Homo Liturgicus

The Human Person as Lover

I am inviting us to rethink the relationship between worship and worldview by thinking about the connection between liturgy, learning, and formation. This task is motivated by two different sorts of questions that represent two different ways of coming to the same issues. On the one hand, we are concerned about the nature and task of Christian higher education: Why are we studying at a Christian college? What are we teaching at a Christian college? Why do we even have Christian colleges? So we’re asking: What is the connection between the task of Christian education and the cadences of the church’s liturgical life? On the other hand, concerned with articulating a theology of culture and an understanding of worship as cultural formation, we’re asking: In what ways do other cultural practices constitute (competing) liturgies that are at the same time pedagogies? And in what way does Christian worship function (or fail to function) as an alternative pedagogy that forms us otherwise? At stake in both of these questions is the matter of pedagogy and formation: in both cases and from both angles we’re interested in discerning how material practices constitute pedagogies for the education of desire that shape our very identity. On this account, education is not something that traffics primarily in abstract, disembodied ideas; rather, education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world—all before we ever
start thinking about it. This is why educational strategies that traffic only in ideas often fail to actually educate; that is, they fail to form people. Given this link between formation and embodiment, we might say that education is a “meatier” task than we often assume.

Before we can consider just how this works, we need to consider why this works. Why is it that embodied rituals and material practices are so effective in shaping our identities and forming our desires? So before considering how material practices train us in this way (chapter 2), and before we can give attention to the different ends to which these different liturgies are directed (chapter 3), we first need to follow up on an axiom suggested in the introduction: that behind every pedagogy is a philosophical anthropology, a model or picture of the human person. The focus of this chapter is the elucidation of a philosophical anthropology that recognizes that we are, ultimately, liturgical animals because we are fundamentally desiring creatures. We are what we love, and our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends. So we are not primarily homo ratione or homo faber or homo economicus; we are not even generically homo religiosis. We are more concretely homo liturgicus; humans are those animals that are religious animals not because we are primarily believing animals but because we are liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate. If a pedagogy presumes a philosophical anthropology, then the articulation of a distinctly Christian education requires that we first unpack the elements of a Christian philosophical anthropology. We’ll do this by first considering some common (but reductionistic) models of the human person and then unpack the alternative understanding of human persons as loving, liturgical animals.

From Thinking Things to Liturgical Animals

At stake in how we think about this strange beast, the Christian university—and thus how we think about the relation between church and university—is an even deeper question about what human beings are. For too long we have tried to think of the relationship between the church and the university.

1. The use of the term animals here, as well become clear below, is not merely accidental or metaphorical. The philosophical anthropology outlined in this chapter will emphasize what Alasdair MacIntyre rightly describes as “our animal condition” or our “human animality.” See MacIntyre, Dependent, Rational Animals (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 5. In this respect, my project—like MacIntyre’s, I think (see ibid., 8)—is unapologetically “assimilationist” according to Robert Brandom’s use of the term (more on this below).

My title for part 1, “Desiring, Imaginative Animals,” is offered as something of a play on both MacIntyre’s Dependent, Rational Animals and Christian Smith’s Moral, Believing Animals.

as well as the hybrid beast, the Christian college, in terms of ideas. So we tend to think about this as a matter of relating the sacred and the secular, or how to integrate faith and learning, or we tend to organize the discussion around a clash of worldviews—and imagine the difference between the university and the church primarily in terms of thinking and believing.

But I think the relation—and the challenge—is deeper than that. And I think the problem is the case precisely because human persons are not primarily or for the most part thinkers, or even believers. Instead, human persons are—fundamentally and primordially—lovers. I want to make sense of that claim by a brief tour of options in philosophical anthropology. Here the key questions are these: What are human beings? Why kinds of creatures are we? And what are we called to be? There are different, competing models of the human person that we can see throughout the history of philosophy and theology.

