. For now, we wish to speak of circumcision and circumcision of the heart found in the Christian bible, specifically in *Genesis* and the *Deuteronomy*, and consider two procedures of circumcision, plain circumcision and subincision. There are three attributes of circumcision to which we should pay especial attention in view of the heart-knotting feeling. One, there is a before and an after to circumcision: the uncircumcised becomes the circumcised. Two, circumcision is lived and permanent: the circumcised penis and the circumcised heart stay with one for life, one must live with it. Three, circumcision and circumcision of the heart are correlated: the physical mirrors the spiritual and the spiritual mirrors the physical. The two procedures of circumcision to be examined express two human orientations towards the divine. Plain circumcision is in accord with the divine; subincision is in discord with the divine. Maintaining continuity with preceding parts of the thesis, we will note along the way similarities and differences between biblical circumcision, Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, and the heart as a transcendent souvenir.

#### 3.1 The Covenant of Circumcision

Much contemporary literature on circumcision revolves around medical, bioethical and, generally speaking, secularist implications of the practice. Papers are written on the relationship between circumcision and prevention of venereal diseases (Austin, 2010); vindication of the rights of infants and rejection of circumcision (Sarajlic, 2014); vindication of the interests of infants and permissibility of

circumcision (Mazor, 2013); and so on. These are not exactly our concerns; we wish to understand the spiritual significance of circumcision.

One finds in *Genesis* 17: 9-10: "Then God said to Abraham, '[...] This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.'" An obvious question arises concerning spiritual purpose of circumcision. That is to say, how does circumcision influence one's relationship to the divine? Victor P. Hamilton, in his commentary on the *Book of Genesis*, suggests two reasons for circumcision to be a covenantal condition. One, circumcision serves as a sign for the circumcised: "May the act of circumcision be a sign for the benefit of the one circumcised? Every time he looks at his body he is reminded that he is part of Yahweh's covenant. Thus interpreted, circumcision is a mnemonic sign, reminding God's people of who they are" (1990, 470). Two, circumcision serves as a sign for the divine: "It is equally possible that circumcision is a sign to God [...]. God will see the circumcised penis of the Israelite before and during sexual congress, and will then 'remember' his promise to Abraham" (ibid., 470).

Both reasons are mnemonic in nature. The circumcised penis helps to remind the circumcised of the divine and the divine of the circumcised. In this sense, circumcision is an act of mediation, "a mutual event between God and his people" (Westermann, 1985, 266). Through circumcision, there is materialized on one's own body a visible proof of one's supposed devotion, a mark harmonizing bilateral relations between the circumcised and the divine. This harks back to the nail of affliction as also being a mediator, between the afflicted and the divine. Of course, a difference would be that the nail of affliction can now clarify and then obscure the afflicted-divine relationship, alternating. Circumcised male genitalia, on the other hand, are there permanently, for All to see. As well, this harks back to some personal views on the heart espoused above, namely, the heart as a transcendent souvenir reminds an existing human being of that which is beyond her. The heart's movements are not within our control. Thus, when one casts one's gaze inwards, listens to the heart's sighs and laughter, what one sees and

hears are sights and sounds coming from somewhere beyond us. A difference here would be that the heart as a transcendent *souvenir* is hidden under us, sneaking up on us, whereas circumcised male genitalia are there on the surface, for All to see.

A few clauses later in *Genesis* 17: 14, one finds: “Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.” On first reading, it seems clear that circumcision is not only pertinent to the human-divine relationship but also to the human-human relationship. The uncircumcised belong to one group of human beings, those who are alien to the divine, and the circumcised to another, those who are chosen by the divine. This is true, but there is more. As Hamilton explains:

Biblical scholars have advanced two different interpretations of the phrase *be cut off* [...]. One suggestion is that to ‘be cut off’ means to be excommunicated from the community. The other suggestion is that ‘be cut off’ means execution, occasionally a human execution of a divinely ordained death penalty [...], but normally one carried out by God, that is, premature death.  
(1990, 474)

Let us consider excommunication before execution. There is here “a wordplay on *cut*. He that is not himself cut (i.e., circumcised) will be cut off (i.e., ostracized). Here is the choice: be cut or be cut off” (ibid., 473). If one is circumcised one is a part of the divinely chosen; if one is uncircumcised one is not part of the divinely chosen. “Be cut or be cut off,” mutilation or exclusion, either way there is something to be suffered. This harks back to a quality of affliction, namely, both the butterfly and the afflicted undergo a change in their social situations. From a life in the wild, living with other butterflies, the chosen butterfly enters into the hobbyist’s abode and becomes a one in a one-to-one encounter when the physical nail pierces its body. Comparably, the afflicted on recognizing the significance of worldly necessity, that everything comes and goes, shines then fades away, is turned off by the masses and their

worldly aspirations. She retreats inwardly and discovers, in brief but transfiguring moments, her heart and soul pierced by the nail of affliction, at the behest of the divine. One either lives blindly, circumscribed by birth and death, in accordance to worldly necessity, or, enduring heart and soul-rending pain, is awakened to the divine; again, suffering in both cases.

Now regarding execution. There is something confusing about Hamilton's explication. Execution of the uncircumcised is supposed to be "divinely ordained" and "carried out by God," but what results is a "premature death." Surely, a death can only be premature from the perspective of a human being and her or his relatives. For the divine, if we are to bring up Weilian necessity again, all deaths are timely, happening at the right moment. To straighten out this confusion, we must clarify what exactly constitutes a premature death in biblical times from the human point of view. Matitiah Tsevat, on the *Book of Samuel*, notes: "Death is the fate of man. [...] In nonmodern thinking, not every case of death is 'fateful.' Ancient Oriental man tends to think of fate in terms of ideality. [...] In this ideal fate, man acquiesces; other than that is 'non-fate,' which he dreads" (1961, 199). A premature death would be death rejected by a human being, less than ideal; a timely death would be death accepted, perhaps even welcomed, by a human being. The confusion, then, has to do with conflict between a human being and the divine, of death ordained but rejected. To be more specific, "[i]deal fate is completing one's 'days on earth' (Job 8:9), making their number conform to an ideal standard. [...] Death before the end of manhood is denial of the opportunity completely to realize one's capacities, to attain full status and act out one's role in society" (ibid., 201). The uncircumcised rejects divinely ordained death for social reasons or, in other words, reasons of a finite nature. For example, he has not yet married, not yet sired a son, not yet achieved a respectable position in his line of work. The mode of existence occupied by the soon-to-die uncircumcised is similar to that occupied by the afflicted when the nail of affliction acts as an obscuring agent. Both latch onto this world, turning away from the divine.

