

D G McIntyre - Harmony in Paradox – Part V

The Paradox of the Freedom to Choose and the Inevitable End ¹¹

We all know that the freedom to choose is a hallmark of Zarathushtra's teachings:

".....Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision..."Y30.2[2]

".....Him who left to our will (to choose between) the virtuous and the unvirtuous...." Y45.9

It would seem logical to conclude, therefore, that if people are free to choose what is evil, we can never be certain that good will prevail and evil will be defeated. Yet in Y49.3, Zarathushtra says the exact opposite.

"However, it has been fated [3] for this world, Wise One, that the truth [asha] is to be saved for its (good) preference, that deceit is to be destroyed for its (false) profession. . ."Y49.3.

An interesting paradox.

In my early years of studying the Gathas, it seemed to me that an assurance that good will prevail sounded like pre-destination and was irreconcilable with the freedom to choose. I was tempted to dismiss this sentence in Y49.3 as an aberration, the freedom to choose being so central a part of Zarathushtra's teaching. But long experience in studying the Gathas has taught me that it is never wise to dismiss as an aberration, anything that Zarathushtra says. It took me a quite a while to appreciate that indeed, as Zarathushtra says, the more free we are to choose, the more inevitable it is that good will prevail and evil will be defeated.

To understand this paradox, let us first consider Zarathushtra's notions of "good" and "evil".

If you look at each descriptive reference to "good", in the Gathas, you will see that it is the product of "right" choices – truth, beneficence, justice, solicitude, friendship, compassion, et cetera. And if you look at each descriptive reference to "evil", you will see that it is the product of "wrongful" choices – murder, deceit, cruelty, fury, bondage, tyranny, et cetera.

Natural phenomena, such as earthquakes, locusts, wolves, drought, and illness, are not identified as "evil" in the Gathas (as they are in later Zoroastrian texts). Zarathushtra does not subscribe to the view (as did later Zoroastrian texts) that anything which causes us grief, or suffering, or loss, or damage, or inconvenience is, for that reason alone, "evil". I will resist the temptation to elaborate here on the validity of the view that natural calamities are not "evil", because this essay is about the freedom to choose. And while natural calamities can be made worse by wrong human choices, they are not necessarily caused only by such wrong choices.

If evil is the product of wrongful choices, then if you do not choose evil in a given thought, word or act, it ceases to exist in that particular thought, word or act. Or stated another way, when we stop choosing evil, we deprive it of substance. It may still exist as a theoretical alternative, but it lacks existence in the reality of thought, word and action.

Let us take it a step further. We become what we choose. So the more we choose asha, the more asha-like we become, until eventually, choice by choice, we reach haurvatat, a state of being that personifies asha, that is pure goodness, pure truth. If this is so, would it not be equally possible for a life force to become pure evil through its wrong choices? The answer (as I see it in the Gathas) is that this is not possible. Let us consider the matter.

According to Zarathushtra, the good and evil ways of being (mainyu) are primordial, i.e. these two ways of being are a part of the original nature of all living things. Therefore as long as evil remains a preference in anyone's mind, and finds expression in that person's thoughts, words and actions, it cannot be defeated.

It is apparent, therefore, that evil cannot be defeated by divine decree, by God waving a magic wand, as it were. That might be a solution for robots, but not for life forms that think and have preferences.

It is equally apparent that evil cannot be defeated by punishment. The fear of punishment may induce a person to hide his evil inclinations, and not express them in word or action. But the inclination towards evil would still exist in his mind. Therefore punishment cannot truly defeat evil. It only suppresses its expression while the fear of

punishment exists. Once that fear is removed, the inclination would again express itself in thought word and action. And evil would still be with us.

An effective way to defeat evil, therefore, would be for the inclination or preference for evil to change in all the living. For a true change to occur, the change would have to be something that is freely made, from the inside, by the person himself, without compulsion. And that is exactly Mazda's solution for defeating evil. His solution is the truth that underlies the way in which existence has been ordered (asha), its comprehension (vohu mano) and its realization in thoughts, words and actions (aramaiti[4]). Let us consider this solution.