“I Think, Therefore I Am”: The Human Person as Thinker

A dominant model, as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated throughout modernity, sees the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing. Recall Descartes’ basic project as outlined in Discourse on Method and his later Meditations. Racked with anxiety because his prior certainties have become shipwrecked on the shores of later doubt, Descartes finds himself in an existential crisis: If things that have seemed so certain to him can later be unveiled as false, then how can he be certain about anything?

Trying to tackle this angst head-on, Descartes retreats to isolation in a room for several days, simply in order to think his way through the problem. (How different would the world be if Descartes could have just gotten a date?!) You probably know the rough-and-ready outline of the story: meditating on the conditions for knowledge, Descartes sets about to discover if anything can be known with certainty. After writing off the senses and the body as sources of deception and doubt, and even the realm of mathematical truths, Descartes despairs whether anything is certain. While I might think that 2 + 2 = 4 is a certain truth, it is at least possible that God is an evil demon, toying with me, and deceiving me into thinking that’s obviously true, when in fact it is not. Almost swallowed by this sea of raging doubt, Descartes catches a glimpse of hope—a sort of intellec
tual beacon that promises solid ground. For, he reasons, even if I’m being deceived about what seems most certain, it must be the case that, in order for me to be deceived, I must exist. And so, in the Meditations, Descartes’ famous maxim “I think, therefore I am” takes on an even starker form: “I’m deceived, therefore I am”—because even if I am being deceived, I
would have to exist in order to be deceived. With this insight, Descartes’ battered vessel in search of certainty finally reaches a shore.²

So, with certainty, Descartes concludes that I am. But this raises the next question: What am I? Just what is the nature of this “I” that most certainly exists? Having cast aside the senses and the body already in his meditations, Descartes concludes that “I” am “a thinking thing.” In other words, what I am is an essentially immaterial mind or consciousness—occasionally and temporarily embodied, but not essentially.³ This bequeaths to us a dominant and powerful picture of the human person as fundamentally a thinking thing—a cognitive machine defined, above all, by thought and rational operations. We might call this a broadly “rationalist” or “intellectualist” picture of the human person, and it has both a long pedigree (back to Plato) and a large progeny (through Kant and into the present). It entails a sense that persons are defined by thinking and is often allied with a sense of functional disembodiment (that is, the person as thinking thing is only contingently related to a body). As such, what nourishes or fuels the “I!” is a steady diet of ideas, fed somewhat intravenously into the mind through the lines of propositions and information.

While this model of the person as thinking thing assumed different forms throughout modernity (e.g., in Kant, Hegel), this rationalist picture was absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity (whether liberal or conservative), which tends to operate with an overly cognitivist picture of the human person and thus tends to foster an overly intellectualist account of what it means to be or become a Christian—which helps explain the rationalist distortions of “worldview” discussed above. It is just this adoption of a rationalist, cognitivist anthropologist that accounts for the shock and disbelief of so many Protestant worshippers at a heavy affair fixated on “messages” that disseminate Christian ideas and abstract values (easily summarized on PowerPoint slides).⁴ The result is a talking-head version of Christianity that is fixated on doctrines and ideas, even if it is also paradoxically allied with a certain kind of anti-intellectualism. We could describe this as “bobble head” Christianity, so

². There is a more complicated version of this that, looking at Meditation III, sees the “I think” cast back into doubt. I’m going to bracket consideration of that more nuanced, contested reading for the moment.

³. Recall that half of Descartes’ interest in the Meditations was to demonstrate the immateriality of the soul (see his “Prefatory letter to the Sceptics”). The same sort of focus of human identity in the rational, immaterial soul was articulated much earlier in Plato’s Phaedo.


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fixed on the cognitive that it assumes a picture of human beings that look like bubble heads: mammoth heads that dwarf an almost nonexistent body. In sum, because the church buys into a cognitivist anthropology, it adopts a stunted pedagogy that is fixated on the mind. So rather than calling into question this reductionistic picture of the human person, the church simply tries to feed different ideas through the same intellectual IV.

