

PHILOSOPHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF FREE WILL AS TAUGHT BY ZARATHUSHTRA

By Kersey H. Antia, Ph.D.

Zarathushtra was the first prophet known in history to expound a highly ethical monotheism as well as the concept of Free Will and make it the very basis of his theology. The fact that he ventured to do so in prehistoric times when human civilization had hardly started, should qualify him as the greatest proponent of the thesis of Free Will in the history of mankind, especially as there are many philosophers even in our own times who repudiate this thesis. Since Free Will forms the crux of Zarathushtra's teachings, it is imperative for his followers to review various arguments hurled against it by contemporary philosophers and ascertain the validity of their arguments, which is what this paper attempts to do, though a comprehensive review of all such attempts is beyond the scope of this paper. Since Free Will is so pivotal to Gathic teachings, our attempt at vindicating its philosophical validity may prove to be of tremendous significance to those who adhere to the Gathic teachings in their daily life. In addition to making philological and related contributions, conferences thus could also make contributions that will inspire us Zoroastrians to better understand our Gathic beliefs.

Free Will in the Gathas

First, let us examine what Zarathushtra says about Free Will. According to Yasna 29, the earth was full of violence, fury and spitefulness. (It seems this could have been written for our own times.) Therefore, Geush Urvan, the soul of the Universe, complained to Mazda: "For whom did you shape me? Who created me?" It urged Mazda to send a savior. But at first Asha observes: "No one (has been) really found by the world – no Ratu, no judge in accordance with truth itself." (29.6) Later, (29.8), however, Vohumana says: "There is only one (savior) found by me who has listened to our teachings and (he is) Zarathushtra." It seems to me that only when Zarathushtra made his own choice to align himself fully with Mazda that he was declared by Mazda as his chosen Ratu. That explains why Asha first said he did not know of any savior he can send to the earth. Therefore, even Zarathushtra had to make a choice. He chose Mazda before he, in turn, was chosen as a prophet by Mazda. Perhaps it could be argued that as Asha strictly follows the cosmic law and order, he too preferred a superman and did not know of one, but Vohumana has no such preferences because of his innate peaceful and tranquil nature and so he recommended Zarathushtra without any hesitation.

However, such an interpretation is hardly tenable, as we read in Yasna

(29.10) itself that Mazda is “the first possessor of Asha, Vohumana, and Kshathra.” Even the younger Avesta such as Zamyad Yasht, (para 15 & 17) and Farvarden Yasht, (para 83) support this Gathic precept. The latter even maintains that all the seven Amesha Spentas are of the same mind, same speech and same action and their Father and counselor is Dadar Ahuramazda.

In his very first lectures (Yasna 30.3 and 45.2), Zarathushtra declares that there are two Mainyus (mentalities or forces) who differ in their thoughts, words and actions - one is better (Vahyo) than the other, the other, being evil. The good souls chose rightly but not the evil ones (Yasna 30.3) The more beneficent spirit (Mainyu) told the evil one: “Neither our thoughts nor our statements, nor our intellects, nor our choices, nor our words, nor our actions, nor our conscience, nor our souls, agree.” (Yasna 45.2). The word for religion in the Gathas is Daena which means “conscience.” If man always makes the right choice, he can follow his Daena. Zarathushtra therefore advises us never to compromise with our conscience and choose very carefully between good and evil. Zarathushtra emphasized “This is equally true for men and for women” (Yasna 53.6). Thus, from the ancient-most times, man and woman share an equal status in Zarathushtra’s ideology. Women have an equal right to choose as man. As a result, Zarathushtra repeatedly urges both men and women to make the right choice. It is very important to note here that the idea of right choice implies the idea of moral responsibility but the idea of moral responsibility cannot exist without the existence of free will.