Asha literally means "what fits" and it applies to both the material (physical) existence, as well as the abstract existence of the mind.

In the material or physical existence, "what fits" is what is correct, accurate – truth, the laws that govern the universe – laws of physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy – the correct natural order of things.

In the abstract existence of the mind, "what fits" is also what is correct – i.e. what's right. In the Gathas, what is right, includes such notions as truth, goodness, justice, generosity, solicitude, beneficence, friendship, lovingkindness, compassion, et cetera. All these are a part of "what fits" -- the true, correct, order of things in the abstract existence, the existence of mind.

In short, asha, "what fits" is the truth that underlies the way our existence has been ordered.

And according to Zarathushtra, asha, ("what fits") includes that perfect justice which sets in motion the law of consequences – that we reap what we sow, that everything we do comes back to us.

When the good we do comes back to us, it reinforces our preference for that good way of being. When the "evil" we do comes back to us, we don't like being on the receiving end of such experiences. We understand that this is not the way we want things to be. Such experiences increase our understanding, and help to change our preferences. The law of consequences is one part of the process whereby minds are changed so that we prefer what is true and right (asha) because that is the way we want things to be.

Now, we know that justice is a part of asha. But the notion of beneficence (which means "active goodness, kindness, charity; bounty springing from purity and goodness"[5]) is also a part of asha. Indeed, the Wise Lord himself is described as being beneficent through asha "...the Lord, beneficent through truth [asha], virtuous [spento] and knowing..."Y48.3, indicating that beneficence is a characteristic of asha

You well may wonder: How can justice, with its relentless, rigid, exactness, and the generosity of beneficence, both be included within the meaning of asha?

The answer lies, in part, in appreciating that both concepts are a part of "what fits", asha. The answer also lies in setting aside our conventional notions of divine justice and attempting to ascertain Zarathushtra's thought.

The notion of divine justice which has punishment as a means of dealing with wrongdoing, is a revenge-based notion of justice. Revenge is not a part of asha or its comprehension (vohu mano). Enlightenment is.[6]

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra often associates the law of consequences (which is a part of asha) with fire (which is one of his material metaphors for asha). For example:

".....those rewards Thou shalt give, through the heat of Thy truth-strong [asha-strong] fire, to the deceitful and to the truthful," Y43.4.

If the law of consequences is a part of asha, (delivered through its material metaphor, fire) then, however painful or difficult the process might be, it can only deliver enlightenment, understanding, the comprehension of what is true and right (which is vohu mano[7]).

The Gathas themselves suggest that the law of consequences is not for punishment, both in the way it is implemented, and in the end result that it delivers.

Zarathushtra tells us that the law of consequences is implemented by Mazda through His **good** thinking.

"...May He dispense through His good thinking (each) reward corresponding to one's actions." Y43.16 (emphasis added)

He also tells us that the law of consequences is implemented by Mazda through a beneficent (good, generous, loving) way of being (spenta mainyu).

"Wise Lord, together with this virtuous spirit [spenta mainyu], Thou shalt give the distribution in the good to both factions through Thy fire, by reason of the solidarity of [aramaiti] and truth. For it shall convert the many who are seeking." Y47.6 (emphasis added).

In Y45.6 Zarathushtra describes Mazda as beneficent through His spenta mainyu, his benevolent way of being: ". . .Him who is beneficent through His virtuous spirit [spenta mainyu] to those who exist. . ." Y45.6. If beneficence comes from spenta mainyu, then the nature of spenta mainyu would have to include the characteristic of beneficence. If spenta mainyu is beneficent, and if the law of consequences is delivered through spenta mainyu [a beneficent way of being], then the law of consequences would have to be delivered with beneficence, i.e. not for revenge or punishment.

In terms of the end result, Zarathushtra tells us that the law of consequences delivers "satisfaction" and "the good" to both factions i.e. to those who choose correctly, and to those who choose wrongfully:

".....when the distribution in the good shall occur to both factions through Thy bright fire, Wise One." Y31.19.

