

Hands
by Angus Johnston

Final FYP Lecture, April 9, 2010

Notes as provided to the Archives at the University of King's College, Halifax

This is the final lecture of foundation year 2010. April 9. The actual lecture left some of this out and touched on things not in this text.

The talk was dedicated to Roy Wilwerth [architect of Library and NAB] who made thought visible for all of us at King's and with whom I spent an hour thinking on Rembrandt's Jewish Bride – a central image for this talk.

I am so pleased and honoured and see this as a first fruits for the students having completed the course and for me looking back on thirty-two years.

Thanks to Peggy Heller I have come to know many great books courses across north America – through the Association of Core Texts and Courses. It has struck me that many courses either deny that the medieval leads from ancients to moderns, or want to encourage students to dwell in the medieval. It becomes then a touchstone for dogma: how one treats the second Section.

What Section do you think of when I use the term "secularity" – student response: Spinoza. Lately my reflection has turned to the Fourth section and the way in which some courses assume that secularity is opposed to the spiritual, underestimating what I am calling visible thought.

Aristotle comments on the problematic character of the human hand – a tool? The tool of all tools? Is the hand like the heart for him a turn of externality to will?

Heidegger makes what a hand is problematic. This is especially noteworthy as Hegel divides the history of the West into the dialectical understanding of the whole and the notion or *begriff* - the gripped (Miller trans. P.121-4).

The dialectical: This division hangs on two different notions of otherness. The first recognizes the completeness of thought such that any form of incompleteness is not, in truth. This is the platonic problem and is best expressed in Plotinus' notion of matter.

The notion: The second notion of otherness stems more from Aristotle and finds in the recognition of the objects of thought an otherness which has the unity and truth – the substance in Aristotle's terms – to make the first principle clear. In the other as notion is the whole.

Whether one can take the other into thought should be one of the large questions remaining at the end of this course.

For Heidegger the hand, the handy, the present to hand stem from the always already which precedes thinking in the form of western metaphysics. And human being, Dasein, is related to the hand in a way that is more primordial than biology or race. The truth of the hand allows one to think a human group – the Germans for instance – which is both particular and yet whose special character does not depend upon the biologist and racist policies of the National Socialists.

Derrida's critique of Heidegger - an essay in Deconstruction and Philosophy - allows this as a profound point concerning humanity but makes problematic the relation to bodies as conceived in the European enlightenment – Heidegger allows a dogmatic moment concerning nature as a whole in marking off the hand and its relation to Dasein.

This could be interpreted to be about whether monkeys have thumbs and so on concerning other animals but following Hegel it seems to be an argument about things themselves, things more generally. To accept that the thumb is already always in a way which the tail is not, or the moon, seems to be adopting certain enlightenment distinctions dogmatically.

Perhaps so but that takes in the whole question especially of Hegel's Phenomenology. I find myself just beginning to approach that. I understand you had an exhortation to make that attempt last week by visiting prof Russon.

I find art a way of approaching this central moment of western thought. In this paper then I have accepted a hand – a series of gifts in art - in understanding the line between thought and its other. And I hope to share with you a few images concerning what early modern secular hands, especially, make clear about that question and take some images of that great friend of foundation year, Alex Colville, as engaging with this secular enlightenment. I hope in doing this to remind you and myself of what this course allows us, indeed demands of us all to do – to think in an ever richer context.

I hope this can be an enjoyable oral, the first fruits of a course like this.

Ancient hands.

Ancient hands are not natural. Two thoughts come into play here: the first is the notion of Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics that early art is symbolic in the sense that it always points to a whole which is beyond itself. It is never a reproduction of nature because of course there is no nature yet.

The second thought is that I hope that you have learned to avoid 'subtraction stories' as Charles Taylor puts it in *A Secular Age* p.22. (the same point is expressed in a different way in the introduction to Section Four in the Foundation Year Handbook)
(I did not use this image in the talk):

- The history of the west as
- 1 the popping of a series of balloons
 - 2 as some balloons disappear others are discovered
 3. there is one large balloon



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Mesopotamia





Egypt

The Egyptian and Mesopotamian hands point to a total reality, we would perhaps say including gods, nature, human, and whatever else there is. They indicate a place in the whole where it is not clear if these are simply human hands, and where the relation to the whole runs from the powerless to the point of the power of creation – in our two examples here.

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What I want to recall from your thinking through Greek texts and images is simply that in Plato the elements of this whole are first clearly distinguished in the West.

The platonic cave allows you to think for the first time of the natural, the visible moving aspect of the real, the caused rather than the cause. And by looking to nature one can think the supernatural (this is by no means a subtraction story: a new sense of the divine and the human accompany this nature, we are coming to see more of the true balloon) – nature reveals the whole so art can call forth the whole by the most beautiful portraits of nature and especially human nature. Hands are for the first time hands and reveal the highest things – not as symbols of power or lack of power but as hands themselves – this is true in Hegel's view especially in Greek sculpture.