There is something entirely new here that should be noted. Circumcision implies a before and an after. Before circumcision, when the foreskin is still intact, when one is hidden, so to speak, from the divine, one is not recognized by the divine. After circumcision, with the foreskin removed, one is revealed and is seen by the divine. The heart as an organ of affliction and as a transcendent souvenir lacks this transitional quality. Of course, we spoke of temporal and eternal states of being which seem to correlate with the uncircumcised and the circumcised inasmuch as there is a certain transformation in play. On the one hand, there is the physically pierced butterfly, passing from being a living creature to being a pristine specimen, from life to death. This is rigid temporality and eternity. On the other hand, there is the spiritually pierced afflicted who lives her life now linearly and then in the moment, alternately a slave of worldly necessity and a transcendent beyond worldly necessity. This is fluid temporality and eternity. Circumcision is different from both and actually represents an overlapping middle ground between the two. That is to say, circumcision is at once a permanent transition, as from life to death, and a lived transition, as from under necessity to beyond necessity and back. The foreskin is lost forever and the circumcised must live with it. The circumcised penis is a lived permanency.

### 3.2 Circumcision of the Heart

We have been considering circumcision so far as a physical and bodily phenomenon. Readers may have been troubled for a while now by an apparent exclusion of women in the covenant of circumcision. This is not an issue as the physical is irrelevant here. What is fundamental for our purposes is a spiritualized circumcision, a kind of circumcision universal to all human beings. To understand what a spiritualized circumcision entails, let us turn to *Deuteronomy*. According to Anthony Phillips, a commentator on *Deuteronomy*, “the title ‘Deuteronomy’ derives from the Greek translation of the Old Testament [...] where the Hebrew phrase ‘a copy of this law’ in Deut. 17: 18 was mistranslated as ‘this second law’ (*deuteronomion*)” (1973, 1). Thus the name passed down, *Deuteronomy*, highlights the fact that the



book is a certain duplicate of earlier books in the Christian bible. Addressing Israelites in the desert, Moses in *Deuteronomy* recapitulates and elaborates on laws set out by the divine in *Genesis*. Concerning the covenant of circumcision, Moses says something quite astounding in *Deuteronomy* 10: 16:

“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”

Phillips presents the following interpretation: “Israel is not merely to purify and dedicate herself outwardly by the physical rite of circumcision: she is to do so inwardly by such a *radical change of heart* that it could only be described by comparison with circumcision” (emphasis added; *ibid.*, 76). The circumcised heart, like the circumcised penis, is a mnemonic device, reminding one of the divine, and a mark of distinction, signifying that one is aligned with the divinely chosen. Circumcision of the heart, like circumcision of the penis, is lived and permanent. Just as once the foreskin is cut off it is gone forever, so this “*radical change of heart*” once brought about can scarcely be reversed. How can the heart be circumcised? *Deuteronomy* 30: 6 answers: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.” Phillips elaborates: “[I]t is God who will make it *impossible* for the Israel of the future to renounce him, and so suffer the total collapse of the covenant relationship” (emphasis added; *ibid.*, 202). Physical circumcision is within human power and so it is a duty assigned to human beings. Circumcision of the heart is beyond human power; “the rite is carried out by God himself” (*ibid.*, 202).

There is a difference between the circumcised penis and the circumcised heart. The circumcised penis as an outward mediator of finite-divine relations is adulterated by the gaze of human beings and by societal standards. On the other hand, we may infer that the circumcised heart as an inward mediator of finite-divine relations is seen by nothing but the divine and is therefore pure. The social or finite aspect of circumcised male genitalia is expressed in *Genesis* 17: 12: “For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner [i.e. slaves] – those who are not your offspring.” Circumcision of male

genitalia turns Abraham's personal covenant with the divine, a spiritual covenant, into an interpersonal covenant among human beings. As Hamilton comments on the passage: "To circumcise a son is expected, but to circumcise a slave is to expand the range of the recipients of the covenant. God's covenant, however, is directed to no elitist class of society. [...] Hierarchialism gives way to egalitarianism" (1990, 472-473). Circumcised male genitalia are effectively an instrument of social organization, possibly replacing one society, a society obsessed with rank, with another, a society aware of the fact that all are equal before the divine. The circumcised penis and the circumcised heart are both mnemonic devices and marks of distinction. However, in the case of the circumcised penis, its being a mark of distinction often takes precedence over its being a mnemonic device while, in the case of the circumcised heart, the two functions co-exist.

### 3.3 Two Procedures of Circumcision: Plain Circumcision and Subincision

The three attributes of circumcision (before and after, lived permanency, spiritual-physical correlation) have been to some extent demonstrated by our discussion hitherto. We wish now to elaborate on the three attributes by considering how circumcision is carried out. There are apparently two types of circumcision: plain circumcision "where the foreskin (prepuce) is completely removed exposing the whole glans of a flaccid penis" and "another procedure, better described not as circumcision but as 'subincision'" (Doyle, 2005, 279). This latter procedure is hair-raising to read: "In this mutilating procedure the foreskin is removed and, with a thin stick inserted into the urethra to maintain its patency, an incision is then made in the under surface of the penis near the base of its shaft, in effect making a urethral fistula" (ibid., 279). Subincision, compared to plain circumcision of foreskin, is excessive. It is easy to imagine how much more pain and discomfort are endured by the "victim" of subincision. Moreover, subincisions are made with dubious aims: "semen is ejaculated via the fistula, presumably little of it entering the vagina, during intercourse" (ibid., 279). Plain circumcision, in biblical terms, is a

mediator of human-divine relations, required for spiritual transcendence. Subincision runs in the opposite direction, that is to say, downwards, associated with excess and onanism, temporal pleasures.

We can understand this difference between plain circumcision and subincision, the former associated with obedience and the latter human recalcitrance *vis-à-vis* the divine, spiritually, in terms of circumcision of the heart. Plain circumcision of the heart, as explained above, leaves behind a mark that, like the plainly circumcised penis, reminds one of the divine and distinguishes one as part of the chosen. The plainly circumcised heart is perfect, neither a cut more nor a cut less, in a state of harmonic equilibrium. Subincision of the heart, if we are to follow how subincision happens physically, implies a much different scenario. There is also here a “*radical change of heart,*” but to such an extent that the heart becomes twisted and disfigured. Taking into account the aims of subincision (onanism) and its torturous procedure, we may speculate that a libertine in the pages of the Marquis de Sade could be an exemplar of the subincised heart. Like one whose heart has been plainly circumcised, the Sadean libertine is distinguished from the ordinary run of human beings, but distinguished in a carnal, as opposed to a spiritual, sense. Her beating heart reminds her of innocence unmolested, to be molested. “The appearance...the mere idea of a virtue horrifies me; I *had* to violate those laws, some gesture was required of me,” exclaims Minski from *Juliette* (emphasis added; Marquis de Sade, 1968, 592). We shall not say with absolute certainty that the Sadean libertine shuns the divine, for, after all, in accordance with worldly necessity, in accordance with the divine everywhere and thus nowhere, carnality is here. We say at most, seeing how human egoism figures in subincision, the Sadean libertine is a recalcitrant.

There is perhaps another exemplar of the subincised heart, one more closely connected with this thesis at large: the Kierkegaardian demonic. It is again despair that is our concern. As was said before, Kierkegaardian despair has to do with dying death, a self as divine vassal attempting futilely to efface itself, resulting in implosion and agony. The demonic individual, as presented in *The Sickness unto Death*, reacts in a particular way to despair. So a self in despair is unhappy with itself, for whatever reason.

