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The Philosophy of Zarathushtra

Kaikosrov D. Irani

Early religions were ways of establishing a viable relationship with the supernatural realm. That realm consisted of a set of divinities; since early religions were polytheistic, each deity being associated with a special function, preserving an aspect of nature or an aspect of human life. In such religions humanity requested from the divinities a life of success, health, happiness and triumph over adversaries, or some special favor or boon. In return were offered sacrifices of one sort or another, prayers of praise and thanks, and declarations of glorifications of the divinity. This mode of primitive religious thought and attitude was the prevailing mode of religiosity in the ancient world, and is not infrequently manifested even today.

This form of religiosity was replaced by what one may call, reflective religion, an attitude which emerged in the first millenium B.C.E. having been originally formulated by Zarathushtra 3500 years ago. In this conception, religiosity alters from a form of exchange with the divinities to the acceptance of the religious vision and a commitment to a way of life. A religion which does not provide a way of life may be filled with pious preaching, but is ultimately only an empty gesture, usually with a lot of irrelevant emotion.

Zarathushtra was inspired by the one divinity he called Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord. This inspiration led him to offer humanity a religious vision. The religious vision, as is the case in reflective religions, is a fusion of a view of the world and a way of life. The vision, though presented in the Gathas not as it would be in a text-book, can be gathered with reasonable accuracy from the extraordinarily powerful and inspiring poetry of the verses. In the brilliant range of Persian poetry, he was the first. It is illustrious example.

To view the structure of his philosophy, though shorn of its poetic power, I shall present it, a little later, under the four following headings:

The Nature of the World

Human Nature

The way of Life, Ethics

Individual After-life, and Universal Eschatalogy

But before we enter that discussion, we must first consider the scheme of his theology, and concepts in terms of which it is presented. These concepts later came to be known as the Amesha Spentas, a term variously translated as the Benevolent Immortals, the Holy Immortals, the Progressive Eternal Attributes, the Enternal Holy Essences. They are: *Asha*, the Truth, also the Right; *Vohu Mana*, the good Mind; *Spenta Armaity*, the Spirit of Benevolence or Piety, Rightmindedness; *Khshathra Vairya*, the Ideal Dominion, or the

Kingdom of God, or the Ideal Society; *Hauravatat*, the Completeness of one's mental and spiritual being, or Integrity, or the state of perfection, and finally *Ameretat*, Immortality, the state of Immortal Bliss.

Zarathushtra's theology is of a highly philosophic character. He conceives of existence not as one, or a collection of entities, for him the underlying basis of reality are principles, what today we may call laws of nature. This set of principles are included in *Asha*. It is the Truth about the universe which we progressively grasp, and by which we comprehend the world as more and more of it is disclosed to the human mind in the advance of our knowledge. I would suggest that there are two kinds of principles in the total set, those which are time-independent and hence specify the structure of the relationships of the properties of the universe, and those which specify how reality will unfold in time evolving to greater organization, as principles of change. These principles, we collectively call *Asha*, are not applicable just to the material world, but also, and especially, to the social world. These are the principles of the ideal social order--the way human life should be organized. Hence these are the principles of right moral life. For this reason *Asha* is characterized both as the Ideal Truth and as Righteousness.

Such an abstract notion of Right is intimately related to *Vohu Mena*, the Good Mind. The Good Mind is not merely a

reliable logic machine, it is not limited to reasoning from premise to conclusion. It is a divine attribute, implanted in us and endowed with the power of insight. By this insight we recognize what the rightness of a situation is, and in what way and to what extent it deviates from the ideal. It also enables us to put our goals and aspirations in accord with the right.

We glimpse the notion of Truth and Right which Zarathushtra combined as Asha, in his vision of existence, and also the confidence he had that Ahura Mazda has granted us the almost supernatural mentality, Vohu ^u Mena, capable of understanding the world and the value of Goodness which we can promote. In both enterprises it is the wisdom of Good Mind which directs us. In the advancement of knowledge, it is W wisdom with Truth. In the advancement of goodness, individual and social, it is Wisdom with Righteousness.

We come now to the four topics under which Zarathushtra's philosophy may be considered.