Zarathushtra was thus the first preacher and philosopher in the world to realize that man has free will. Man cannot be scared or compelled even by the threat of hell-fire, and brimstone to do good all the time. Free Will is the very cornerstone of Zarathushtra's theology. Neither angels nor man can always do good under compulsion. Now you can see why God did not want to send a strong-armed warrior to root out evil from the world. Zarathushtra says God may plead us to be good but won’t force us to be good (Yasna 31.12). Choice is the fact of life ever since the world was created. Man cannot escape from his responsibility to make choice one way or another. Zarathushtra says this so well and clearly in Yasna (31.11): “O Mazda, since the very beginning of existence, You through Your mind, fashioned for us the physical world, religious views, and intellect, and put breath of life into mortal bodies, and established actions and counsels. (You did all these) indeed so that one could make his choice through Free Will.”

Free Will & Moral Responsibility

Zarathushtra advises us to use our Free Will wisely because he intricately links it with moral responsibility. In his very first sermon, he declares: Hear with your ears the best things (I say) and think it over with the light of your

mind. Each man and woman has to select either of the two. Awaken to this Doctrine of ours before the Great Event of Choices begins” (Yasna 30.2) In Yasna 45.3, Zarathushtra says that the Wise Lord Himself has told him that those who will not follow this formula of the Right Choice, “for them “woe” will be the last (word) of (their) existence.” He also tells us that if we follow his advice, we become “an ally, a brother or a father of Wise Lord.” (Yasna 45.11). Just think what a novel and thought-provoking statement (Mantra) Zarathushtra makes here. He does not say God will be our ally, brother or father. But we, ourselves will be an ally, brother or father of God if we make the right choice in everything we do. Just think how beautiful our whole world would have been if man had made the right choices throughout the ages by avoiding violence with fellow human beings, protecting the environment, etc. God does not bring various plagues on us, but we bring them on to ourselves, by making the wrong choices. When the plagues befall us, it is often brought on by human failure to ensure a clean and rat-free environment, as well as not performing acts of Frashokereti by devising means and medicines to counteract them.

Therefore, God wants man to help Him make this world beautiful and fresh, which Zarathushtra calls Frashokereti (Yasna 30). The whole world is moving toward the realization of Frashokereti by man’s right choice. It is only when man will become allies and collaborators of God that God will be able to destroy all evil from this world. But He can not do it without man’s help, nor does he want to do it for Himself. He wants to do it for mankind and therefore, expects cooperation from mankind. “By whatever action, word and worship, O Ahura You obtained for Yourself. Immortality, righteousness, and perfection, let us give these very things to You, O Mazda, in the very greatest number.” (Yasna 34.1). It seems we owe a loving debt to All-Loving Mazda to be one like Him in every way by making right choices and that is what the Gathas exhort us over and over again.

Ethical Dualism as a Vehicle for Expressing Free Will

Zarathushtra sees basic opposition between good and evil prevailing in this world as well as in the spiritual world, for example, between the Yazatas, adorable angles and the Daevas, demons, between good mind and evil mind. Man had to make his choice at every stop for both these spheres. What is very unique and innovative in Zarathushtra’s teachings is not his ethical dualism so much as his emphasis on man being the principal arbiter between good and evil since ethical dualism serves rather a secondary purpose of allowing man to exercise his free will for his salvation. Zarathushtra seems to have devised it as a vehicle for expressing free will by man which is his innovation facile princeps (easily first). Traces of dualism perhaps existed long before Zarathushtra in the Indo-Aryan lore, but it is hard to find the traces of the

