

Two Ways of Breathing

When you get older the desire to travel decreases, not necessarily for everyone but in general. There's an added discomfort of going about it compared with pre-9/11 days especially when it comes to flying, the security procedures plus the extra hours of waiting. Surely the glamour has long gone. Train travel in the USA is easier security-wise but for the most part undependable outside large urban areas. Then there's the bus...a last resort.

Traveling is just one aspect of life that's more difficult as you get older. Things which you took for granted when younger become obstacles. You can do them, of course, but they involve greater personal inconvenience. Far more intrusive than the inconvenience of traveling is the daily struggle to keep up with Internet-related devices. It turns out they mind you instead of the other way around. Such intrusiveness, welcomed by most folks, is a sure-fire way to disturb you over the long haul. Obviously much has been written on that with the sure promise of more to come.

Finally there comes a point—a different time for everyone, but we all reach it eventually—when we succumb to what Ecclesiastes summed up famously as “vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Such vanity isn't something we can observe in events or in other persons but is alive and well in oneself. In other words, we all have it. When older, vanity stares you in the face more directly and doesn't let you go until you make the decision to let it go. More specifically, it's the memories of when we had succumbed to vanity that can haunt us. On the positive side when compared with being younger, we don't react as strongly to vanity by attempting to boot it out. Instead, we allow it to slide away more or less gracefully. In sum, as we age we come to see this vanity more clearly and accept it in peace instead of getting all worked up about it. The struggle begins in youth, reaches its peak during middle life and later drops you off on one side or the other...hopefully on the right one. No need to digress on the other side. Instinctively we all know what it is.

The nature of our innate vanity requires a bit of fleshing-out which we'll give a shot at by examining two Hebrew nouns, *hevel* and *ruach* or vanity and spirit. *Hevel* is found in Ecclesiastes, a favorite word the author is fond of applying to all human endeavors. The most common translation is breathing ¹, exhalation, vapor. In essence,

¹The noun “breath” can be used but the verb “breathing” is more suggestive of

it's simply another word for pride or better, self-centeredness. We obtain it early on in life and equally early on accept it as part n' parcel of being human as having been gained through culture and in more recent years, through the all-pervasive media.

The second Hebrew noun standing in contrast to *hevel* is *ruach*. It has a similar meaning, breath (wind is an alternative), but also is applicable to spirit and therefore leans more to the divine as in Holy Spirit ². Thus *ruach* turns out to be nobler than *hevel*, the two never being confused or intermingled.

Stretching this a bit, we could say that two types of breathing exist in us, one corporeal and the other spiritual. Hopefully in our latter years or even better, before that, we end up "breathing" in accord with *ruach*, not *hevel*. In the meanwhile there's an educative process with regard to the two, for we start off with the latter and move toward the former or at least try to.

One way of point out the difference between *hevel* and *ruach/pneuma* is to present samples of both. After them comes a third category, *reyach*, found in both Testaments as related to fragrance. The reason for this addendum is to show the appeal of *ruach* over *hevel* with emphasis upon scent or that which is sweet-smelling.

A few samples of *hevel* ³

Dt 32.21: They have stirred me to jealousy with what is *no god*; they have provoked me with their idols.

Job 7.16: I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Let me alone, for my days are a *breath*.

Ps 31.6: You hate those who pay regard to *vain* idols; but I trust in the Lord.

Ps 39.5: Surely every man stands a mere *breath*!

Ps 62.9: Men of low estate are but a *breath*, men of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a *breath*.

Ps 78.33: So he made their days vanish like a *breath* and their years in terror.

Prov 13.11: Wealth *hastily gotten* (literally, 'from vanity') will dwindle, but he

something active, not static.

²*Pneuma* is the Greek for *ruach* used throughout the New Testament.

³References to the Book of Ecclesiastes are omitted since *hevel* occurs with such frequency there, some thirty-one times. As for the Book of Jeremiah, it has the most occurrences (eight) of the prophets.

who gathers little by little will increase it.

Prov 31.30: Charm is deceitful, and beauty is *vain*, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.

Is 57.13: When you cry out, let your collection of idols deliver you! The wind (*ruach*) will carry them off, a *breath* will take them away.

Jer 2.5: What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me and went after *worthlessness* and *became worthless*?

Jer 10.3: For th customs of th peoples are *false*.

Jer 16.19: Our fathers have inherited nought but lies, *worthless things* in which there is no profit.

Jer 51.18: They are *worthless*, a work of delusion; at the time of their punishment they shall perish.

