

DG McIntyre - Harmony in Paradox - Part I: The Paradox of the Material and the Spiritual

Our reality can be classified in many ways. One of these is to see it in terms of the physical and the abstract, or as Zarathushtra puts it, the "existences ... of matter as well as of mind..." Y28.2.[1]

Before we go further, let us be clear about Zarathushtra's notion of "mind". To some extent, we all are the prisoners of the languages and cultures in which we have been raised. But Zarathushtra shared neither our linguistic nor our cultural conditionings. So to understand his thought, we need to remove the spectacles of such conditioning and see his thoughts with fresh eyes.

Historically, our cultures have associated the mind with the intellect, logic, analysis, et cetera. And historically, the heart has been associated with the emotions, creativity, intuition, et cetera. Yet, the discoveries of science have now made us aware that although the heart is a wonderful and indispensable organ, it is nothing more than a pumping machine, responsible for pumping our blood through our bodies. The heart has nothing to do with emotions. Even when the heart pounds with love or fear, we know that it's muscles are merely responding to hormones released into the blood stream by the brain. It is the brain that governs both intellect and emotions. The left side of the brain governs the kinds of thoughts and perceptions which historically our cultures have associated with the mind. Whereas the right side of the brain governs the kinds of thoughts and perceptions which historically we have associated with the heart. And, absent surgical intervention, both sides function in an integrated way.

Zarathushtra may not have known about the left and right sides of the brain. He may not even have been aware of the functions of the brain as an organ. But to him, the abstract, the existence of mind, includes the functions expressed by both sides of the brain. And the distinction he makes is not between intellect and emotions, but between the good and wrongful use of each of the many functions which our brains enable us to express or generate.

To Zarathushtra, "bad" (aka) thinking is ignorance, false understanding, (left brain functions) as well as such qualities as fury and cruelty (right brain functions). For example in Y30.6, an expression of the "worst thought" is "fury":

*". . . Since they chose the **worst thought**, they then rushed into **fury**, with which they have afflicted the world and mankind." Y30.6 (emphasis added).*

By the same token, included within the functions of good thinking (vohu mano), are not only such qualities as, for example, good judgment, the ability to discriminate between what is accurate and inaccurate, true and false (governed by the left side of the brain) but also such qualities as creativity, insight and the good emotions (governed by the right side of the brain). To give just a few examples:

Zarathushtra tells us that in making our choices, we should reflect with a "clear mind". Yet he tell us that it is the beneficent who make the right choices. Beneficence means ". . . active goodness, kindness, charity; bounty springing from purity and goodness"[2] indicating that these good emotions are involved in the judgment of the "clear mind" which results in making the right choices.

*". . . Reflect with a **clear mind** -- man by man for himself -- upon the two choices of decision. . ." Y30.2 (emphasis added).*

". . . and between these two, the beneficent have chosen correctly. . ."Y30.3.

Similarly, Zarathushtra's terms for paradise are "the best thinking",[3] the "The House of Good Thinking" (Y32.15), and "the House of Song" Y45.8, Y50.4, Y51.15. "House is used in the Gathas as a metaphor for a state of being. Thus "the best thinking", the "The House of Good Thinking", and "the House of Song" describe the state of being that is the Zarathushtrian paradise. Now it is readily apparent that "Song" involve creativity. It expresses and evokes emotions. Although music can evoke emotions that are sad and joyful, it would be reasonable to conclude that in using the term "House of Song" for paradise, he is describing a state of being that is bliss, sublime joy.

The House of Good Thinking and the House of Song, both describe a state of being in which both good thinking, and the good emotions are personified.

In the same way, Zarathushtra describes vohu mano or good thinking as an attribute of the Divine, one of his names for "God" being Mazda -- Wisdom personified. And to him, Mazda, Wisdom personified, comprises, not just intellect and the qualities it includes, but intellect committed to goodness, and all of the good emotions as well -- solicitude, beneficence, friendship, et cetera.

". . . Him, the One who offers **solicitude**. . ." Y45.7

". . . Him who is **beneficent** through His virtuous spirit to those who exist. . ." Y45.6.

". . . Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a **friend** should grant to a **friend** . . ." Y46.2.

You well may ask: If the intellect and the emotions are expressed by the brain (which is a physical thing), and if intellect and emotions committed to goodness are also included within the meaning of vohu mano (good thinking), is vohu mano physical or abstract? And more important, does vohu mano exist outside of the human brain? An excellent question, and one that I have pondered for quite a while.

We know from the Gathas that good thinking (vohu mano) is an attribute of Mazda. So to Zarathushtra it would have to have an existence independent of the human brain. And I speculate (since Zarathushtra has not specifically addressed this question) that perhaps the brain is like a lens, one of the physical media through which our minds experience reality. I am inclined to think that each life form enters this world with a material shell (body) which is like a set of tools with which to address the experiences which the person encounters. The fact that one person has a specific tool (like intelligence) does not make him superior or more worthwhile than a person who has a different set of tools (like mental retardation, or schizophrenia). These tools have nothing to do with that person's worth or value. Even what we do with the tools is simply a process. If we use these tools to make "wrong" or "bad" choices (such as choices which harm others), we retard spiritual growth. If we use these tools to make good choices, we promote spiritual growth.

Returning to Zarathushtra's view of the existence of mind, it is also important to be aware that "mind" and "spirituality"[4] are not used as two antithetical concepts in the Gathas. Indeed, Zarathushtra uses the House of Good Thinking to refer to the ultimate spiritual state of being which is paradise.