"Wise Lord, together with this virtuous spirit [spenta mainyu], Thou shalt give the distribution in the good to both factions through Thy fire, by reason of the solidarity of [aramaiti] and truth. For it shall convert the many who are seeking." Y47.6 (emphasis added).

"The satisfaction which Thou shalt give to both factions through Thy pure fire and the molten iron, Wise One, is to be given as a sign among living beings, in order to destroy the deceitful and to save the truthful." Y51.9. (by "destroy the deceitful" and "save the truthful" I think Zarathushtra is referring, not to people, but to qualities – to destroy what is deceitful, and save what is truthful, in all of us, since even the worst of us has some good in him, and even the best of us has some wrong in him, at least in our present reality).

You well may ask: If, under the law of consequences, the evil we do comes back to us, how can it be said to distribute "the good" and "satisfaction" to those who choose correctly and also to those who choose wrongly. Well, it is in the end result that the law of consequences distributes "the good" and "satisfaction" to all. It returns abundant good for the good done, and, through the painful, difficult, experiences resulting from our wrong choices, it helps to increase understanding which changes evil preferences into good ones as well, thus distributing "the good" and "satisfaction" to those who choose wrongly as well.

This conclusion is corroborated in a later Avestan text. In Yasna 62 (not a part of the Gathas), fire is described as the agent for the growth of the soul (verse 6), and as bringing about the renovation (verse 3)[8] which corroborate the conclusion that fire, as a metaphor for asha (of which the law of consequences is a part), is an instrument, not of punishment, but of enlightenment.

Now, it is true that a person who has been abused, sometimes identifies with the abuser and inflicts the same abuse on others. A person who has experienced harm often hungers for revenge. A rigid tit-for-tat alone would not be sufficient to bring about a change of preferences. But the process that changes preferences is not just a rigid tit-for-tat. The process is asha (which includes beneficence), good thinking, and aramaiti.

We have already seen, through the verses quoted above, that the law of consequences is not a product of anger, revenge or punishment on the part of Mazda, but is delivered by Him through his good thinking, and with a beneficent way of being, spenta mainyu. However, to change minds, to change preferences, the process also requires the good thinking, the good words and good actions, (the beneficence, generosity, lovingkindness), of all the living, to help break destructive cycles of abuse and revenge. Such good thoughts, words and actions of asha is the concept aramaiti. The generous, loving, help we give each other is as important, and as indispensable, as the law of consequences in changing minds.

"Wise Lord, together with this virtuous spirit [spenta mainyu], Thou shalt give the distribution in the good to both factions through Thy fire, **by reason of the solidarity of [aramaiti] and truth [asha]**. For it shall convert the many who are seeking." Y47.6 (emphasis added).

"...but in due course [aramaiti] shall come to terms with one's spirit where there has been opposition." Y31.12.

It is an interesting paradox that the defeat of evil requires both the exact workings of the law of consequences, and also the generosity that gives without looking for an exact (or any) exchange, bringing to life all that is good, with thoughts, words and actions of asha in mutual, loving help.

It is important to note that in the Gathas, the process of generating the law of consequences -- that we reap what we sow -- is reserved for Mazda alone. It is not man's part to inflict pain for pain.[9] Our good thinking is not so perfected as to be an effective instrument for delivering the law of consequences so as to bring about enlightenment, rather than repeated cycles of abuse or a thirst for revenge, on the part of the recipient. In the Gathas, the human soul is judged by Mazda[10], and by the soul itself [11].

In conclusion, the more free we are to choose, the more we experience the consequences of our choices. These experiences, together with our ability to understand, and mutual loving help, inform our preferences and, over time, lead us to want what is true and right, because that is the way we want things to be. Under this solution, the more free we are to choose, the more inevitable it is that everyone will eventually choose what is true and right for its own sake. Evil is checkmated.

It would surely be a very long process, for minds to change, choice by choice, experience by experience, through the law of consequences, and mutual loving help, and the 1,001 other experiences, both earned and unearned, that we experience. But eventually, when each part of the life force attains a state of being (mainyu) in which it prefers what is true/right/good for its own sake (the spenta way of being), evil will be defeated. It will no longer have existence in the reality of our thoughts, words and actions.