“I Believe in order to Understand”: The Human Person as Believer

Now, this rationalist or cognitivist picture of the human person as a “thinking thing” has been contested, especially within the Reformed tradition, as a reductionistic account that fails to honor the richness and complexity of the human person and also naively imagines that thinking constitutes a neutral or objective base. Instead, the criticism goes, we need to recognize the degree to which thinking operates on the basis of faith, that thought is not a neutral, objective activity but rather a particular way of seeing the world that is itself based on prior faith or trust. So before we are thinkers, we are believers; before we can offer our rational explanations of the world, we have already assumed a whole constellation of beliefs—a worldview—that governs and conditions our perception of the world. Our primordial orientation or comportment to the world is not as thinkers but as believers. Beliefs, we might say, are more “basic” than ideas.⁶ In this alternative anthropology, human persons are understood not as fundamentally thinking machines but rather as believing animals, or essentially religious creatures, defined by a worldview that is pre-rational or supra-rational. What defines us is not what we think—not the set of ideas we assent to—but rather what we believe, the commitments and trusts that orient our being-in-the-world. This moves the essence of the human person from the more abstract, disembodied world of ideas to a prerational level of commitments that are more ingrained in the human person. Before we are thinkers, we are believers. Thus this line of worldview-thinking generated by the Reformed tradition developed precisely as a critique of more rationalistic construals of Christianity that have now hijacked worldview-talk to rationalistic ends.

This critique of rationalism—and especially Christianized rationalism—is laudable and important. The Reformed emphasis on a more holistic sense of our identity as believers contests the reductionistic rationalism

⁶. Thus Alvin Plantinga speaks of “properly basic beliefs” and Nicholas Wolterstorff of “control beliefs.”

that continue to dominate both the academy and public consciousness. It also contests an important feature that attends such rationalist accounts of the human person, namely, claims regarding the “objectivity” of reason that engender a secularization of the “public” sphere, including the public sphere of the university—just the sort of boundary marking that makes the “Christian university” sound like an oxymoron. By contesting this, the Reformed emphasis on humans as fundamentally and inescapably believing animals pushes back on the logic of secularity and thus carves out a space to articulate a rationale for distinctly Christian education. However, while I affirm much of this critique, I have two reservations about this faith-based (rather than rationalist) anthropology:

1. While it contests a narrow, naive focus on ideas, this model of the human person seems just to move the clash of ideas down a level to a clash of beliefs. Those beliefs often still look like the propositions and ideas of the rationalist model; they’ve just been given the status of Ur-ideas—the originary beliefs that undergird all ideas. Such beliefs still feel like the sort of thing that can be formulated as P or P’ on a register that is not qualitatively different from the rationalist register on which we would map ideas. Does such a (merely semantic?) shift really honor the richness of the human person? Again, I think this manifests itself in how this model shapes our thinking about the relationship between faith and the university. While we might not reduce it to a matter of ideas, the worldview model still tends to think about the difference and relation primarily in terms of beliefs. Once that step down is made—from ideas to the worldview commitments that undergird those ideas—the discussion looks a lot like the discussion in the person-as-thinker model.

2. I find that the person-as-believer model still tends to operate with a very disembodied, individualistic picture of the human person. The beliefs that orient me still seem quite disconnected from my body, and with little or no attachment to the things I do as a body, and so with little attachment to the others that my body bumps into, embraces, hugs, and touches. While this model tries to articulate a more integral relationship between faith and reason, believing and knowing, it tends to do so in ways that imagine the individual Christian as a believer who knows on the basis of this individual belief. Hence, discussions of how to relate faith and learning are usually articulated in terms of connecting Christianity or Christian faith to the disciplines or to the college. One will find little if any discussion of the church. Instead, given this disembodied, individualistic picture of the person-as-believer, such a model fosters a focus on developing “Christian perspectives” on X, Y, and Z. Both the materiality of the body (along with attendant bodily practices) and the specificity of the church drop out of this picture. As Hauerwas rightly notes, when Christianity is turned into “a belief system,” it is reduced to something “available without mediation by the church.” So while in the person-as-believer model, the human person is not a “brain in a vat,” she still seems like an isolated, disembodied island of beliefs.