Our religion enjoys many similarities with other religions. And also some differences. It is good to celebrate the similarities, as we do with inter-faith activities. And it is also important to be aware of the differences, not for the purpose of condemning what is different, but in order to understand Zarathushtra's teachings.

Those religions which urge us to set aside the "mind" and go with the "heart" are quite different from Zarathushtra's teaching. Those religions which see "mind" and "spirituality" as antithetical, or mutually exclusive in their functioning, are also quite different from Zarathushtra's teachings. He sees intellect, emotion and spirituality as integral parts of the abstract existence, the existence of mind, and he requires us to commit all such abstract capabilities to what is good and true and right.

An even more important difference between Zarathushtra's thought and conventional religious thought, is Zarathushtra's view of the roles that mind and matter play in bringing about spiritual growth and the desired end.

Conventional religious wisdom teaches that to achieve spiritual growth, we must renounce the material, withdraw from it. This teaching is implemented in a variety of ways, ranging from the simple, such as not eating things that we like ("I promise to give up sweets for Lent"), to the more serious, such as fasting, embracing poverty and celibacy, renouncing the ties of family and friends, asceticism, becoming a hermit, and even "mortifying the flesh" such as wearing hair shirts and flogging the body, as was the practice in some monastic sects in the Middle Ages.

The underlying premise of such a belief is that what pertains to the material – especially material things that give us pleasure – is "bad" and must be rejected, if we are to grow spiritually. I find this approach to spirituality problematic. It not only categorizes a large part of our existence (the material) as "bad", but creates the notion of a Deity who is displeased by us enjoying ourselves, and is pleased by our deprivation and discomfort. For self denial alone does not automatically bring about goodness unless the mind bends itself to achieving that end.

Very different is Zarathushtra's understanding. To him, the existences of matter and mind are neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad. It's how we use them that counts. And he goes a step further.

He tells us that it is through the medium of the material world that we achieve spiritual completeness. An interesting paradox.

Yet, a moment's reflection shows us the validity of his view. It is clear that good spiritual values cannot exist in a vacuum. To be worth anything, (at least in our reality), they have to be expressed through the material medium of thoughts, words and actions.

That simple Zarathushti maxim: good thoughts, good words and good actions, which unfortunately it has become fashionable today to denigrate, is actually the means by which we fulfill the two-fold purpose of life which is: (1) to advance each individual spiritually towards haurvatat, (perfection, completeness) with each good choice in thought, word, and action, and (2) in so doing, make our world a better place, for it is impossible to think a good thought, say a good word or do a good deed without benefiting the people and places affected by such thoughts, words and actions.

Just as a musician uses material instruments to express the music in his soul, just as an artist uses the material medium of paints and canvas to express his vision, so too Zarathushtra teaches that the divine values of truth / right (asha), and good thinking (vohu mano), are brought to life, given substance, through the medium of our material world, using material things, with our choices in thought, word and action (which incidentally, is the concept of aramaiti – making asha and vohu mano real with our thoughts, words and actions).[5]

I rather like Zarathushtra's approach to the existences of matter and mind. It relieves the material existence -- so large portion of our reality (of what "God" has provided to us) -- of the status of something that is "bad", and instead sees it as an indispensable component of the process of advancing each soul, and our world, towards the desired end. But even more, it shows us the generosity of the Divine in crafting a medium for this advancement, that so often gives us pleasure, while we use it to achieve the desired end.

In Zarathushtra's understanding of reality, the spiritual is advanced through the material. The material is advanced through the spiritual. And the paradox of the material and the spiritual resolves itself into the harmony of a beneficent existence.

[1] All quotations from the Gathas in this paper are from the translation of Professor Insler in **The Gathas of Zarathushtra**, (Brill 1975), unless otherwise indicated, although Professor Insler may or may not agree with the inferences I draw from his translation. Round brackets () appearing in a quotation are in the original and indicate an insertion by Professor Insler, indicating his understanding. Square brackets [] indicate an insertion by me. Such insertions by me are provided to show you applicable Gathic words (although not with their grammatical variations) or by way of explanation. A string of dots in a quotation indicates a deletion from the original. Often a verse contains many strands of thought. Deleting from a quotation those strands of thought that are not relevant to the discussion at hand enables us to focus on the strand of thought under discussion.

[2] Webster's International Dictionary, 2d edition (1956).

[3] ". . . and how, at the end, the worst existence shall be for the deceitful but the **best thinking** for the truthful [ashaune] person." Y30.4 (emphasis added).

[4] I use spirituality here, not in the sense of "mainyu" which many translators have translated as "spirit". A contextual analysis shows that Zarathushtra uses "mainyu" to indicate the totality of a way of being. See for example Y30.3, where mainyu includes thought, word and action ("Yes, there are two fundamental spirits [mainyu] . . . In thought and in word, in actions, they are two: . . ."Y30.3). And see Y45.2 where mainyu includes many enumerated characteristics including thoughts, teachings, intentions, preferences, words, actions, vision, and soul ("Yes, I shall speak of the two fundamental spirits [mainyu] of existence, of which the virtuous [spenta] one would have thus spoken to the evil [angrem] one: 'Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our preferences nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions nor our souls are in accord'." Y45.2).

[5] " But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth, and (our) enduring [aramaiti] gave body and breath (to it). . ."Y30.7. Giving "body and breath" to the rule of truth and good thinking means to give it life, make it real, give it substance. Similarly ". . . Through its actions, [aramaiti] gives substance to the truth. . ."Y44.6. Aramaiti is the concept of making asha and its comprehension (vohu mano) real with our thoughts, words and actions.

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