What happens when the despairing self, rather than turning to the divine, throws itself deeper and deeper into its own unhappiness, when its misery becomes a sort of shanty refuge? The

demonic. It usually originates as follows. A self that in despair wills to be itself is pained in some distress or other that does not allow itself to be taken away from or separated from his concrete self. So now he makes precisely this torment the object of all his passion, and finally it becomes a demonic rage. (Kierkegaard, 1983, 72)

The demonic undergoes a bout of suffering in life and becomes attached to it, he will not get over it.

There is in the demonic a stubbornness that flies in the face of all, the divine not excluded. He holds his pain close and “even if God in heaven and all the angels offered to help him out of it—no, he does not want that [...] now he would rather rage against everything” (ibid., 72). His pain becomes his weapon and, should the need arise, he might even kill himself with it. In both the Sadean libertine and the Kierkegaardian demonic one can detect a certain restless exertion, and this is precisely how the subincised heart is excessive. He whose heart has been subincised rarely sits still, always seeking and always destroying (others or oneself), evoking image of an encaged elephant, thrashing against bars. The plainly circumcised heart is at peace with itself, neither a cut more nor a cut less. The subincised heart is in agitation, cut excessively.

The three attributes of circumcision now take on additional meaning. There is a before and an after to circumcision. We can expand and say that change is brought about through two possible procedures, plain circumcision and subincision, the former procedure in accord with the divine and the latter procedure in discord with the divine. Plain circumcision and subincision can happen physically and spiritually.

Circumcision is lived and permanent. This is so in a physical sense, as we showed above with the physically circumcised who belongs to the divinely chosen and is reminded of the divine every time he

looks at his body. Circumcision is lived but not always permanent in a spiritual sense. If the heart is plainly circumcised, that is, circumcised according to the divine, then the heart is at once lived and permanent for it is the divine that carries out the operation. The plainly circumcised heart is at peace. If the heart is subincised, in violation of the divine, then the heart is subject to change for it is the human acting against the divine. The subincised heart is agitated.

There is in circumcision a correlation between the physical and the spiritual. This is the case with plain circumcision. Mnemonic and distinguishing functions of the plainly circumcised penis help us to understand the plainly circumcised heart. A correlation between the physical and the spiritual can also be found in subincision. Onanism and excess associated with the physical operation of subincision carry over in the subincised heart, as exemplified by the Sadean libertine and the Kierkegaardian demonic.

## 4 The Heart-Knotting Feeling

### 4.1 Relevance of Weilian Affliction, the von Hildebrandian Affective Heart, the Heart as a Transcendent Souvenir, and Biblical Circumcision

So far we have been laying down the foundation for the heart-knotting feeling. As we have proposed way back at the very beginning of the thesis, the heart-knotting feeling is a relative of Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir, and biblical circumcision. After our analyses, we may now assert that the five of them belong to the family “finite-divine relations,” for that is the general concern which they all share. There are other familial resemblances and certain features of the heart-knotting feeling can be found in its relatives. Before speaking about the heart-knotting feeling, we wish to briefly explain the relevance of Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir, and biblical circumcision.<sup>16</sup>

The nail and hammer motif under which we examined Weilian affliction showed us mediated contact between the finite and the divine. To be impaled by the nail of affliction is at once a privilege and a curse; the afflicted has been chosen by the divine and the pain of impalement makes her wish she was never born. This pain of impalement pertains to an inability to do away with oneself, an inability to do away with the divine that is in each and every one of us. The afflicted thus suffers like a broken record, or like a criminal in the process of being quartered, wanting to die but cannot, for the human can never do away with the divine. These are the most pertinent points to be taken away from Weilian affliction. The

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<sup>16</sup> An important disclaimer: we cannot go into great detail in our explanation for that would involve broaching the topic of what happens in between formation and resolution of the heart-knot which, due to constraints of time and space, simply cannot be explored in this thesis.

heart-knot is also a mediator, tying a human being to the divine, and is the source of pain not unlike the pain of being impaled by the nail of affliction. The heart-knot is formed by the heart turning in and out of itself, by a sort of self-strangulation.

The von Hildebrandian affective heart and the heart as a transcendent souvenir accentuated the heart's transcendence. We are not in control of our hearts; our hearts are held by that which is beyond us, now caressed and then crushed. The heart's transcendence is experienced at select moments. This selectivity is expressed by the heart as a *souvenir*, as something which sneaks up on us when we least suspect it, and the rarity of von Hildebrandian spiritual responses, compared to physical and psychical states. The heart's transcendence and elusiveness carry over in the heart-knotting feeling. We will show that formation of the heart-knot takes place while we are in the womb, the process beyond human jurisdiction. There are also special difficulties to experiencing the heart-knot.

Circumcision and circumcision of the heart are the closest relatives of the heart-knotting feeling owing to the three attributes that we raised above. Like circumcision, there is a before and an after to the heart-knotting feeling; there is the heart-knot unresolved and the heart-knot resolved. Circumcision is lived, permanent in the case of plain circumcision and mutable in the case of subincision. Similarly, the heart-knot is lived; whether or not resolution of the heart-knot is permanent depends on the method of resolution. A correlation between the physical and the spiritual can be found in biblical circumcision. The mnemonic and distinguishing functions of the plainly circumcised penis are mirrored by the plainly circumcised heart; onanism and excess associated with the subincised penis are mirrored by the subincised heart. The heart-knotting feeling follows a comparable pattern. As we shall see, formation of the physical heart and formation of the spiritual heart (i.e. the heart-knot) are, in a way, the same process. The penis and the heart can be either plainly circumcised or subincised, the former procedure in accord with the divine and the latter procedure in discord with the divine. Analogously, there are two ways to resolve a physical knot and the heart-knot, either by untying or by tearing. Untying the heart-

knot can be likened to plain circumcision, whereby there is a relieving of the finite-divine relationship. Tearing the heart-knot can be likened to subincision, whereby there is a rupturing of the finite-divine relationship.

Having thus explained the relevance of Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir, and biblical circumcision, we are finally in a position to speak about the heart-knotting feeling. There are two sections: formation of the heart-knotting feeling and resolution of the heart-knotting feeling. Basically, we wish to propose that the human heart is a knot. There are two main sets of questions following from this proposition to be addressed. First, what does it mean for one's heart to be in a knot? We will employ here an approach employed above in the discussion of affliction, that is, we are not concerned with an abstract understanding of the heart-knotting feeling but rather the heart-knotting feeling as a lived condition. To understand the lived heart-knot, we will endeavor to model the spiritual upon the physical, the elusive upon the concrete. The second set of questions has to do with the structure of the knot. A knot may be formed by a piece of string; that is certain. If the heart-knot is situated at one end of the string, questions arise pertaining to what is situated at the other end and of what material (or immaterial) the string is made. We shall consider this question spiritually, that is, in terms of relationship between the finite and the divine.