The Nature of the World

Zarathushtra speaks of "two worlds" in the Gathas. By this he means two modes of existence. One is the abstract, ideal from existence in a state of harmony reflecting an ideal perfection. This is purely an abstract existence, its logical form capable of being grasped only by the mind. This is one mode of existence, the mainyu world. The other is the

tangible world of matter, that is, the physical world we live in and experience through our senses. This is the other mode of existence, the gaithya world.

This distinction is in the Gathas, the implication of which we find abundantly elaborated in the later Avestan and Pahlavi writings in the Zoroastrian tradition. How much of that expressed the thought of Zarathushtra, himself, and how much of it were extensions introduced by his disciples and later philosophic thinkers of the Zoroastrian priesthood, is impossible to say. I shall present it here as the philosophy of the tradition, either of the prophet alone or with those who thought consistently with his thinking.

The mainyu world was created upon being conceived by Ahura Mazda. It is the basic structure of creation-Asha, the ideal form of reality. If one thinks of it as a plan or blue-print, one can call it an ideal representation of what the actual world was meant to be. The gaithya world was created to manifest this form of reality and evolve to perfection. However, that did not happen, because there operate two forces in creation with opposed attitudes, the Good (Shenta) and the Evil (Agra). The good may be viewed as the vector directed to fulfill Asha, the evil, directed to interfere with and frustrate Asha.

Thus the world we live in is this conflicted world, originally meant to evolve in harmony to perfection, and would have been in that state had it not been for the

infection of evil. This is a world in time and must manifest change and, although the divine plan gradually asserts itself, notice the great advances in human civilization, it also fails in various ways through incoherence, and consequently conflicting changes move toward imperfection.

Human Nature
This duality of moving toward and moving against perfection Zarathushtra perceives in moral terms--in terms of good and evil.

The world we live in is not just the physical world, it is also, very importantly, the social world, the world of human relations. The principles which specify ideal social relations leading to progressively better forms of social existence are, of course, part of Asha. They were invoked frequently in Avestan literature. We can best express that aspect of Asha as the Righteous Order.

The Social Order of the world is not perfect. As societies change in time, some worthy structures emerge and some not so worthy, some valuable aspects of social life are generated and some destroyed, and some socially perverse human interaction is not a worthwhile existence. Absence of practices and institutions also unfortunately arise. This is the world on which Zarathushtra's attention was focused. And he repeatedly asks us to look at this world of moral conflict, of the ^{drive} ~~divine~~ to promote the Righteous Order, the drive we call Spenta Mainyu, and the drive to deception by which the Righteous Order is perverted, where distrust, discord, greed and violence are promoted, the one called

Angue Mainy, It is this vision, in moral terms, of a conflict between good and evil, that characterizes Zarathushtra's view of the world and is part of the way of thought of the entire Zoroastrian tradition.

Human Nature

The Gathas do not provide a clearly formulated statement on human nature, but from innumerable comments on human and social existence we may, by inference, construct a coherent view.

Human beings are composites of body and soul. At death the body perishes, whereas the soul being immortal continues to exist. This topic we shall discuss later. More importantly, human beings are viewed as having capacities which set them apart from the rest of creation. The most significant is the capacity to think. This capacity enables us, at least those of us who make an effort to think, to do two things: to understand and to decide. To live in the world without understanding its nature and the nature of human interaction is not a worthwhile existence. Absence of understanding leaves us at a level not much better than that of animal existence. The effort and achievement of understanding is not only what we seek, but also that from which we gain the grasp of Asha, and in achieving that we are ~~enabled~~ ^{ennabled}.

Zarathushtra wishes this vision of ultimate understanding for himself and his followers--the gift of ~~implanted~~ ^{implanted} in human beings. It is Spenta Armaiti, the Spirit

Truth which is received as the fruit of the Good Mind. For, there one sees the divine design.