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Marathon boy - self contemplation of hands. References to Antigone and Oedipus – human hands but are they not divine deeds?

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Mourning Athena.

The root of my thoughts today came from a passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology* about reading palms.

(Observing reason; physiognomy section). Hegel argues that we become aware of an inner and an outer – motivation and deed let's say. Our first observation is that the two fall apart and yet should be one. What each of you is – your hands just as they are -- and as Sophocles puts it, your whole life lived. What we are it seems cannot be either. But we observe that we do not simply leave things at that state.

For what we are externally –the hand here -is not the whole and yet is external – not internal and yet (the second and difficult step in Hegel's argument here) this external is an internal for the external whole – of fate. The hand becomes a middle term. Q p 189 so the hand becomes one of the key ways we signify that we are both internal and the whole of our externality.

Third we recognize that there is this relation of external moments which embody the internal and this recognition becomes alive in the moments: the hand becomes the individual reflection on the action as a whole which is our life or our fate – they are the “expression in the sense of a reflection on the actual expression” (Miller translation of the Phenomenology p.190).

Hands reveal the person. They and the person know that, so that hands become authoritative akin to speech and thought – I raise my hand in lecture for attention; for Asher my border collie and he drops to the ground – the peace sign from a school bus in Lunenburg county – if I hold up a finger – the koan tale of the zen master who cut the students finger off – learning “loser” from my daughters. Still another level when they speak as hands.

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The natural hands of the Greeks gave way to the middle stage –



No longer Aristotle’s tool of all tools this hand is clearly about thought and its object and their possible unity.

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The Romansque hand is both symbolic and part of the narrative – poked by an angel (Autun).

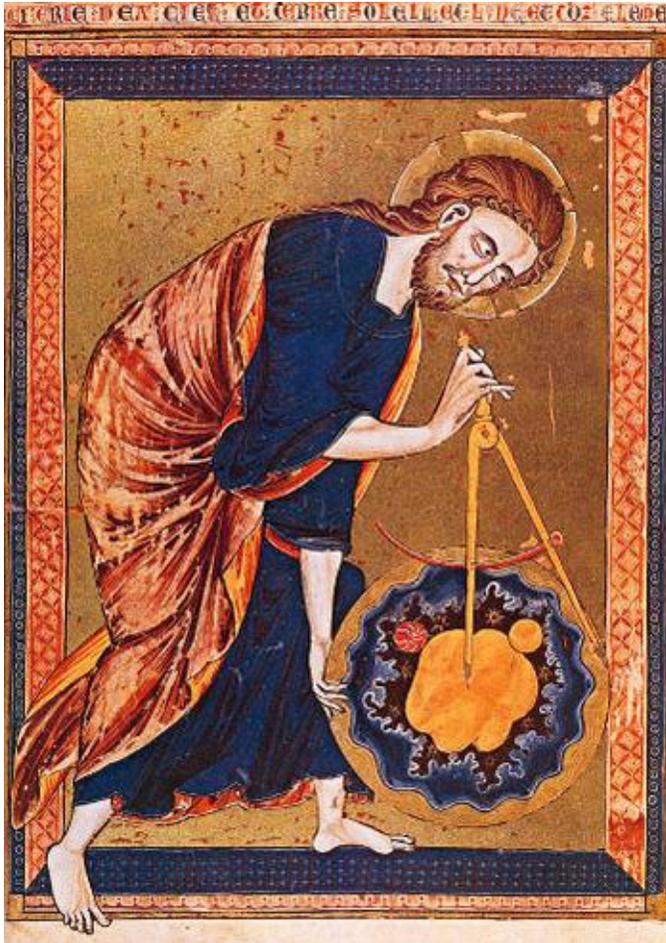
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Hildesheim. The hands of Adam and Eve are denying their internality and making it undeniable.

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Life is becoming both symbolic and narrative. Huizinga's description of cutting up an apple.



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Hands become related to the possibility of incarnation – they are the unity of the individual and the cosmic.



Padua.

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There are three miracles going on in this portrait of Saint Francis. The stigmata themselves. A narrative of symbolic and yet real hands. And the birth of the natural in Giotto

Ancient, medieval and early modern hands – our three steps?

So what then: a new nature a new sign and a new reflection? The enlightenment, the contemporary and what is to come?

Antonin Artaud : culture in action culture growing within us like a new organ.

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Bosch has god think creation in the upper left.

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If you take away the hand all of the natural becomes the 'point of contact' or perhaps not any of it?