A few samples of *ruach* ⁴

Because there are far more references to *ruach*, those taken from Ecclesiastes are listed only. ⁵ *Hevel* is the native soil of Ecclesiastes, if you will, hence the reason for focusing upon how *ruach* either parallels or contrasts with it in this book.

1.6: The wind blows to the south and goes round to the north; round and round goes the *wind*, and on its circuits the *wind* returns.

1.14: I have seen everything that is done under the sun; and behold, all is vanity and a striving after *wind* (literally, ‘feeding on wind’).

3.19: For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same *breath*, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity.

3.21: Who knows whether the *spirit* of man goes upward and the *spirit* of the beast goes down to the earth?

5.16: This also is a grievous evil; just as he came, so shall he go; and what gain has he that he toiled for the *wind*?

7.8: Better is the end of a thing than its beginning; and the patient in *spirit* is better than the proud in *spirit*.

8.8: No man has the power to retain the *spirit* or authority over the day of death.

⁴The Greek *pneuma* is left out but may be added later.

⁵Some are omitted because essentially they are the same. Also, *hevel* sometimes occurs within the same verse. It is not put into italics.

10.4: If the *anger* of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for deference will make amends for great offenses.

11.4: He who observes the *wind* will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

11.5: As you do not know how the *spirit* comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of god who makes everything.

12.7: And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the *spirit* returns to god who gave it.

A few samples of odor and fragrance

This list of odor/fragrance references is a kind of supplement to *hevel* and *ruach*. That is, the very nature of an odor is subtle and akin to both a vapor and wind. You might say that it depends upon either one as a vehicle to transport it. As for the noun *reyach*, it's from the same verbal root as *ruach*, so the two are related closely. All the Old Testament references deal with sacrificial offerings including the negative one of Ezk 6.13. *Nychuach* (always with *reyach*) is a noun pertaining to sweetness; from verbal root *nuach*, to rest, sit down, cause to be quiet. Such sweetness wafts through the air and is just as intangible as *hevel*, *ruach* and *reyach*. As for the two New Testament references, the Greek *osme* means an odor, scent or the sense of smell. *Euodia* is a sweet smell; *eu-* being and adverb meaning well as opposed to *kakos*, the adverbial form of evil, that which is bad. ⁶

Gen 8.21: And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*), the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.

Ex 29.17-18: Then you shall cut the ram into pieces and wash its entrails and its legs and put them with its pieces and its head and burn the whole ram upon the altar; it is a burnt offering to the Lord; it is a pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*), an offering by fire to the Lord.

Lev 1.9: And the priest shall burn the whole on the altar, as a burnt offering, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*) to the Lord. (Make a note that "an odor pleasing to the Lord" occurs frequently in Leviticus and Numbers.

⁶As an interesting side note...on this home page is a document listing the scriptural references to the three **Song Commentaries** by Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux. All three favor verses as pertaining to the sense of smell, more so than the sense of sight.

Ezk 6.13: And you shall know that I am the Lord when their slain lie among their idols round about their altars, upon every high hill, on all the mountain tops, under every green tree, and under every leafy oak, wherever they offered pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*) to all their idols.

Ezk 14.19: Also my bread which I gave you—I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey—you set before them for a pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*), says the Lord God.

Ezk 20.41: As a pleasing odor (*reyach nychuach*) I will accept you when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will manifest my holiness among you in the sight of the nations.

Jn 12.3: Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance (*osme*) of the ointment.

2 Cor 2.14-16: But thanks be to God who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance (*osme*) of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma (*euodia*) of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16) to one a fragrance (*osme*) from death to death, to the other a fragrance (*osme*) from life to life.

With the outline of *hevel* and *ruach* in mind (along with *reyach*), we can take them as two ways of breathing: one in accord with vanity and the other in accord with the spiritual nature of our being. Now the stage is set to move on and see how we might develop them. Inhalation and exhalation are proper to both as we do with physical breathing which keeps us alive. That, however, is on the physical plane. On a deeper level, our very existence depends upon whether we “breathe” according to *hevel* or according to *ruach*. It’s easy to see how *ruach* bestows life on the natural level as some of the Ecclesiastes verses reveal. A different story, however, when it comes to *hevel*. Although Ecclesiastes uses it as breath, just as many times the element of vanity is thrown in, the theme of the book.

Breathing and henceforth living in accord with *hevel* is false, a contrivance of our own making which other biblical verses translate as false gods. Although Ecclesiastes doesn’t develop this directly as is the case with the prophets, for him *hevel* is a characteristic of human activity, even the normal everyday kind. References to *ruach* pertain to the wind, breath and spirit and in a sense, are similar to *hevel*. The major difference is that other biblical books associate *ruach* with spirit which means it points to something more divine or transcendent. *Ruach* never is a vapor, the alternate meaning of *hevel*.