The other aspect of this capacity enables us to make rational decisions. This presupposes the existence of Free-Will in humans, a fundamental tenet of Zarathushtra's thought. When we perceive alternatives before us, we consider their implications and choose to act in a certain way because we judge that is the right course of action. The consequences of the choice is the responsibility we bear for it. The choice may be made with reflection or upon impulse. We may be influenced, and even forced with threat. But the choice is ours, it cannot be avoided. Nor is it determined by our background, or social framework, or a higher power. W we, human beings choose, and must be held responsible for that choice, by other human beings, by society, and ultimately by the divinity.

Even in the acceptance of his teachings, based on the inspiration Zarathushtra received from Ahura Mazda (i.e., the Mazdayasni faith), the prophet asks each individual to reflect upon it with a clear, enlightened mind and make his or her decision. The acceptance of religious dedication must be based upon proper reflection; casual acceptance was not a satisfactory form of religious commitment in Zarathushtra's thinking.

Here we must consider another divine attribute implanted in human beings. It is Spenta Armaity, the Spirit

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of rightmindedness or Benevolence. It is the inclination to do the right thing, to promote the good. Benevolence is the feeling in us that inclines us to promote the good of others. And Zarathushtra considers this ~~is~~ to be an ever-present divine emanation that influences a receptive human soul, giving it a desire toward goodness, we often call the love of humanity. It is dedication to the right action, leading to a contentment of one's spirit, or, what a high priest of the ^SSa~~r~~anian period called, the joy of the righteous. / 2

The function of human beings in this world is to vindicate the ideal of existence, the implementation of Asha, and help to establish the ideal society, Khshathra Vairya. We would then be in a state of exalted well-being, Haurvatat and make the world ready for the total renovation, ^Freshokereti, that is, in accordance with Asha. This

Zarathushtra's teachings evince his firm belief in the rationality and goodness of human beings. It is all the more manifest by his trust in the exercise of their free-will, that they will choose the good through their own judgment without being bound by a set of prescriptions. / 2

The first of these, Good Thought, we have just discussed; now we should consider Good Words and Good Deeds.

Every religion, except the very ancient, purely ritualist religions, provides a way of life as an element of the faith. For Zarathushtra it was the centerpiece of his decisions rarely occur in isolation from interaction with others. This is open and non-manipulative interaction one

As we saw, he presents a view of the world as a potentially good creation meant to evolve to perfection, but contaminated with evil and therefore in a state of moral conflict. The way of life he directs us to adopt after proper reflection is this. Any situation we are in is to be examined with care, that is, with reasonable thought. This will enable us to see what is right and what is flawed. The faculty that enables us to see that is the Good Mind, Vahu^a Mena, for it is capable of seeing the ideal and also recognizing the disparity between the real and the ideal in the nature and magnitude of the flaw. This, in contemporary philosophy, is called moral perception. For Zarathushtra, it is part of Good Thought. The rest of Good Thought is concerned with determining what should be done to make the situation good, that is, in accordance with Asha. This operation is called Good Thought, or sometimes, good thinking, or Humata, in Avestan. Everyone knows that the Mazdayasni religion is characterized by the three precepts, Good Thoughts, Good Words, and Good Deeds, or Humata, Hukhta and Huvareshta, in Avestan. The first of these, Good Thought, we have just discussed; now we should consider Good Words and Good Deeds. Good Words, in the context of this theology, mean honest, non-hurtful, non-deceptive communication. Human decisions rarely occur in isolation from interaction with others. Thus in open and non-manipulative interaction one

ought to declare one's intentions and the reasons for them, and listen with willingness, and openness to the responses and views of others. The importance of communication and the dangers of miscommunication are fully recognized in this day and age. But it is to the credit of the great sage and the first social analyst of ancient Iran, perhaps of the ancient world, to have grasped its significance in the moral life of humans.

There cannot be a way of life without human beings performing actions. It is not enough to reflect and form good intentions. The intentions must be turned into actions, and what that requires is the resolve and the courage of one's convictions. If one has thought carefully and communicated honestly, then one should ^{act} ~~set~~ to implement the decision so made.

This is the way of life Zarathushtra offers to the believers. In this theological scheme, questions have been raised as to how and why is there evil behavior, when human beings are endowed with goodness and rationality. As a matter of fact the ethical scheme of the Gathas enables us to understand evil with great clarity. Evil arises out of failure in good thought, good word, or good deed. Evil itself is the departure from Asha.