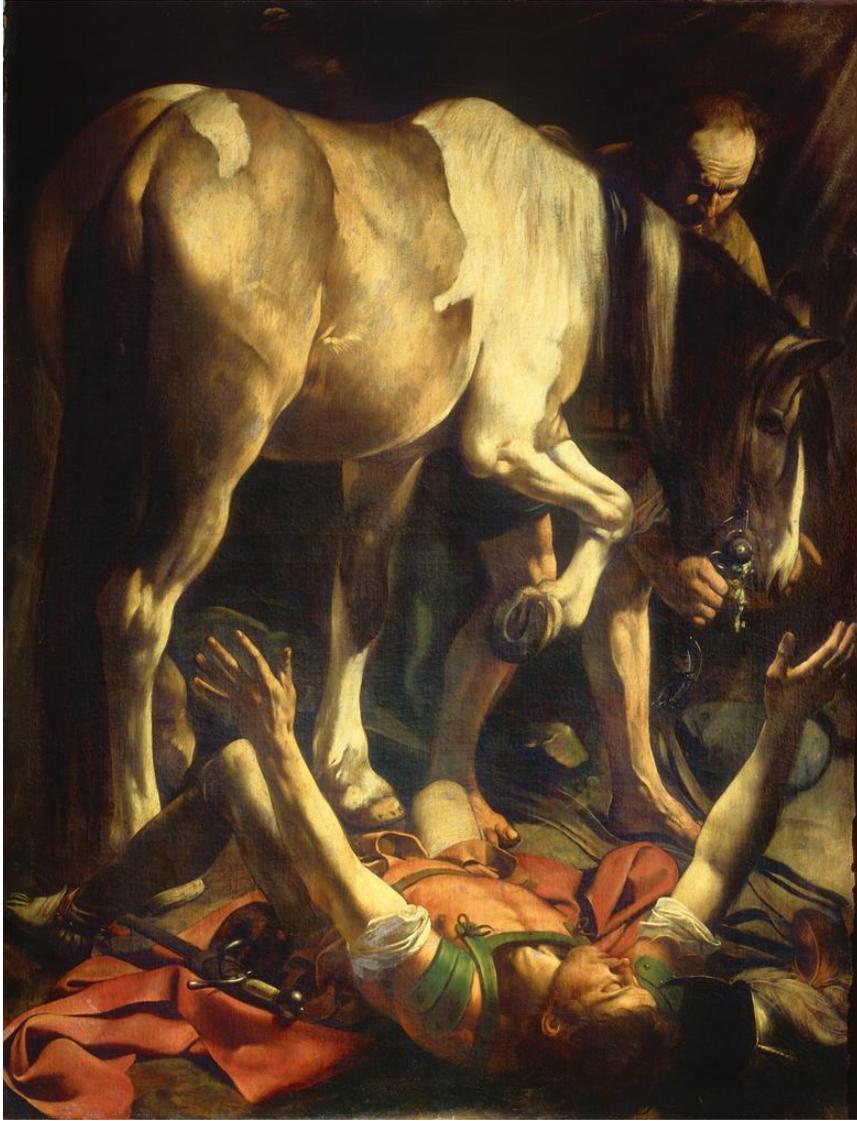
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Nature, an inner dynamism and the power of the divine have come together in art in truly self conscious and perhaps more simply conscious hands.



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Caravaggio was asked why the horse's ass and he answered because that is God's light. When asked the students found it difficult to say what his hands are showing – the key to the painting. Jane Reagh Bruce-Robertson has argued that this is the first painting of empty space in the history of the west.

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Narcissus and Descartes.

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What is the subject matter of these hands?



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A great tutorial or the worst? If one could become one with the world itself – not blind, not other – if one could unite thinking and extension. Not that the older sense of the divine has been subtracted – again to use Taylor's image – but a new world or a new substantiality has become evident.

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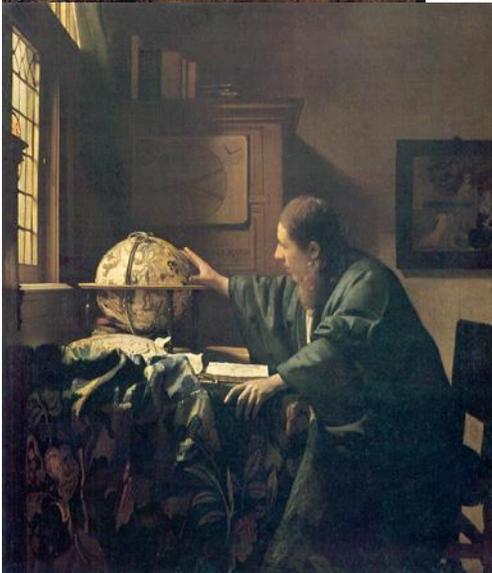
I want to compare four major images from the age of reason – the conversion of Saint Paul, the Jewish bride, Vermeer's woman with the balance and Goya's massacre of May 3, 1808, with a few images of the twentieth century.