In this model, the “believer” feels like a chastened rationalist: beliefs still seem to be the sorts of things that are more commensurate with thinking. Or to put it otherwise, if I jump into a “thinking thing” and a “believing thing” on the street, I don’t think I’d notice much difference.

Taken together, these criticisms suggest that the person-as-believer model still gives us a somewhat reductionistic account of the human person—one that is still a tad bit heady and quasi-cognitive. And that is significant because of the pedagogy it yields. Recalling our working axiom—that every pedagogy assumes and expresses an anthropology—we need to ask, Is the “believing” pedagogy really going to look much different from the “rationalist” pedagogy? Insofar as the former still doesn’t seem very attentive to embodiment and formation by practice, it seems to me that the “believing” pedagogy will simply be a tweaked version of the informative paradigm. And I think that’s just what we find in the curricula and practices of Christian schools and universities across the continent. While the Reformed tradition of worldview-thinking generates a radical critique of rationalism and its attendant claims to objectivity and secularity, the critique still feels reductionistic insofar as it fails to accord a central role to embodiment and practice. Because of this blind spot, it continues to yield a quasi-rationalist pedagogy.

8. This is also the burden of Christian Smith’s methodological manifesto for the social sciences, Moral, Believing Animals (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), in which he argues that regnant paradigms in the social sciences continue to reflect a reductionistic picture of human beings as merely rational machines (or, alternatively, as only biological machines). Thus Smith calls for social theory that begins from a richer, more-holistic understanding of human persons as believing and narratival animals. With respect to the former, he draws specifically on the work of Wolterstorff and thus can be somewhat situated within the tradition I’m describing here.

9. I have discussed this in much more detail in James K. A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), particularly chapter 5.

Now, these criticisms do not constitute a rejection of the worldview model per se. I think the claims vis-à-vis rationalism are correct: that our knowing is governed and conditioned by constellations of belief that are more primal than our ideas. So the criticism is not a rejection; rather, the point is that the emphasis on belief does not go far enough. We might say that this Reformed worldview emphasis on the person as believer is a step in the right direction, but that it is insufficiently Augustinian. We still get a somewhat stunted anthropology that fails to appreciate that our primal or primary orientation to the world is not knowledge, or even belief, but love. Thus, in contrast to both the person-as-thinker and the person-as-believer models, I want to articulate a more robustly Augustinian anthropology that sees humans as most fundamentally oriented and identified by love. Only such a robust anthropology—which accords a more central, formative place to embodiment—can yield a truly alternative understanding of pedagogy. And such an alternative pedagogy will have two important outcomes: first, it will make us attentive to the ways in which all sorts of cultural practices actually constitute pedagogies of desire, thus heightening our sense of what is at stake in seemingly banal cultural institutions. Second, it will help us envision a more integral and radical understanding of distinctively Christian education.

"I Am What I Love": The Human Person as Lover

I have described both the person-as-thinker and the person-as-believer models as reductionist; by that I mean that they fail to honor the complexity and richness of human persons and instead reduce us and our core identities to something less than they should be. There are at least a couple of ways to account for this reductionism. In one sense, such models are too narrow; they are focused on only a slice of being human and so tend to be blind to other, more significant factors that constitute human identity. Instead, they take the slice to be the whole and thus absolutize just one aspect of the human person. In particular, both of these models remain narrowly focused on the cognitive aspect of our nature and tend to reduce us to that aspect (whether in terms of thoughts or beliefs). As a result, significant parts of who we are—in particular, our noncognitive ways of being-in-the-world that are more closely tethered to our embodiment or animality—tend to drop off the radar or are treated as nonessential. In another sense, we could say such models are too static; they tend to treat the human person as the sort of thing that can be captured in a snapshot. In the same way that our

