**heart/心(Xīn)**

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| European Perspective | Stefano Della Torre | 17 Feb 2022 |

The concepts of heart, spirit and soul are all related to the mistery of life. They have different origins, and each of them has many meanings, but they also share wide overlappings.

Starting from ancient Greeks, they had the psykè as a definitely nonmaterial being, whose existence could be separate from the body, and philosophers thought of it as immortal. This concept is quite equal to the Latin “anima” (French: ame, Italian: anima, Spanish: alma) and the ancient German “seula” (English: soul, German: selle).

The etymology of psykè reveals the relationship with life acknowledged in something sensible, even if not visible, as the word is connected with the verb meaning “to breath” or “to blow”: the life ends whit the last breathing, and this movement of air becomes the sign of ending or enduring life.

Hence the idea of thumos, as a concept which is more related to physical life, identified with the breath. This concept is equal to Latin “spiritus” (English: spirit, French: esprit; Italian: spirit: Spanish: espiritu) and to the German Geist.

Basically, the spirit is what makes the body alive, and the death is the end of this synergy. The overlapping among “anima” (soul) and “spiritus” (spirit) (in any European language) became more and more complete: the spirit became as well a being that exists also after the end of the persons’ life, and the fantastic elaboration of the concept produced the idea of a spirit as good, or bizarre and maleficent, often described as the ghost.

The link with life bridges with all breathing beings, besides humankind: “animal” has the same root as “anima”, without any ambition to immortality. The idea of an individual human being as composed of a mortal part, the body, and an immortal part, the soul, was elaborated by the ancient religions and became central in Christian vision. In popular thought, the soul is the inner being, the most authentic and private part of a person. Psychology is the branch of medicine that works on feelings, memory and thoughts, and this shows the path of the concept.

Looking at the many meanings of these words in the dictionaries, it is possible to observe that the most popular meanings are the same for both the terms, and only few meanings are specific, sometimes producing funny “false friends”, such as “spiritoso” (Italian: something or somebody that makes people laugh) and “spirituosen” (German: alcoholic beverages, as alcohol is produced by a process of evaporation, and in the Middle Ages the vapor given off and collected during an alchemical process (as with distillation of alcohol) was called a spirit of the original material). But in general, both spirit and soul bear the sense of the nonmaterial essence, the animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life, and form this shared origin the multiple metaphoric senses arise. Therefore, a soul or a spirit are attributed to things, places, ideas, times…: some examples can be the spirit of the time (German: Zeitgeist), the soul of places, the spirit of the movement, the soul of the team, and so on.

There was another organ definitely related with life, that is the heart. The end of life can be described as a stop of breath, but also of heart beating. That’s why European peoples developed a vast metaphoric use of “heart” in a semantic area related to life. Some of these meanings correspond with (secondary) meanings of spirit and soul: heart, spirit, soul, are all frequently used to speak of courage and bravery.

Furthermore, if the soul and the spirit symbolically came to signify the inner part of a person, the heart is physically the inner part of the body, used also in popular everyday expressions (the heart of vegetables), and therefore there is a wide area of overlapping metaphoric uses (to comply with the spirit of a law, to reach the heart of a discourse, to portray the soul, or the spirit or the heart of a person…).

Anyway, the most frequent and specific sense in which “heart” is used is related to the sphere of feelings. Heart is the international symbol of love, also by very popular logos and emoticons. This is because “heart” is used to underscore the good, which is present in actions, such as welcoming somebody (German: “Herztliche wilkommen”), to deal with somebody with openness and friendship (Italian: “cordialmente”), to accept something or somebody with openness, to do something with a generous commitment, with passion. “To learn by heart” in English (“apprendre par coeur” in French) means learning a text so to be ready to repeat perfectly without reading: something to do with memory, but more with the sphere of care and focus.

Beyond the common meanings, heart tend to signify the richness of feelings and sense in human life, whilst spirit and soul tend to be related to nonmaterial essence, and they move towards the vision of an everlasting life, often within the sphere of religion.