We could apply both inhalation and exhalation to *hevel* and *ruach* which make them come alive. To inhale and exhale according to the former means living in accord with vanity as Ecclesiastes depicts it. The same in/out applies to *ruach* as animating a person in accord with the Holy Spirit (*Ruach*). While the in and out of breathing work hand-in-hand, associating inhalation seems more applicable insofar it applies to our taking in either *hevel* or *ruach*. As for exhalation, it's a type of emptying—almost a giving-back of what we've inhaled—which requires an immediate filling or inhalation and so forth, in and out, until we expire or literally are out of (*ex-*) breath.

This leads to another idea, that of *kenosis* which often is associated with St. Paul's hymn in Philippians 2.5-7⁷. Because Jesus Christ emptied himself (*kenoo*) of his divine form or *morphe*, we could say that he—rather the Father—exhaled him upon upon which he assumed the *morphe*, if you will, of *reyach nychuach*. True as far as this pertains to the scent associated with sacrificial offerings as the biblical references of *ruach* suggest and naturally suggests Jesus as offering himself as upon the cross. Thus Christ becomes an example where the idea of a divine *morphe* is shed voluntarily. For as already noted, when an exhalation occurs, automatically an inhalation follows.

The example of shedding one's personal *morphe* based upon the Philippians passage allows us to engage in a *kenosis* paralleling that of Jesus Christ. For us it would consist in transiting—emptying ourselves—from *hevel* to receive *ruach* where the latter is associated with the Christian concept of *pneuma* or spirit.

All this is well documented in the overall Christian tradition from which a number of spiritualities have developed. This leads to an observation, if you will, a kind of side track that may or may not be helpful. Whenever we run into a presentation of a given spirituality, chances it's in an exhortatory format where we're encouraged to do this or do that. It comes as part of the package, and barely are we aware of it. While the approach is certainly legitimate, in reality it's pretty much doomed to failure. The reason? An inability to take into account the fragility of our enthusiasm which falters sooner or latter because it can't be sustained. Once we do falter we pick ourselves up and make another go at it, this followed by another faltering. And so a pattern emerges which sets the stage for how we advance...or give up. If the latter, many a

⁷“Have this in mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but *emptied* himself, taking the form of a servant, being form in the likeness of men.” A short essay on this is posted in this same homepage entitled **Kenosis**.

spirituality describes such a fall invariably couched in language where sin plays a dominant role. In addition to this, the perception of a self being so afflicted is heightened. How to detach from it is couched in similar unpleasant language which makes the enterprise less than desirable. So in a way, the exhortatory approach is a subtle form of *hevel*...vanity and vapor combined.

With that little digression out of the way, let's return to the *hevel* common to us all and about which Ecclesiastes speaks so eloquently. *Hevel* colors everything we perceive, do as well as pass on to the next generation. The previous generation had passed it on to us, the transmission of which isn't quite evident at first glance and requires some digging around to perceive it. The first question that pops into our minds is where did it come from? We carry *hevel* like an albatross around our collective neck and can't seem to rid ourselves of it. It seems all-pervasive and hence more difficult to get a handle on. That's why Ecclesiastes' famous utterance "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" echos across the ages as something all too familiar, not requiring explanation. We pick up on it instinctively, for it's out there for all to behold. At the same time often we don't take the time nor are inclined to examine it since it appears as a given,,,a brick wall which seems insuperable.

At this point we can introduced the famous notion of original sin found in Christianity as a way to describe the human predicament. As everyone knows, Eve ate the fruit of the tree in the garden's center, a divine no-no, and then offered it to her husband Adam. In sum, the "sin" consists of disobedience passed on by no other way than through childbirth which in some circles is perceived as the real problem, the culprit for original sin. Be that as it may, the transmission is described as a stain. As we all know, stains are difficult if not impossible to remove at the peril of either damaging or destroying the material on which it is found. As the story goes, the first sin of disobedience has stained all generations from the Garden of Eden to the present. No one is exempt ⁸. Many types of rubbing, if you will, have been adopted over the centuries in an attempt to remove this stain but to no avail. Such is the power of this story in our collective Western heritage.