12. Recall that what distinguishes Augustine’s two cities (the earthly city and the city of God) is not ideas or beliefs but love. See Augustine, City of God 19.24.
more static models of the person we saw earlier. But that to say we intend the world or aim at the world does not yet tell us much about how we do that. The phenomenological tradition—which, anachronistically, we might say reaches back to Augustine—recognizes that there are different ways of being conscious; there are many different ways to intend the world. For instance, we might think about our friend Theodore, or we might perceive him. We might also remember him or hope for him. In some strange circumstance, we might even be afraid of him. Or we might love him. All of these (and others) are different ways of intending the world, different modes of intentionality. Here we enter the terrain of a key debate in phenomenology between Husserl and Heidegger regarding which mode was most fundamental or basic to being human. Primarily and for the most part, do we think about the world? Or do we most of the time intend the world in some other way? Heidegger argued that Husserl—in Cartesian fashion—tended to see humans as primarily cognitive or rational animals, as if we fundamentally and for the most part intended the world in the mode of thinking or perception. Heidegger thought that Husserl’s account of intentionality was reductionist in a way not unlike our critique of the Husserl above: Husserl tended to reduce the richness and complexity of our lived experience to mere perception or cognition, thus reducing the texture of the world to a collection of “objects”—as if we went around all day perceiving chairs and perceiving our friends, rather than sitting on chairs and embracing our friends while engaged in much more interesting ways of inhabiting the world.

In contrast, Heidegger argued that primarily and for the most part, we don’t think about a world of objects; rather, we are involved with the world as traditioned actors. The world is the environment in which we swim, not a picture that we look at as distanced observers. Thus, rather than suggesting that perception or mere cognition is the fundamental mode of intentional consciousness, Heidegger argued that care is the most primordial way that we “intend” the world. With this, Heidegger made a critical move: he shifted the center of gravity of the human person from the cognitive to the noncognitive—from the head to something like

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15. In Being and Time, whenever Heidegger really wants to take a shot at his teacher Husserl, he lays the charge at the feet of Descartes (thus suggesting a fundamental commonality between Descartes’ rationalism and Husserl’s particular, overly cognitivist version of phenomenology). But it didn’t take much for Husserl to figure out that he was the intended target here; on his edition of Being and Time, Husserl scribbled: “Plato’s a friend, but truth is a greater friend.”

16. I have unpacked this in more detail in James K. A. Smith, Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation (London: Routledge, 2002), 67–82.

the heart, from the cerebral regions of mind to the more affective region of the body.\textsuperscript{18} For Heidegger, we might say that I don’t think my way through the world, I feel my way around it. With this shift, Heidegger both signaled the influence of Augustine (and a later Augustinian, Pascal) and began to articulate an anthropology that was an alternative to the cognitivist paradigms that had dominated the scene up to that point (and that remain operative in the person-as-thinker and person-as-believer models noted above). So our model of the person as lower begins from an affirmation of our intentional nature; further, with Heidegger, we would affirm that our most fundamental way of intending the world is not cognitive but noncognitive. Our primary or default mode of intending the world is not reflective or theoretical; we don’t go around all day thinking about how to get to the classroom or thinking about how to brush our teeth or perceiving our friends. Most of the day, we are simply involved in the world. We navigate our way and orient ourselves for the most part without thinking about it—like driving home from work by a route so familiar that we can do it without even being “conscious,” and thus sometimes find ourselves in the driveway unable to remember driving home. Our default way of intending the world is noncognitive and prerellective; it is an affective mode of “feeling our way around” the world—what Heidegger called our “attunement” to the world. However, we need to push this one step further, Augustine—to whom Heidegger owed no small debt in his phenomenology of care—would articulate this slightly differently, and in doing so would challenge Heidegger’s own thought. Rather than settling for the more generic notion of “care” or “concern” as the most primordial mode of intentionality, Augustine would argue that the most fundamental way that we intend the world is love.\textsuperscript{19}