Isaac and Rebekah? 1666. My first thoughts on this work owe a good deal to Detlef Stefan retired from the German department.

Student response was that the man's hands indicated possession, care – they go from the outward protection to the intimately inward – the woman's hands go to the deeper inwardness they argued of childbirth and the other hand indicated uncertainty concerning a free spiritual unity.

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Now the hand connecting the globe of the stars was a human hand. (the astronomer)

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The weighing of maat in the Egyptian book of the dead; the last judgement on the



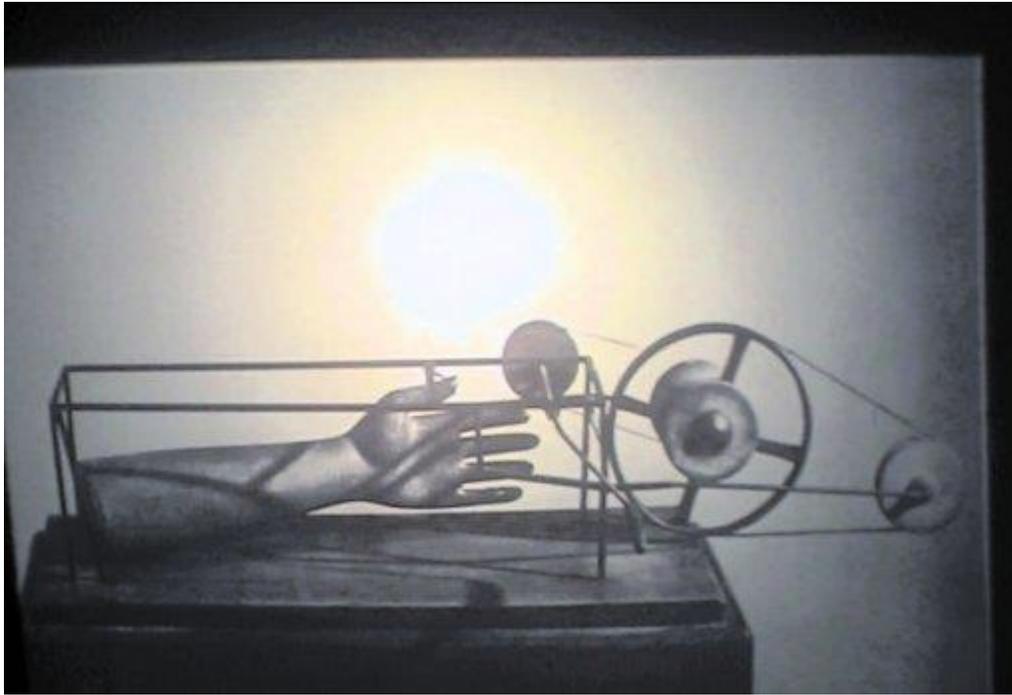
wall; the empty scales.
there was little student response partly because I think the actual scales were hard to see.
the simple letting be of these wonderful hands expresses our thinking care of space, time, and
mass – our unity with them.

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Students argued that the thought in these hands was of a common humanity. (bravo)

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Giacometti

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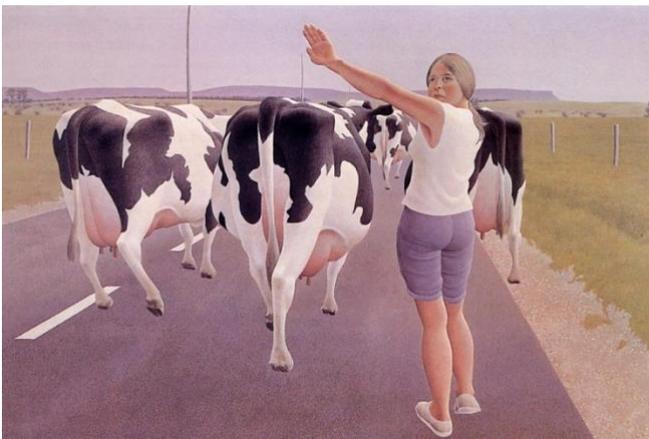
These hands are forming the truest notes of the twentieth century.

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Enlightenment hands are turned to a more primordial subject, Colville's call is similar in some ways to Heidegger, our hands can think a true subject matter if it allows us.

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The student's strong response was to stop – elements of the Romanesque symbolic narrative. What is necessary and what is at stake? Here she shares the uncertainty of the Jewish bride but with the overwhelming power of her gesture – perhaps what the young – you young persons – have to put together.

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A few of the students in the class knew this man and there were brief discussions of going home to the valley and what he meant to them. When asked why he waves the most articulate student said that she did not know – a very fine answer in my view.

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I ended with the thought that we have only begun to understand the thoughts and the matters that our hands may be able to make visible but that we can know that at stake are deeply spiritual issues.

Any simplistic opposition between the secular and the religious is a lie.

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