Note that the point of actual fracture comes from a suggestion by the serpent to the woman when he says it's okay to eat of the tree. Now the idea is put into her head which she couldn't shake and gave in. The Genesis text doesn't speak of how long was

⁸Catholics maintain that apart from Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary is free from this stain.

the interval between this event and her offering the fruit to her husband. She must have taken some time to deliberate, weighing the consequences which served only to make matters worse. As for the original prohibition from the Lord, the serpent distorts it, for he changes it into some all right to do. In the context of this essay this deception may be posited as *hevel*. Like Eve, we've started off with knowledge of the truth but having given in to a seemingly attractive alternative, we distort...stain...the truth. Keeping in mind the notion of a stain, we take this alternative and "spill" it on a place where it doesn't belong. The result? We're unable to free ourselves from it no matter how hard we scrub away.

The final step is that we go away...die...and our children take our place. As they were growing up, they could observe something not quite right with their parents and were unable to articulate it. As for the parents, they were too embarrassed to admit the spill which led to a cover-up—afraid to be naked, if you will—like Adam and Eve. So the stain is transmitted to offspring not physically nor even mentally. While both body and mind are involved, the real transmission seems to be on a plane hovering between form (what we can see, touch and hear) and what's formless. The latter is ill-defined but is a very real bond between parents and children called affection, it subject to being stained.

So if the parents are uneasy as to their conscience, the stage is set for their children to move right in and take over perhaps without knowing they're taking possession of something because never has it been brought into the open. In fact, most people don't even know how to do this. They're inherited *hevel* or deception with which they've grown up and unwittingly are steeped in it. With time they get married, have kids and just like their parents, pass on this unease which is a kind of malaise. This term is quite accurate insofar as it suggests an overall, hard to pin down feel. It seems with each transmission *hevel* gets stronger in the sense that it's bonds can't be loosened as easily as before. Even a flood at Noah's time couldn't wash the world of this *hevel*. Soon afterwards it took root and sprouted, almost with a vengeance, and continues to the present.

If you want to see this documented in real life situations, check out some of the biblical prophets. Jeremiah comes to mind, for he confronts the waywardness of his own people over and over again. Despite he being the agent for numerous divine interventions, the cycle cannot be stopped. Once in a while the people take notice of their condition but more often than not, they persist in it. Such a predicament easily

can apply to the rest of humanity. Israel stands out in this regard simply because of its divine election which heightens the people's struggle with *hevel*, it sometimes being transmuted into worship of alien gods sometimes labeled as *hevel*.

Our perennial struggle with *hevel* has a parallel with the other half of Western civilization's heritage as presented through the person of Socrates. One of his biggest bugaboos was opinion usually translated as *doxa*⁹. Although it lays beyond the scope of this article, for all practical purposes *doxa* and *hevel* share a lot by reason of resting on unsteady ground and in fact, lack any real foundation. Sticking with *hevel* so we don't get off course, we can say it does partake of that stain-nature relative to so-called original sin. As noted already, a stain is quite difficult to remove and even its residue is just as pervasive, hence the reason why it can be transmitted from one generation to the next. *Hevel*-as-stain is harder to detect and can fly under the radar, so to speak. Before you know it, the next generation finds itself equally stained, *hevel* having been acquired by watching one's parents in action and pretty much absorbing it subconsciously. Again, that parent-child bond of affection seems to be essential for the transmission.

We've inhaled *hevel* and find ourselves being unable to exhale it. And so round and round it goes trapped inside us, for we're now unable to exhale or rid ourselves of it. However, we have to exhale both physically, mentally and spiritually. When we do with regard to the second two, we attempt to rid ourselves of what has been bugging us but can't quite put our fingers on it. Because this inability to exhale *hevel*, it rolls around...rattles...within us.

On the other hand, the *ruach/reych* movement starts from within...God...and moves out as so many scriptural passages demonstrate. The Philippians quote is of special interest insofar as it concerns the self-emptying of Jesus Christ which Paul calls a *kenosis*¹⁰ as noted earlier. Such *kenosis* as breathing-out or *ruach* is recounted in Jn 20.22: "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. (*Pneuma*).'" Actually this is a kind of primer, for at Pentecost the disciples received the *Pneuma* in full which first descended and then rested upon them. And so this *Ruach/Pneuma* not only meets our human *hevel* but goes within a person who is its prisoner and sets him free.

⁹Bringing up *doxa* in this context indeed leads to examining it further which may be the subject of an article following the current one.

¹⁰More accurately, the verb *kenoo* is used, to empty.

Hevel represents an upward movement (or an attempt at it) whereas *ruach* represents a movement which is downward ¹¹. Both are on the same track, if you will, which sets them up for an inevitable collision. Either a person allows *hevel* to pass into *Pneuma* ¹² or it flies right by, missing it completely. Practically speaking *Pneuma* never takes over our personal *hevel* but waits patiently for us to accept its presence. The opposite is true with *hevel*. If left to its own devices, *hevel* would run roughshod over *Pneuma* which fortunately never can happen. This confrontation or meeting (depending on how you see it) shouldn't be cause for despair but on the contrary, hope because of the forward momentum of both must see a resolution.