The “desiring” model of the human person begins from our nature as intentional beings who first and foremost (and ultimately) intend the world in the mode of love. We are primordially and essentially agents of love, which takes the structure of desire or longing.\textsuperscript{20} We are essentially and ultimately desiring animals, which is simply to say that we are essentially and ultimately lovers. To be human is to love, and it is what we love that defines who we are. Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity.\textsuperscript{21} So we’re not talking about trivial loves, like when we say we “love” pizza or the Boston Red Sox; we’re not even quite talking about significant loves, like when we say we “love” our parents or we “love” a spouse (though these will be wrapped up in the sort of love we’re concerned with). Rather, we are talking about ultimate loves—that to which we are fundamentally oriented, what ultimately governs our vision of the good life, what shapes and molds our being-in-the-world—in other words, what we desire above all else, the ultimate desire that shapes and positions and makes sense of all our penultimate desires and actions.

This sort of ultimate love could also be described as that to which we ultimately pledge allegiance; or, to evoke language that is both religious and ancient, our ultimate love is what we worship. The reason we emphasize this is a matter of love is to signify that our orientation to what is ultimate is not primarily on the order of thinking. It’s not what I think that shapes my life from the bottom up; it’s what I desire, what I love, that animates my passion. To be human is to be the kind of creature who is oriented by this kind of primal, ultimate love—even if we never really reflect on it. In fact, sometimes this subterranean, prerellective desire governs us most powerfully precisely when we don’t reflect on it (which, as we’ll discuss below, can be a problem).

So this love or desire is a structural feature of being human. It is not just a characteristic of passionate people or romantic people or even specifically religious people. To be human is to be just such a lover—a creature whose orientation and form of life is most primordially shaped by what one loves as ultimate, which constitutes an affective, gut-like orientation to the world that is prior to reflection and even eludes conceptual articulation. To say that humans are, at root, lovers is to emphasize that we are the sorts of animals for whom things matter in ways that we often don’t (and can’t) articulate. There is a sort of drive (or pull, depending on the

\textsuperscript{18} Even in \textit{Being and Time}, which is his rather “secularized” (formalized) account, Heidegger specifically refers to Augustine on this point: “Our existential analytic of Dasein toward ‘care’ occurred to the author in connection with attempts at an interpretation of Augustine that is, Greek and Christian, anthropology” (ibid., 405f,).

\textsuperscript{19} See Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City, 1996), 1.26.27–1.29.30; and for a commentary, see Smith, “Confessions of an Existentialist.” Volume 2 of the present project will provide space to explore these themes in much more detail, particularly in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty. I hope to articulate the claim that worship is something like an “existential.”

\textsuperscript{20} See Augustine, \textit{Homilies on 1 John} 4.6, “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing. . . . That is our life, to be trained by longing; and our training through the holy longings advances in the measure that our longings are severed from the love of this world” (in Augustine: Later Works, ed. John Burnaby (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 290). For a qualification of the meaning of “this world” in this context, see chapter 3 below. In this book, I basically make no distinction between love and desire, eschewing any distinction between eros and agape. As will become clear below, agape is rightly directed eros. Here the Augustinian distinction between caritas and cupiditas can be helpful, though I tend to think of both as directional modes of dilectatio. Whether that is properly Augustinian, I’ll let others judge. For a helpful discussion, see John von Heyking, Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{21} For discussion, see James H. Othnin, \textit{The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 68-70.
metaphor) that pushes (or pulls) us to act in certain ways, develop certain relationships, pursue certain goods, make certain sacrifices, enjoy certain things. And at the end of the day, if asked why we do this, ultimately we run up against the limits of articulation even though we “know” why we do it: it’s because of what we love.