It is interesting that this solution lays to rest the oft repeated philosophical dilemma that God is either not all powerful, or not all good, because if He allows evil to exist and cannot stop it, He is not all powerful, whereas if He can stop it and does not, He cannot be all good.

Zarathushtra discloses a third alternative – that of a Life Force who orders existence (asha) in such a way that the freedom to choose, which may increase evil in the short term, generates the experiences which ensure its ultimate defeat, thereby demonstrating:

His power (because He can defeat evil);

His goodness (because He does so with the way in which He has ordered existence (asha) -- the law of consequences, and the beneficence of mutual, loving help through good thoughts, words and actions (aramaiti); and

His wisdom, (because with the way in which He has ordered existence, we come to the realizations (vohu mano) which defeat evil, for ourselves, freely and without compulsion -- our freedom to choose being an indispensable requirement for bringing about the inevitable defeat of evil).

Thus we see that the paradox of the freedom to choose, and the inevitable end, resolves itself into the harmony of a beneficent existence.

[1] Posted on vohuman.org on August 29, 2006.

[2] All quotations from the Gathas in this text are to the translation as it appears in Insler, The Gathas of Zarathushtra (Brill, 1975), although Professor Insler may or may not agree with the conclusions I draw from his translation. Round parentheses () in a quotation indicate an insertion into the text by Professor Insler. Square brackets [] in a quotation indicate an insertion by me, sometimes by way of explanation, and sometimes to show you the applicable Gathic words, but for convenience, usually without their grammatical variations. I leave "aramaiti" untranslated. A string of dots indicates a deletion by me.

[3] Insler translates the word "nidatem" as "fated, determined" based on its Vedic equivalent. Taraporewala translates it as "laid-down". Sethna, in a free translation, translates "...righteousness shall prevail and falsehood shall be frustrated." But not all translators translate the word in a way that generates the meaning of inevitability.

[4] There is a great difference of opinion among linguists as to the correct translation of aramaiti. A contextual analysis, i.e. of the way in which Zarathushtra uses the word in the Gathas, shows us that it means making asha real, giving it life, substance, which can only be done with thoughts, words and actions: "But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth, and (our) enduring [aramaiti] gives body and breath (to it). . ."Y30.7; ". . . Through its actions, [aramaiti] gives substance to the truth. . ." Y44.6; " Virtuous is the man of [aramaiti]. He is so by reason of his understanding, his words, his actions, his conception [daena]. . ." Y51.21.

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

[6] "Enlightenment" itself is a metaphor, indicating a mind full of light, i.e. a mind that sees clearly, a mind that understands the truth, which is another way of describing Wisdom personified. In the Gathas, light is often used, sometimes as a metaphor, sometimes as a simile, for Mazda and His divine attributes, the amesha spenta, including specifically, asha and vohu mano. For example: ".....the glories of Him who offers solicitude ... the Wise Lord" Y46.17; ". . . truth which attains glory. . ." Y51.4; ".....Him who has the appearance of the sun....." Y43.16; ". . . sunlike truth....." Y32.2; ".....the sunlike gain of good thinking....." Y53.4.

[7] "Give, o truth, this reward, namely, the attainments of good thinking....." Y28.7. "Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord?. . ." Y28.5 (the "way to the Lord" being the path of the amesha spenta).

[8] Mills translation, SBE Vol. 31, pages 314, 315.

[9] As we have already discussed in The Paradox of Being Bad to the Bad.

[10] ". . . The Wise Lord who, together with His clever advisor, truth [asha], has judged the just and the unjust. . ."Y46.17

[11] ". . . His soul shall vex him at the Bridge of the Judge surely, in that he has disappeared from the path of truth by reason of his own actions and (the words) of his tongue." Y51.13; " During their regimes, the Karpans and the Kavis yoked (us) with evil actions in order to destroy the world and mankind. But their own soul and their own conception did vex them when they reached the Bridge of the Judge, . . ."Y46.11.