Another approach is to see the breath of our *hevel* which resembles more a vapor often a substance diffused or suspended in the air. Thus *hevel* is comprised of particles compared with *ruach* which is pure wind or breeze. The two run in opposite directions as just noted, but from another perspective, they run towards each other. *Hevel* follows a movement which it perceives only as natural or from below (or from within a person) upwards or outwards. On the other hand, *ruach* follows a downward movement as the two New Testament verses testify which is normal. And normal here is taken as setting the norm or standard for the proper way of how things should work.

And example of *hevel* and *ruach/pneuma* meeting head-on as in a collision course has a parallel in the first man and woman hiding from the Lord. They were afraid and hoped he'd just walk by. After all, the Lord was walking in the "cool or the *ruach* of the day" [Gn 3.8]. As for *ruach/pneuma*, as applicable to Jesus Christ, it seems closely allied to *kenosis* which comes very close as to his very nature. So while the upward motion of *hevel* is doing its thing, the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ seeks to intercept this motion with the downward one proper to it. In other words, the normal seeks to intercept the natural; not nullify it but transform its direction, making it realize (to put it a bit crudely) that what goes up on its own accord must fall down.

So the two types of breathing—*hevel* and *ruach/pneuma*—are destined to meet head on even if the former would rather avoid it. While this may be the initial perception of our experience, it does offer a real blessing to an understanding of our predicament

¹¹Putting it in grosser terms, *hevel* = from earth to heaven and *ruach* = from heaven to earth.

¹²*Pneuma* can be substituted now for *ruach* though both are pretty much the same.

and even better, a relief, should we put it into practice. We should begin with realizing that both types of breath have motion in common. In this regard they aren't alien to each other even if their goals are very different. The upward one seeks to become God whereas the latter seeks to become man meaning it's a matter of how the two intersect.

This leads to how we grasp this motion in an imperfect manner. Should we make the gesture of taking an overall glance at ourselves, we do it whole and entire. It results in a picture which is static because this glance doesn't allow for movement. In other words, it freezes where and when we are at a given moment. We can repeat this glance, of course, as often as desirable yet end up with a series of still-like photos one after each other. The question is how to perceive ourselves in action, in continuous movement, of transforming these still-life photos into a motion picture. The initial gesture automatically suspends our thought process with its attendant emotions. We've halted sufficiently long (even a fraction of a second is long in this regard) to get a snapshot which can be repeated right away or by waiting a tad longer. In sum, doing this in discreet intervals is the way to go which involves not the least bit of fuss. Now we've come to see ourselves in our totality where our innate *hevel* stands out right before us.

Since we've exposed ourselves—actually have suspended the continuous outward motion of *hevel*—we hang out there but only for an instant, more or less. Nevertheless, we're disposed to perceive the divine *ruach* coming toward us. At first we might do a glance or two but repeated gestures prime the pump, so to speak, that we may get a fuller awareness. Then we take memory of this *ruach*, memory-as-*anamnesis* or recollection which circumspectly tells us that yes, we're on the right track and already we are right at home or as God has made us. This special type of *anamnesis* (it's dealt with in another article on this homepage) is akin with the divine *ruach* and shows how we're a reflection of it. Getting the two aligned completely may be beyond our capacity but to think in that way is to miss the point. Seeing how the two interact is joyful enough. Any notion of advancement or progression is secondary to the delight at hand.

The interaction of the upward, natural movement of *hevel* and the downward, normal one of *ruach* continue to do their own thing insofar as we've disposed ourselves to behold them. The relief comes when as a result of our innate weakness we fall back into *hevel* and let it take us over. Time now to make that inner gesture of glancing at

ourselves whole and entire which reveals this in perfect clarity. Once again this clarity allows for perceiving the divine *ruach*, it being done without recrimination. The reason? *Ruach* is begetting *anamnesis* or recollection of what we're made of instead of us falling back into our own natural memories. Thus it's downright difficult to call it boring or engaging in the same repetitive gesture day after day.

A caveat to conclude this article, if you would. It as well as many others on this homepage, the approach is rather amateurish, lacking polish and even a modicum of sophistication. That point can't be drilled home enough. Nevertheless, writing here about *hevel* and *ruach* as well as other related topics has been a genuinely fun experience, no effort, really, which is what it's all about.

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