However, that does not mean that we all love the same thing. The structure of love can love different directions, which means that such love can also be misdirected.22 It depends upon how our love is aimed. What distinguishes us (as individuals, but also as “peoples”) is not whether we love, but what we love. At the heart of our being is a kind of “love pump”24 that can never be turned off—not even by sin or the Fall; rather, the effect of sin on our love pump is to knock it off kilter, misdirecting it and getting it aimed at the wrong things.25 Our love can be aimed at different ends or pointed in different directions, and these differences are what define us as individuals and as communities. This brings us to the second element of the “desiring” model (recall figure 1 earlier in this chapter).

2. Teleology: Love’s End

To say that we are dynamic, intentional creatures entails a second characteristic: we are teleological creatures. We are the sorts of animals whose love is aimed at different ends or goals (Greek: telos). As intentional, love always has a target, something that it intends or aims at. So as we inhabit the world primarily in a noncognitive, affective mode of intentionality, implicit in that love is an end, or telos. In other words, what we love is a specific vision of the good life, an explicit picture of what we think human flourishing looks like.26 Such a picture of human flourishing will have all sorts of components; implicit in it will be assumptions about what good relationships look like, what a just economy and distribution of resources look like, what sorts of recreation and play we value, how we ought to relate to nature and the nonhuman environment, what sorts of work count as good work, what flourishing families look like, and much more. (Perhaps it is most important, at this point, to emphasize that this is a social vision. This is not a picture of just what it looks like for me to be “saved”; rather, a vision of human flourishing—even an individualistic vision—includes some account of human intersubjectivity and social institutions.) Our ultimate love is oriented by and to a picture of what we think it looks like for us to live well, and that picture then governs, shapes, and motivates our decisions and actions.

It is important to emphasize that this is a picture. This is why I have emphasized that we are fundamentally noncognitive, affective creatures. The telos to which our love is aimed is not a list of ideas or propositions or doctrines; it is not a list of abstract, disembodied concepts or values. Rather, the reason that this vision of the good life moves us is because it is a more affective, sensible, even aesthetic picture of what the good life looks like. A vision of the good life captures our hearts and imaginations not by providing a set of rules or ideas, but by painting a picture of what it looks like for us to flourish and live well. This is why such pictures are communicated most powerfully in stories, legends, myths, plays, novels, and films rather than dissertations, messages, and monographs.27 Because we are affective before we are cognitive (and even while we are cognitive),28 visions of the good get inscribed in us by means that are commensurate with our primarily affective, imaginative nature. This isn’t to say that the cognitive or propositional is a completely foreign register for us (if it were, this book would be an exercise in futility!); however, it doesn’t get into our (nongenetic) bones in the same way or with the same effect.29 The


28. This is one of the points regularly emphasized by MacIntyre in Dependable Rational Animals: even when humans engage in cognitive reflection, we don’t cease to be noncognitive animals. As he puts it, “Human identity is primarily, even if not only, bodily” (8). Thus the “prelinguistic” (what I’ve been calling noncognitive or affective) is not just “a stage of our early lives” that we grow out of; it remains functional (and primary) “throughout our lives” (16). We’ll explore this further in the next section.

cognitive and propositional is easily reduced and marginalized as just more “blah-blah-blah” when our hearts and imaginations are captured by a more compelling picture of the good life—the way it’s hard to listen to someone talking when the television is on, with its blinking images functioning as magnets for our attention.

Our ultimate love moves and motivates us because we are lured by this picture of human flourishing. Rather than being pushed by beliefs, we are pulled by a telos that we desire. It’s not so much that we’re intellectually convinced and then muster the willpower to pursue what we ought; rather, at a preconceptual level, we are attracted to a vision of the good life that has been painted for us in stories and myths, images and icons. It is not primarily our minds that are captivated but rather our imaginations that are captured, and when our imagination is hooked, we’re hooked (and sometimes our imaginations can be hooked by very different visions than what we’re feeding into our minds). Those visions of the good life that capture our heart have thereby captured our selves and begin to draw us toward them, however implicitly or tacitly. The goods and aspects of human flourishing painted by these alluring pictures of the good life begin to seep into the fiber of our (everyday, noncognitive) being (i.e., our hearts) and thus govern and shape our decisions, actions, and habits. Thus we become certain kinds of people; we begin to emulate, mimic, and mirror the particular vision that we desire. Attracted by it and moved toward it, we begin to live into this vision of the good life and start to look like citizens who inhabit the world that we picture as the good life. We become little microcosms of that envisioned world as we try to embody it in the here and now. So many of the penultimate decisions, actions, and paths we undertake are implicitly and ultimately aimed at trying to live out the vision of the good life that we love and thus want to pursue.