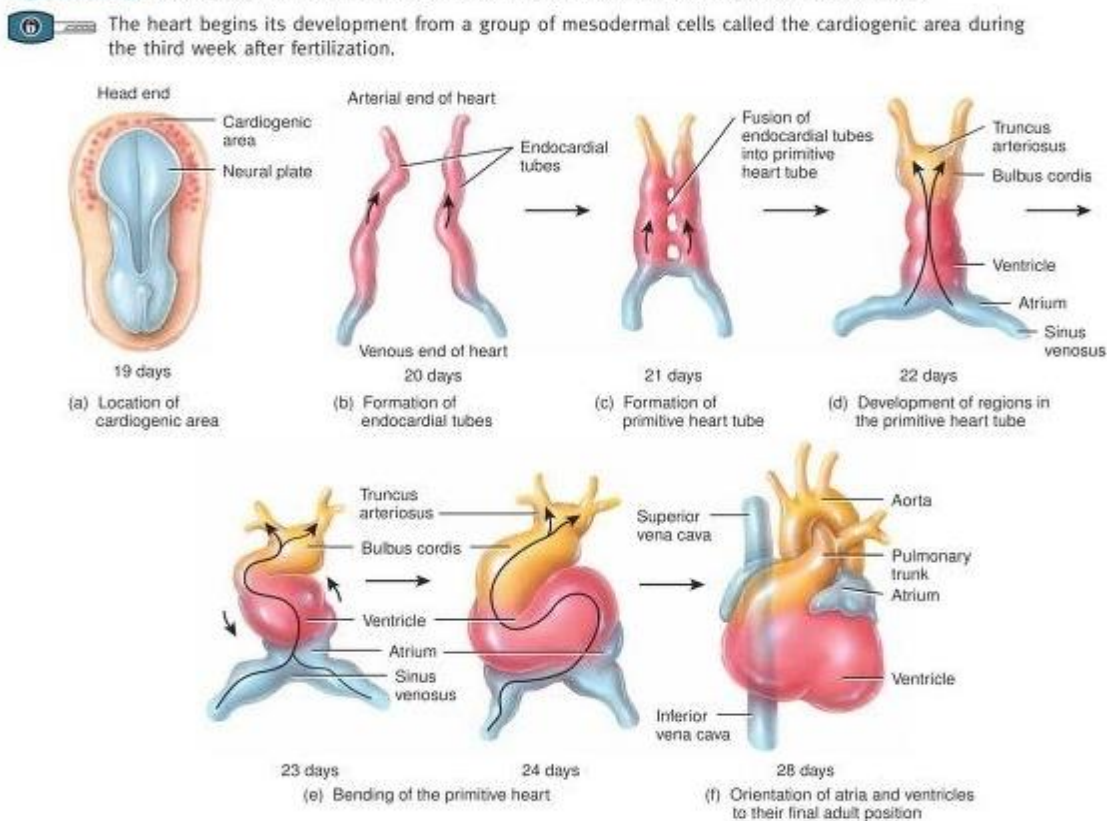
#### 4.2 Formation of the Heart-Knotting Feeling

In our discussion of affliction we never inquired after the origin of affliction. About this, Weil writes: "To be a created thing is not necessarily to be afflicted, but it is necessarily *to be* exposed to affliction" (emphasis added; Weil, 1974, 97). So affliction is not always there from the very beginning of one's life but sooner or later one will most definitely encounter it. This makes much sense according to the nail and hammer symbolism. If the nail of affliction symbolizes worldly necessity ordained by the divine, overwhelming, everything which has happened, is happening and will happen, then the longer one lives



one's life the more likely one is to come to recognize and experience affliction. "Affliction. Time bears the thinking being in spite of himself towards that which he cannot bear and which will come all the same" (Weil, 1987, 73). It is only a matter of time before an existing human being becomes aware, through earthly vicissitudes, that she is no more than a bark at the whims of an interminable sea, now allowed to rest and then suddenly in upheaval. If favored, perhaps she shall find a harbor to call home; if not, she may simply be thrown against some jagged rocks and be shattered to pieces.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 20.19** Development of the heart. Arrows within the structures indicate the direction of blood flow.



**?** When during embryonic development does the primitive heart begin to contract?

(Tortora & Derrickson, 2009, 748)

<sup>17</sup> "Man is like a castaway, clinging to a spar and tossed by the waves. He has no control over the movement imposed on him by the water. From the highest heaven God throws a rope. The man either grasps it or not" (Weil, 1970, 82).

The origin of the heart-knotting feeling is different from the origin of affliction. Rather than a condition to be encountered sometime in the future, the heart-knotting feeling is there the moment life begins, in the womb. This proposition can be substantiated by a presentation of how the physical heart is formed, aided by the diagram above. There are arguably two stages to early heart formation: entwining (as illustrated by figures b, c and d) and twisting (as illustrated by figures e and f).

[T]he heart develops from a group of mesodermal cells called the **cardiogenic area** [...]. [T]he mesoderm in the cardiogenic area forms a pair of elongated strands called **cardiogenic cords**. Shortly after, these cords develop a hollow center and then become known as **endocardial tubes** [...]. [T]he paired endocardial tubes approach each other and fuse into a single tube called the **primitive heart tube** on day 21 following fertilization. (Tortora & Derrickson, 2009, 748-749)

The first stage of heart formation, entwining, concerns the coming together of endocardial tubes and their subsequent fusion. What results is the heart in its earliest form, the primitive heart tube. The second stage of heart formation, twisting, has to do with growth of the primitive heart tube. "On day 23, the primitive heart tube elongates. [...] [T]he tube begins to loop and fold. At first, the primitive heart tube assumes a U-shape; later it becomes S-shaped" (ibid., 749).

Taking into account the two stages of heart formation, entwining and twisting, we may begin to see that formation of the physical heart and formation of the spiritual heart (i.e., the heart-knot) are in a way one and the same process. When that pair of endocardial tubes come together and fuse into the primitive heart tube, two heart-strands intertwine, forming a heart-string; when that primitive heart tube grows, squished first into a U and then an S, the heart-string is turned in and out, forming the heart-knot. In this way, formation of the physical heart and the spiritual heart-knot start and finish in unison, the physical mirroring the spiritual and the spiritual mirroring the physical. "[T]he heart is the first functional organ" and, so, the heart-knot is there from the get-go, the moment life begins (ibid.,

748). Now, a knot may be formed by a string and a string has two ends. Tying a string to something forms a knot at one end and at the other end the string is held by the thing's proprietor. If the heart-knot is located at one end of the heart-string, located somewhere within us, then what is there at the other end of the heart-string? We say, emphatically, the divine. The divine endowed this life to us through the heart and through the heart we belong to the divine. The physical, functional, heart ties the fetus to the womb, the placenta, to this world. The heart-knot ties the fetus to the divine.