Failure of good thought arises either out of evil intention, or because one has let irrelevant considerations enter into one's thinking. Wherever one is situated at any

moment in life, one must try to improve the situation, not seek to satisfy greed, or promote one's self-interest, or cause the discomfiture of one's enemies. The intention must be focused on the intrinsic nature of the situation, one must recognize what one is facing and resolve to, the Avestan saying: There is only one path and that is the path of Asha.

Failure of good word arises through ill-will or inadvertence. Ill-will takes the form of deception, injury through falsehood, or through abusive or verbally violent behavior. In these cases the intention is to hurt. In failure through inadvertence, misinformation is permitted to exist, or information fails to be communicated where it should have been made available.

Failure of good deed comes usually from failing to do a deed one knows to be the right thing to do, out of fear or through indolence and neglect. The failure may also emerge from doing a deed which is not derived from good thought. When one acts impulsively, out of rage, or just unthinkingly one has failed to live by the responsibility of a rational, thinking being which Ahura Mazda has created us to be.

Reflecting on the nature of human behavior what does one find. Most human beings are not malicious, having intent of harm to others, they are often unthinking and inconsiderate in the harm they do. They do not pause to ask, what should this situation be, still less do they think out a proper course of action. The springs of action for most

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persons are matters of self-interest, which in themselves are not wrong to pursue, but which by injecting themselves in all sorts of situations, prevent so many human beings from doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do. bridge
Zoroastrians are told that true happiness will come to one who does right for the sake of ^Rright. Such is the message of the Ashem Vohu prayer. the House of Falsehood. Even though

Individual Afterlife and the End of Universal History

Zarathushtra conceived of the spirit or soul as a non-material entity, it has no physical properties, but it is the consequential continuance of the moral consciousness of the seat of consciousness and thought. It is thus in its essence present life, such is the effect of the ever-pervading immortal. Material objects have their existence in time, they come into being, transform and perish. We, human beings, are a combination of matter and spirit, the matter decomposes on death, the spirit lives on.

In keeping with his radically moral outlook on life, Zarathushtra considers the state of the soul in after life as a moral consequence of its life in this world. The good soul exists in after-life in a state of Best Consciousness. Other souls have the kind of consciousness appropriate to their moral stature, their actions and choices in life. Of course, the truly evil come to a state of Worst Consciousness. The state in after-life is a lawful consequence of the moral character of one's life here.

The Righteous Order, for this is the way the Avestan priests of the early centuries of the Faith interpreted Asha, functions as it is divinely ordained. But in this world of temporal existence, the Order of Asha is disturbed by the action of evil, and righteous conduct does not invariably receive its validating recompense. However, beyond the gates of death evil is utterly ineffective over the righteous and

There is a dramatic expression of the idea of final judgment in the imagery, borrowed from very ancient times, of crossing a bridge to the other world. This is called the bridge of judgment, the bridge of accounting, or the bridge of separation. The good pass over it to the blessed abode, dramatically called the Abode of Songs, whereas the evil fall into the dark abyss of the House of Falsehood. Even though this account was highly elaborated by later mythology, it never became an account of a trial. The soul makes no appeals, no pleas for mercy. The afterlife is a consequential continuance of the moral consciousness of the present life, such is the effect of the ever-pervading principle of Asha that Ahura Mazda established.

This gives us an insight into Zarathushtra's conception of God. He is not an authoritarian God who dispenses, benefices at his wish. He is neither vengeful, nor is he merciful. He is wise and He is good. And He has created a Righteous Order by which all creation must work and be judged.

The Righteous Order, for this is the way the Avestan priests of the early centuries of the Faith interpreted Asha, functions as it is divinely ordained. But in this world of temporal existence, the Order of Asha is disturbed by the action of evil, and righteous conduct does not invariably receive its validation^{ng} recompense. However, beyond the gates^{validation} of death evil is utterly ineffective over the righteous and

the consequence and recompense of the Righteous Order prevails in consciousness.