This is just to say that to be human is to desire “the kingdom,” some version of the kingdom, which is the aim of our quest. Every one of us is on a kind of Arthurian quest for “the Holy Grail,” that hoped-for, longed-for, dreamed-of picture of the good life—the realm of human flourishing—that we pursue without ceasing, implicitly and tacitly, it is such visions of the kingdom that pull us to get up in the morning and suit up for the quest.

However, to say that all humans desire the kingdom does not mean that we all desire the same kingdom. Structurally, we are lovers, and that “love pump” can’t be turned off; and because love is intentional and teleological,

cerned to show that all narratives—whether the Gospels or Proust—structure emotions, desires and hopes that impact upon what we believe and how we come to value certain acts” (439). He concludes that “the narrative economy, in engaging our expectant emotions, opens up a transcendental horizon that configures our sense of what is real and what is valuable” (453–56).

3. A. HABITS: LOVE’S FULCRUM

The anthropology we’ve sketched has emphasized that we are fundamentally creatures of desire and love and that our love is always directed to a particular vision of the good life. A picture of the kingdom that embodies a particular image of human flourishing. We further suggested that these pictures—these affective icons of the good life—get into our brains and our hearts and thus shape our character by aiming our desire to a particular end. But this raises important questions: Just how does that happen? How does our love get aimed in different directions? Does this happen by some kind of magic or alchemy? Does it happen by the dissemination of ideas and propositions that convince us to pursue this vision? What are the mechanisms by which particular visions of the good life get infused in our hearts such that they could motivate and govern a way of life (decisions, actions, pursuits, relationships)?

This brings us to the third element of figure 1: a desire for and orientation to a particular vision of the good life (the kingdom) becomes operative in us (motivating actions, decisions, etc.) by becoming an integral part of the fabric of our dispositions—our preconceptive tendencies to act in certain ways and toward certain ends. Philosophers like Aristotle, Aquinas, and MacIntyre describe such dispositions as “habits.” Good habits, for instance,

our love is always aimed at some particular vision of the good life that has been pictured for us. But because the structure of love can be misdirected, there can be many different teloi. In other words, there are very different visions of what “the kingdom” looks like. The shape of the kingdom is contested, generating very different stories and thus different kinds of peoples, citizens who see themselves as subjects of rival kings. There are many roundtables. One of the core tasks of cultural discernment will be to “read” the particular configuration of the kingdom that is assumed by different cultural institutions and narratives.

30. I recognize that things aren’t quite this neat and tidy: that we are often fragmented, “split” selves who might be simultaneously captivated by competing visions of the good. Few of us inhabit enclaves where only one story is dominant; rather, we find ourselves in spaces where competing stories are told. As Ward rightly observes, “Christians, like any other human beings, are shaped by and implicated in more than one community; they have social and even psychological spaces with those who may be far removed from Christian narratives” (“Narrative and Ethics,” 439). And precisely because these stories and visions function affectively and prereflectively, we can be quite taken with stories that cognitively we might criticize. I will return to this layer of complexity below (in chapters 2 and 5); for the moment, in this first sketch, I will keep things simpler.

31. Such cultural exegetes will be the task of chapter 3, which will exegete the particular visions of the kingdom embedded in the market, the stadium, and the university; but it will also be the focus of chapter 5, which will exegete the particular vision of the kingdom that is embedded in the practices of Christian worship.