A certain synchronicity between the physical heart and the spiritual heart (i.e. the heart-knot) is established while we are in the womb. This synchronicity is carried forward into the future. The physical heart and the heart-knot accompany us from birth and infancy to senility and death. The physical heart and the heart-knot are, in a way, one and the same; anyone who could feel the physical heart could also, in a way, feel the heart-knot. "We might suppose that the physical heart is one thing and the spiritual/emotional heart is another, but the connection between the two is constant" (Young, 2003, 107). There is a lived dimension to the heart-knot thanks to the heart's physical-spiritual duality. It is helpful to compare here the heart and the soul. Heart and soul are often used interchangeably, with little regard for their differences, to denote what is spiritual in a human being. For an apprentice of the spirit, those not too well-acquainted with spiritual matters, the soul can be intimidating, so distanced and stern. There are no obvious paths leading to an intimation of one's soul and if one fails to find a way one is left with nothing but a sterile, nearly meaningless, word. The soul is inaccessible.

The heart, on the other hand, can be a more accessible avenue into the spiritual domain, a window. For the spiritually uninitiated, the heart might lead her first of all to the physical organ, right there under her left breast, what keeps her alive and wards away death. As we showed above, the physical heart as a transcendent souvenir, an organ whose movements are not within human control and thus reminding us of that which is beyond us, already bears some connection to the divine. The physical heart as a transcendent souvenir is a possible bridge between the physical and the spiritual. Coming across the

word “soul,” the spiritually uninitiated (and perhaps even those who are better versed in such matters) is more often than not stumped, clueless. As an apprentice, she feels little to nothing of what the word “soul” denotes. Coming across the word “heart,” on the other hand, she may first concentrate all her being on her physical heart, a transcendent souvenir, from this side and then, so ineffably, out comes from the other side that which the word “soul” denotes. One defining characteristic of the heart-knot is its relative accessibility.

We may mention another defining characteristic of the heart-knot: a leading-towards. The divine by means of the heart-knot and the heart-string is ever pulling us towards something, another happening or landmark in our lives. There is tension associated with this leading-towards as the heart-knot, and thus the physical heart as well, is tightened by the pull of divine force. This tension is exacerbated when an existing human being chooses to stand still or to move in the opposite direction, in defiance of the divine. The situation is not unlike the Kierkegaardian self in despair who, wishing to be someone of her earthly choosing, suffers like a criminal being quartered. The situation is also not unlike the Weilian afflicted who is impaled by the nail of affliction, a symbol of overwhelming necessity; the Weilian afflicted who in moments of doubt and deliberation engages in a tug-of-war with the world. The heart-knot as a leading-towards pertains to questions of becoming and self-cultivation.

There are yet other defining characteristics of the heart-knot but they are beyond the investigative scope of this section, perhaps even of this thesis. We have already expressed what is fundamental, namely, formation of the heart-knot and formation of the physical heart are, in a way, one and the same process. Let us move on to resolution of the heart-knot.

#### 4.3 Resolution of the Heart-Knotting Feeling: Untying and Tearing

In our discussion of affliction, we did not inquire after a possible end of affliction. On this topic, Weil is somewhat reticent. There are a few passages that suggest an end of affliction is inconceivable, for

example: “If there were no affliction in this world we might think we were in paradise” (Weil, 1987, 72). And, again: “Those who ask why God permits affliction might as well ask why God created” (Weil, 1974, 97). If the nail of affliction symbolizes worldly necessity ordained by the divine, overwhelming, everything which has happened, is happening and will happen, then certainly there cannot be an end to affliction for an existing human being. Affliction is a mark of finitude, a mark engraved on our souls by earthly vicissitudes, joys and sorrows, pleasures and pains. To do away with affliction is essentially to do away with this world, to do away with everything we have experienced. This very moment in time will stop and begin rewinding, all the way back to the beginning, to what happened first. It is quite certain that none of us were there and then.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike affliction, there is a possible end to the heart-knotting feeling. We committed ourselves to understanding the heart-knotting feeling as a lived as opposed to an abstract condition. To do so we proposed to model the spiritual upon the physical. In this section, we will adhere to our plan by first considering how a physical knot may be resolved, either untied or torn in half. We will argue that in the untying and tearing of a physical knot there is a possible momentary encounter between a perceiving subject, anyone who witnesses the untying or tearing, and what was once hidden. Merleau-Ponty’s views on perception will support this argument. Conclusions reached concerning how a physical knot is resolved will be applied to an understanding of how the heart-knot is resolved.

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<sup>18</sup> Here lies a somewhat interesting connection between affliction and decreation, another Weilian concept.

“Decreation: to make something created pass into the uncreated,” back into the divine’s embrace (Weil, 1987, 28).

“God gave me being in order that I should give it back to him. [...] God allows me to exist outside himself. It is for me to refuse this authorization” (ibid., 35). If we view affliction under the nail and hammer motif, worldly necessity being the nail, then decreation seems to be realized by a cessation of affliction, a taking away of worldly necessity and a subsequent rewinding of time.

Let us begin with an exaggerated description of a physical knot and its resolution. We have a better chance of discerning that momentary encounter with the hidden if we magnify our object of inquiry. So we see a knot; we see how the string enters and exits, like an earthworm plumbing through a ball of soil, now submerging and now emerging. With its own very lanky arms, the string hugs itself, forming a wound-up clump. We touch and feel along the string, taking into account its texture, smooth or rough. Eventually, our hands discover a sudden transition from clear extension to a muddy obstruction, a bump in the road. Our visual and tactile senses interact with the knotted string; they are settled in the knotted string as we become settled in a new dwelling. Just as the layout, smell, sound etc. of a new dwelling place may seem at first disorienting and soon orienting qualities of the home, so the faculties make themselves comfortable in the string as knotted. Should someone untie the knot and straighten the string, it is as if a tornado has blown through our home, reducing it to a pile of rubble that, when seen from afar, is but a dot in the horizon. Should someone tear the string in half, it is as if an earthquake of cataclysmic proportions has ripped the land in two, our home now dangling over the brink. We have heard about such misfortunes happening to others and now it has happened to us. We are confronted by the world's underbelly, a side that we have scarcely experienced.