Such is the account of after-life of individual souls; what of the universe as a whole? Zarathushtra frequently speaks of a renovation to come when evil shall be no more. This is called Freshokereti, from which point on existence will be perfected and historical time will end. This state of perfection is deeply desired by Zarathushtra, and he wishes humanity to participate fully in helping to bring it about. The idea of evil, being an idea, will continue to exist, but evil in this world of time can be eliminated by our choice and action. When we, creatures with free-will, do not choose evil, its power is lost and it perishes.

This is the point where all the areas we have considered converge and become the main center of Zarathushtra's thought. Focusing on the point of evil and our mission to eliminate it: Consider the problem from a different perspective, systematically: Evil manifests itself in two ways.

1. Through undeserved suffering.
2. Through frustration of self-realization of individuals and systems, natural and social, in creation.

How do we fight against evil and dispel it.

1. a) We reduce suffering by studying and understanding nature (i.e., science) and apply it for the benefit of conscious beings, (e.g. medicine) and thus

character improve the lot of humans and animals by the port
of the good marvels of technological advancement. it must be

done b) We reduce suffering in human relations by
in implementing the right relations, that is, in
indicate accordance with the Righteous Order, Asha, in of
evil disha a) individual relations, by the elimination of to
the hands of deceit and the establishment of just treatment,
it is the b) social situations, by the restructuring of
appropriate social relations to minimize conflict, thus to
When we encourage restore a rational arrangement for harmonizing
should use Tr interests. close their deceit, rather than attack

2. Since the self-realization of an individual, a society, /-
though a species, etc., where not injurious to others, must be
ultim considered a matter of its own judgment, and thus that
once particularly if it is performing a legitimate function,
belie it is in accord with Asha. Therefore non-interference
becomes a moral requirement, and if interference occurs,
from, justice demands that it be removed. ought to be, is
what we should strive to establish. It is often described as
the rest Underlying these discussions, we see that evil is
violation of the Righteous Order. Evil is a violation or
interference, and it is destructive. on Zarathushtra states
that whereas the good mainyu stands for flourishing^{the} of life, the
the evil mainyu stands for its destruction. Later priestly
commentators characterized the evil spirit as stupid and
violent. ht These, in any case, could not possibly be the He

characteristics of the good spirit. Thus if we, in support of the good spirit, struggle to vanquish the evil it must be done with honesty, intelligence and without violence.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses expressions that indicate the victory of good over evil as a replacement of evil disharmony by the good order, or giving falsehood into the hands of truth. From this line of thought we gather that it is the Truth, namely, Asha, and Truth alone that is appropriate and successful in the struggle against evil. When we encounter evil machinations of perverse men, we should use Truth to disclose their deceit, rather than attack the liars, we attack the lie with the light of truth. For though the deception may succeed in the short run, the ultimate power of truth must prevail. It is obvious that once a falsehood is recognized as a falsehood, it cannot be believed. /,

Evil, as we saw, is the repudiation, or deviation from, Truth. Truth, as the ideal of what ought to be, is what we should strive to establish. It is often described as the restoration of the Righteous Order. Thus Truth is the good. In the struggle to establish it, Truth is the only weapon, the promotion of Truth, the only policy or program, and the presentation of Truth the only strategy.

The philosophic system outlined here seems simplistic to some minds. Its significance escapes many. For Zarathushtra avoids the involved narratives of mythology. He

gives us no lists of virtues, or examples of virtuous acts. He gives us no prescriptions, ordering us to do this and not do that. But he makes us realize the stature we have, as Ahura Mazda has created us free, and with a mind to envision the ideal existence and recognize the faces of good and evil. He inspires us to join with the divinity in perfecting the world. This message of wisdom and responsibility, of freedom and reason, has come to humanity from the teacher, the poet, the prophet of ancient Iran.

In such religions humanity requested from the divinities a life of success, health, happiness and triumph over adversaries, or some special favor or boon. In return were offered sacrifices of one sort or another, prayers of praise and thanks, and declarations of glorifications of the divinity. This mode of primitive religious thought and attitude was the prevailing mode of religiosity in the ancient world, and is not infrequently manifested even today.

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