# Comment:
## *Hands*

'Man is the most touch-perceptive of the animals', Timothy Suttor translated, before inclusive language became an issue, 'and intelligent men the most touch-perceptive of men' (*Summa Theologiae* , 1a. 76, 5). Not limited as other animals are, it is part of our natural history that we have reason and hands — hands which are, St Thomas says, endorsing Aristotle, 'the tool of tools, for with them man can make a limitless range of tools with a limitless range of activities'. The connection between insight and touch, quick minds and sensitive hands, it used to be considered, encapsulated the Aristotelico-Thomist doctrine of the soul's union with the body.

No thinker in more recent times has written more beautifully about the hand than Martin Heidegger, for example in the lectures that he gave in 1951-52, the last before his formal retirement at the age of sixty-three. (These lectures appeared in 1968, in a good translation, obscurely entitled *What is called thinking?* — the original title, 'What does it mean to think?', could, with a forced and untranslatable pun, become 'What bids us think?'.) Thinking, Heidegger contends, is a *craft* — like a cabinet maker's. Without citing Aristotle or Aquinas, he takes up the connection between mind and hand. Apes can grasp things, he says, but they do not have hands. 'Only a being who can speak, that is, who can think, can have hands and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft'. More than that, however: 'The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes — and not just things: the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others'; and so on. 'Two hands fold into one', Heidegger says, 'a gesture meant to carry man into the great oneness'. He develops a very rich and persuasive account of how central our hands are in the whole range of activities, from prayer to carpentry, which characterize human life.

'How can such an uneducated man as Hitler govern Germany?', the philosopher Karl Jaspers asked Heidegger on his last visit in June 1933 (he had a Jewish wife). 'Education is quite irrelevant', Heidegger replied: "just look at his wonderful hands!'

F.K.



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