This perhaps sounds farfetched and strange: a knot becoming a house for our senses and its resolution akin to disasters throwing our lives upside down? However, Merleau-Ponty did allude to something comparable in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. The author has no pretensions whatsoever about grasping that tremendous work. A tiny section will be selected for our purposes. Hopefully, the following analysis will not stray too far afield. For Merleau-Ponty, what we see can be separated into figure and background, figure being what we are focus on at the moment and background being that indistinct scaffold on top of which a figure is presented, like an oblation on an altar. "The perceptual 'something' is always in the middle of some other thing, it always belongs to a 'field'" (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, 4). In response to empiricist positions claiming that perception is merely association of different qualities or

“nothing but a sum of isolated visions,” Merleau-Ponty affirms there is a certain unity to a figure that is anterior to and makes possible empiricist association (ibid., 14). “If we hold ourselves to phenomena, then the unity of the thing in perception is not constructed through association, but rather, being the condition of association, this unity precedes the cross-checkings that verify and determine it, this unity precedes itself” (ibid., 17).<sup>19</sup>

To perceive properly implies a breathing-in of the world, to receive the world as the world presents itself, a unified whole, with as little interference as possible on our part. As soon as one breaks apart a figure and begins to categorize its colors and qualities, as an embalmer dissects a corpse and fiddles with its innards, the act of perception proper ceases; the world-as-is sought after in phenomenology fades, replaced by the world-taken-for-granted, the everyday world. Only after having actually perceived what is there can one begin to conceptualize what is there. An embalmer first sees the pale cadaver, feels its chilled skin, catches a faint scent of rot, then recognizes that the dead body is to be dissected, that he must now do his job, to earn a living. The cadaver properly perceived, a unified whole, breaks down into many tasks and prompts, signposts for quotidian life. The everyday world is built upon the world-as-is, the manifest upon the usually hidden, diversity upon primordial unity.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Eric Matthews paraphrases: “[T]he world we perceive, unlike the world of scientific theory, is not a collection of separate objects, but a whole [...] it is a *world*” (2006, 26-27).

<sup>20</sup> Consider Matthews’s account of a detective solving a murder case: “When I first encounter the crime scene, I experience it as a whole, and the various elements in it as having a meaning for me in relation to that whole. Sir Archibald’s body is slumped over his desk in the study, obviously stabbed in the back. He is obviously dead” (2006, 33-34). Only after breathing in the scene, properly perceiving it as a unified whole, can one begin posing questions tempered by the intellect: “Who had the motive and the opportunity? That involves analysing the situation into its component parts” (ibid., 33). The crime scene properly perceived then breaks down into fingerprints and blood-types. In this way, that initial moment of proper perception puts on hold, for a few seconds, the detective’s

Merleau-Ponty gives an example from lived experience that points to this primordial unity. This example is what really interests us:

If I am walking on a beach toward a boat that has run aground, and if the funnel or the mast merges with the forest that borders the dune, then there will be a moment in which these details *suddenly reunite* with the boat and become welded to it. As I approached, I did not perceive the resemblances or the proximities that were, in the end, about to reunite with the superstructure of the ship in an unbroken picture. I merely felt that the appearance of the object was about to change, that something was imminent in this tension, as *the storm is imminent in the clouds*. The spectacle was suddenly reorganized, satisfying my vague expectation. (emphases added; *ibid.*, 17-18)

Merleau-Ponty's example shows how a figure's primordial unity can now elude the perceiver and then alert the perceiver to its existence, now hidden and then manifest. For a very fleeting moment when one first laid eyes on the scene, breathing in the swaying sea and the unswaying boat and the swaying, wind-blown, forest, everything has perhaps already been revealed to the perceiver. To walk along the beach, an everyday activity, presupposes a perceptual awareness that there is a sandy path fit for walking, in between a watery mass and a thorny mess. The same thing happened with the embalmer vis-à-vis the cadaver. For a very fleeting moment did the embalmer perceive the pale, cold, rotting cadaver, but it is enough. "I can become familiar with a person's face without ever having perceived, for itself, the color of the eyes" (*ibid.*, 11). The perceiver somehow "understands," perceptually speaking, in virtue of primordial unity, what a person, a landscape, or a dead body is about immediately, without explicit

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quotidian life. But this pause is by no means inert, a simple break from life. It is, on the contrary, bursting with energy, for it is precisely by perceiving the scene properly that the detective's life can go on at all, that the murder case can be solved.



analysis. After that initial instant of proper perception, the senses begin to wander. Perhaps one's eyes begin to measure distance from here to the end of the beach, a resting spot; perhaps those shrill sounds now come to resemble human laughter, reminding one of one's acquaintances; perhaps the stranded boat suggests to one of what one's next paycheck should be spent on. In short, the scene's primordial unity fades away.

Suddenly, primordial unity rings out. The boat's wooden mast, previously camouflaged as a part of the forest, is properly perceived as our subject moved closer. We say that the boat's primordial unity rings out because the moment of re-unity, when the wooden mast is perceived as belonging rightfully to the boat as opposed to the forest, is akin to the moment when a gong is struck. There radiates from the boat-as-boat ripples of some sort. The boat ceases momentarily to be taken for granted, perhaps as a mere obstacle in one's way, and yells out silently for one's undivided attention. There is in the perceiver a "presentiment of an imminent order," that the world shall briefly return to its state of nativity (*ibid.*, 18). Then, the boat-as-boat washes over the perceiver like a tidal wave. This lasts for an instant, or at most for a few seconds; the boat's primordial unity disappears as quickly as it appeared, ebbs as it flowed. Once again, the everyday world eclipses the world-as-is. "How did I not see that these pieces of wood were part of the boat? They were after all the same color as the boat, and they match its superstructure perfectly," one reasons just after the fact (*ibid.*, 18). To summarize what took place: the scene is properly perceived; the scene is taken for granted and primordial unity fades; primordial unity rings out when the mast is re-united with the boat; the boat is taken for granted and again primordial unity fades.

The same sequence of events can be found in the physical resolution of a knot. Here is that momentary encounter between a perceiving subject and the hidden. Our exaggerated description is possible because we first saw a knot, that we experienced a knot as a knot. Only on this basis can we begin conceptualizing, comparing the knot to a house, untying and tearing to disasters, in turn straying from

the knot's primordial unity. When a knot shows signs of disentanglement or tension forecasting complete rupture, there is in the perceiver a "presentiment of an imminent order" like that in Merleau-Ponty's example. Except, whereas in Merleau-Ponty's example the boat is perceived as returning to itself as a boat proper, here the knot is not returning to its own primordial state but is approaching the primordial state of either a straightened string or a string in half. We indulge in our imaginations, playing with concepts, taking the knot to be like a house; something seems to be happening, "*the storm is imminent in the clouds*"; with a flash of lightning and a clang of thunder, the scene shifts. That moment when the mast suddenly reunites with the boat is akin to the moment when a knot is untied, when a twisted string slides and unravels, or to the moment when a string is torn in half, when a string is at its wit's end. Just as the reunited boat yells out silently for one's attention, washing over one like a tidal wave, so the newly straightened string or the string newly torn shatters one's imaginations; a tornado or an earthquake of cataclysmic proportions has destroyed one's home. Resolution of a physical knot, by untying or by tearing, signals a possible momentary meeting between a perceiving subject and the previously hidden world-as-world.

So far we have been considering how a knot is resolved physically. Now we have to take what conclusions we have reached and apply them to an understanding of how the heart-knot is resolved. We want to make two claims. One, there is a momentary encounter between a human being and the divine when the heart-knot is resolved, by untying or by tearing. This momentary encounter between a human being and the divine is not unlike that momentary encounter between a perceiving subject and the hidden world-as-world. Two, there is a primordial unity to the heart-knot not unlike the primordial unity of a physical knot.

To make the first claim, let us recall the two procedures of circumcision described above, plain circumcision and subincision, because, as we have argued, biblical circumcision is the heart-knotting feeling's closest relative. Biblical circumcision by its very nature is related to the divine. By plainly

circumcising the penis or the heart, one enters into the covenant set forth by the divine; by subincising the penis or the heart, one shuns the divine covenant in favor of one's earthly will. Plain circumcision is thus in accord with the divine and subincision in discord with the divine. As we showed above, the heart-knot is formed by a heart-string; the heart-knot is located at one end of the heart-string, located somewhere within us, and the other end of the heart-string is held by the divine. Untying the heart-knot can be likened to plain circumcision. When the heart-knot is untied (perhaps by the divine) and the heart-string is straightened out, there is a relieving<sup>21</sup> of an individual's relationship to the divine. The human-divine relationship is in accord. Tearing the heart-knot in half can be likened to subincision. When the heart-knot is torn (perhaps by human will) and the heart-string is in half, there is a rupturing of an individual's relationship to the divine. The human-divine relationship is in discord. Whether the heart-knot is untied or torn, there is, for however brief a moment, an encounter between a human being and the divine. With the heart-string straightened out, there is a heart-to-heart between a human being and the divine; with the heart-string in half, there is a last glance and then a turning away.

This may sound abstract but it really is not. We must remember the heart-knot is in a way the physical heart and the physical heart is in a way the heart-knot. A relieving of the human-divine relationship when the heart-knot is untied and a rupturing of the human-divine relationship when the heart-knot is torn in half can both be felt, in some way, through the physical heart. This does not mean, however, that such experiences are felt with certainty and ease. The momentary meeting between a human being and the divine is akin to that momentary meeting between a perceiving subject and the hidden world-as-world. We may have witnessed many a physical knot untied or torn in half, only to move on with our day afterwards, without actually perceiving what is there to be seen. Similarly, due to human limitations,

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<sup>21</sup> The divine by means of the heart-knot is leading us ever onwards in our lives. There is tension in this leading-on, exacerbated when we struggle against divine ordinance. A relieving of the human-divine relationship would mean, partly, a lessening or a total elimination of tension associated with the heart-knot.

one may fail to feel a lessening of tension when the heart-knot shows signs of disentanglement nor feel a certain tightening when the heart-knot is about to be torn in half. Some attention on our part and some help from the divine are perhaps required.<sup>22</sup>

We may insert here our second claim while we are on the topic of experiencing the heart-knot. There is a kind of primordial unity to the heart-knot, comparable to that of a physical knot. A point we did not mention in our discussion of perception according to Merleau-Ponty: primordial unity of percepts exists and operates regardless of whether or not we are explicitly aware of its existence and operation. This is in part what Merleau-Ponty meant by sedimentation: “I perceive with my body or with my senses, my body and my senses being precisely this habitual knowledge of the world, this implicit or sedimented science” (ibid., 247). A child being taught for the first time how to tie her shoelaces regards with especial wonder at what the finished knot looks like. The novelty of the experience foregrounds the knot’s perceptual unity. The perceived knot informs the child’s subsequent interactions with the world: she learns how to tie her shoelaces so she should not trip while walking or running, so she should not be ridiculed by others for having loose shoelaces, etcetera. After that lesson on shoelace tying, the child may never in her life regard a knot wondrously again. Nevertheless, that wondrous knot on her shoes

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<sup>22</sup> There is a scarcity of literature offering a spiritual or religious interpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The author has browsed the few available works and feels none are suitable for the purposes of this thesis. There is the book *Merleau-Ponty and Theology* by Christopher Ben Simpson and a journal article by Andreas Nordlander, both of which, if the author may humbly opine, are a bit too steeped in the Christian tradition to be useful. There is a book of collected essays entitled *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, which is also not quite on the mark. The idiosyncrasies of this thesis seem to prevent easy reference to any extant works. If more pertinent literature existed, the author would perhaps have a much easier time in this section establishing a correlation between resolution of a physical knot and resolution of the heart-knot; but, alas. The author thus asks for the reader’s indulgence for any gaps in arguments and evidential insufficiencies.

continues to inform her existence, from the shadows. She ties her shoelaces while engaged in conversation with a friend; she unties her shoelaces impatiently after a terrible day at school, perhaps ripping them in half in anger. Her shoelaces become part of the undercurrent running through her life, a sediment, unrecognized but still working tirelessly, generating meaning.

The heart-knot is also a sediment, unrecognized but always and everywhere tying a human being to the divine. We may recall here for comparison how the von Hildebrandian affective heart is often drowned out by physical and psychic states or how the heart as a transcendent *souvenir* sneaks up on us when we least suspect it. Similarly, the heart-knot, though there the moment life begins in the womb, is not entirely present to a human being at all times. How could one “regard” the heart-knot with wonder as one may regard a physical knot with wonder, that is, how could one apprehend the heart-knot’s primordial unity? We said above that some attention on our part is perhaps required. Let us try to be more precise. It is quite a challenge to find the right action, the right verb, which one undertakes apropos of the heart-knot. “Perception opens onto things,” writes Merleau-Ponty, and it is by means of this opening that the physical knot, out there in the world, could be properly perceived (*ibid.*, 54). If the heart-knot is located somewhere within us, a different kind of perception is called for if we are to properly perceive the heart-knot. Taking into account synchronicity of the physical heart and the heart-knot in their formation, that the physical heart is in a way the heart-knot and the heart-knot is in a way the physical heart, no conceptual activity is sufficient apropos of the heart-knot. To think, conceive, imagine, etc., the heart-knot fails to do full justice to the heart-knot as lived, as related to the physical heart. It is perhaps most appropriate to say that the heart-knot is felt, intimated, sensed, etc., all terms associated with the affective sphere. We do mean “affective” here in the von Hildebrandian sense, as in reception, as in being affected by what is beyond us.

A more fruitful answer to this question of how to properly “perceive” the heart-knot might be found if we expand our analysis to include another language, and thus another culture, and thus another mode

of existence. The author meant Chinese. The heart occupies a most prominent place in that language, culture, and mode of existence. There is there a common expression (among innumerable others) that hopefully could bring closure to the thesis and stimulate some afterthoughts. 心想 (xin-xiang) is used in daily conversation to mean think or surmise. The expression is composed of 心 (heart) and 想 (to think), the radical of the latter character being 心. This is where linguistic, cultural, and existential differences show up and become inexorable. To think with one's heart, a strange expression in English. Perhaps less strange in French (*penser avec le cœur*)? The author of this thesis is not fluent in French.

## Conclusion

An attempt was made in this thesis to outline a condition of spiritual attunement, a feeling of one's heart in a knot. Simone Weil's notion of affliction was our point of entry to the heart-knotting feeling. In the first chapter we identified, under the nail and hammer motif, five qualities of affliction: dying death, distinction then isolation, a one-to-one encounter, nudity, alternation between temporality and eternity. To concretize an abstract understanding of affliction we alluded to an episode in the life of Weil herself, when she dealt with a dilemma and a sense of foreboding.

In the second chapter, we endeavored to draw a connection between Weilian affliction and the heart, understood by Dietrich von Hildebrand as an organ of affectivity and by the author as a transcendent souvenir. Both the heart as an organ of affectivity and as a transcendent souvenir accentuated the fact that the heart's movements are not within human control; whether the heart beats or stops beating is decided by that which is beyond us. In this way, the heart can be compared to the nail of affliction, both mediating the human-divine relationship. The heart as an organ of affectivity has to do with all being-affected; it is a receptive organ, the one destination for all feelings and affects, whether physical, psychical or spiritual. In this way, the heart, aside from being an organ of affectivity, is more specifically an organ of affliction, insofar as affliction is a feeling or an affect. The heart as a transcendent souvenir is an ever-present material reminder of that which is beyond us, like some bric-a-brac purchased during a trip that when seen reignites memories of the journey. When the word souvenir is understood in its original French sense, the heart as a transcendent *souvenir* elucidated how the heart reminds us of the transcendent, that is, by sneaking up on us when we least suspect it, perhaps in the dead of night. There are resonances between the heart as a transcendent souvenir and certain qualities of Weilian affliction.

In the third chapter, we discussed Christian biblical accounts of circumcision and considered two procedures of circumcision, plain circumcision and subincision. Three attributes of circumcision were deemed important in view of the heart-knotting feeling: a before and an after, lived permanency, and physical-spiritual correlation. We showed that mnemonic and distinguishing functions of the plainly circumcised penis carry over in the plainly circumcised heart, and that onanism and excess associated with the subincised penis carry over in the subincised heart, as embodied by the Kierkegaardian demonic and the Sadean libertine. Plain circumcision is in accord with the divine and subincision is in discord with the divine.

We began chapter four by explaining the relevance of Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir, and biblical circumcision with respect to the heart-knotting feeling. We noted that the heart-knotting feeling belongs to the same family as the rest of them, the family “finite-divine relations,” for that is the one concern which they all share. The heart-knot mediates the human-divine relationship, similar to the nail of affliction; the heart-knotting feeling entails a pain akin to that of dying death, of suffering like a criminal in the process of being quartered; formation of the heart-knot is transcendent, taking place while we are in the womb, beyond human control. The heart-knotting feeling’s closest relative is biblical circumcision, owing to the three attributes raised in chapter three.

Having explained the relevance of preceding chapters of the thesis, we finally moved onto the heart-knotting feeling proper. There were two sections: formation and resolution. We proposed to understand the heart-knotting feeling as a lived rather than an abstract condition and as a condition pertaining to relationship between the finite and the divine. We proposed to model the spiritual upon the physical, the elusive upon the concrete. In the first section on formation of the heart-knotting feeling, we showed that formation of the physical heart and formation of the heart-knot are one and the same process; the physical heart is in some way the heart-knot and the heart-knot is in some way the physical heart. The



physical heart ties us to this world; the heart-knot ties us to the divine. We also mentioned two defining characteristics of the heart-knot: relative accessibility, thanks to the heart's physical-spiritual duality, and a leading-towards.

In the second section on resolution of the heart-knotting feeling, we began by considering two ways of resolving a physical knot: untying and tearing. We argued that there is a possible momentary encounter between a perceiving subject and the hidden when a physical knot is untied or torn. This argument was supported by Merleau-Ponty's views on perception. According to Merleau-Ponty, to perceive something properly means to breathe in the thing as a unified whole, to be aware of the thing's unity. This unity of percepts is primordial because it makes possible every-day, practical, activities; an embalmer first breathes-in a cadaver, perceiving that the cadaver is a cadaver, and afterwards dissects it, to make a living. Primordial unity of percepts is usually hidden and rarely manifest. Merleau-Ponty's example of seeing a boat's mast returning to the boat itself from being camouflaged by a forest illustrated how primordial unity of percepts may now be hidden and then manifest. On the basis of this example from Merleau-Ponty, we claimed that primordial unity manifests when a physical knot is untied and becomes a straightened string or when a physical knot is torn and becomes a string in half.

We applied conclusions reached concerning how a physical knot is resolved to an understanding of how the heart-knot is resolved. We made two claims. One, there is a momentary encounter between a human being and the divine when the heart-knot is untied or torn in half. This momentary encounter between a human being and the divine is not unlike that momentary encounter between a perceiving subject and hidden world-as-world. Recalling the two procedures of circumcision described, plain circumcision and subincision, we said that untying and straightening out the heart-string is akin to plain circumcision and that tearing the heart-string in half is akin to subincision; the former in accord with the divine and the latter in discord with the divine. Just as we usually fail to perceive what is actually there

to be seen when a physical knot is untied or torn, so we usually fail to feel what is there to be felt when the heart-knot is untied or torn.

We made the second claim while we were on the topic of experiencing the heart-knot: there is a kind of primordial unity to the heart-knot not unlike the primordial unity of a physical knot. We drew on Merleau-Ponty's notion of sedimentation to show that primordial unity of percepts exists and operates independently of whether or not we are explicitly aware of its existence and operation. A child after being taught how to tie her shoelaces may never again in her life regard with wonder that knot on her shoes. Nevertheless, her shoelaces continue to generate meaning as a part of the undercurrent running through her life, a sediment, unrecognized and working from the shadows. The heart-knot is also a sediment, for the most part unrecognized but always and everywhere tying a human being to the divine. We asked how we could arrive at the heart-knot as it is, how we could apprehend the heart-knot's primordial unity. A physical knot is perceived; the heart-knot calls for a different type of perception. Since the heart-knot is in a way the physical heart and the physical heart is in a way the heart-knot, we noted that conceptual activities are never sufficient for the task at hand; they neglect the heart-knot's lived dimension. Only actions associated with the affective sphere seem to be satisfactory. To better understand how to properly "perceive" the heart-knot, we suggested an expansion of our analysis to include other languages, for example, Chinese.

The reader is perhaps, like the author himself, somewhat disappointed with the outcome of this discussion. For all that preliminary exposition spanning Weilian affliction, the von Hildebrandian affective heart, the heart as a transcendent souvenir and Christian biblical circumcision, we have only managed to scratch the surface of the heart-knotting feeling, that is, the heart-knotting feeling's formation and resolution. We have considered more so the heart-knot itself, its origin and structure, than the heart-knotting *feeling* proper, that is, what the heart-knot feels like for a living human being. All that lies in between formation and resolution is still shrouded, unexplored. There are also a number of

unanswered questions, posed or implied. What material (or immaterial) is the heart-knot made of? If formation of the physical heart and formation of the heart-knot are one and the same process, what would happen to the heart-knot if the physical heart is malformed? What brings about, what triggers, resolution of the heart-knot, either by untying or by tearing? In the face of such questions, we may console ourselves by remembering that this thesis is merely an outline and, indeed, an outline it is. If there will ever be a sequel to this thesis, we will most likely pick up where we have left off, with what lies in between formation and resolution of the heart-knot.

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