concept of Free Will in any literature before his times. The Sasanians mistakenly came to perceive dualism between Ahuramazda and Angramainyo instead of between Spenta Mainyu and Anghra Mainyu, as clearly stated in the Gathas. But the concept of Free Will was so much grounded in Zoroastrianism that it can be found in Sasanian dualism even though the latter seriously compromises the sovereignty of Mazda and the conceptual significance of Free Will for establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. Insofar as it describes the struggle between Ahuramazda and Ahreman in concrete and temporal terms and fails to emphasize the eternal and abstract struggle between good and evil forces (Mainyus) within the souls of man as the Gathas do, the Sasanian dualism becomes almost an end in itself rather than a means for inspiring man to realize Godhood through the proper exercise of his choice. For instance, if Mazda's victory over Ahreman is predetermined by a certain time-table, as in the Sasanian dualism, rather than being governed by the Gathic theology of man realizing Godhood by invariably exercising his choice in favor of Mazda, then the Gathic insistence on man as advancing the cause and good rule of Mazda by constantly aligning himself with Mazda by his choice, is seriously compromised in more ways than one. For example, the Gathic doctrines do not warrant an adversary of God, such as Ahreman, God's co-equal. For, however, limited a much less to explain evil in this world which the Gathas describe as existing rather as a fact of life from the beginning of the earth (Yasna 30.3, 45.2). Man's mission on this earth is by constantly exercising his choice against all evil and by bringing about perfection of the world (Yasna 340.9) by eradicating disease, ignorance, poverty, suffering and other ills from this world by the proper exercise of his free will which also includes choosing to work hard (SHYAOTHNA) for God as per the Ahunavar prayer. This Gathic emphasis on man's free will leading to perfection and salvation is rather missing in the Sasanian dualism.

Man made all the difference for Zarathushtra. Along with Free Will, Zarathushtra taught that the good was its own reward and that happiness and suffering were mere consequences of man's good and evil deeds (Yasna 30.8, 33.2, 33.3, 43.5, 46.7, 46.11, 49.11, and 51.14). Man's mission on this earth is to help Mazda by opting for good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Those who choose right will be granted perfection and immortality by Mazda (Yasna 31.21, 32.13, 32.15, 51.15, and Yasna 36.1) even implies that man augments Mazda's own perfection and immortality by his right words, deeds and prayers. The moral responsibility of choice is this deeply rooted in the Gathic teachings and it clearly spells out that each person holds the key to his or her own fate and makes his or her own destiny as he or she makes his or her own choice between good and evil, between truth and falsehood. However, the defeat of the forces of evil was necessary for the truth to emerge victorious. Thus, the decision to choose truth all the time implies a total commitment to Mazda who is the very embodiment of truth in both the worlds. Seen in this light,

Zarathushtra's dualism provides a channel to realize Godhood and worship of one God. Zarathushtra therefore exhorts man to opt for truth in order to assist God in his noble mission and abolish evil forever from this earth. Man is thus not a passive force in the fight between the forces of good and evil but is a soldier-in-arms for Mazda when he tilts the balance in the favor of the forces of the good by making right choices. The *summum bonum*, the highest attainment of human existence, thus consists of one basic feature: Right choice. Everyone is really and truly free to choose either good or evil. His choice in this world, however, determines his fate in the world beyond.

As man represents God Himself in Zoroastrian theology as well as in rituals and as man is endowed with Free Will, Zarathushtra devised ethical dualism to facilitate the expression of Free Will by man as a secondary element in his theology, the primary element in his theology being Free Will. Such an explanation may help focus the importance of free will in the Gathas and defuse the recent emphasis on Sasanian dualism.

Contemporary Philosophical literature on Free Will

There are many philosophers, even in our won times, who argue that there is no such thing as free will and everything is predetermined by God or Nature. However, one philosopher, Peter Van Inwagen, has reviewed all such arguments in his book *An Essay on Free Will* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1983) and came to the same conclusion as did Zarathushtra long ago, though he does not even seem to be aware of Zarathushtra's philosophy of Free Will. He thus furnishes impartial evidence for philosophical justification of Free Will.

It will be therefore, very fruitful to review in brief what Van Inwagen has to say about such arguments against free-will, though a complete understanding of his thesis could only be obtained by a perusal of his book. Not being a student of philosophy myself, I present his thesis here more or less in his own words but in a very succinct manner.

In the last 30-40 years many books have addressed the problem of free will and determinism. Noteworthy among them are M.R. Ayer's *The Refutation of Determinism*, Austin Farrer's *The Freedom of the Will*, R.L. Franklin's *Freewill and Determinism*, Anthony Kenny's *Will, Freedom and Power*, J.R. Lucas's *The Freedom of the Will*, A.I. Melden's *Free Action*, and D.J. O'Connor's *Free Will*. Van Inwagen, discusses the problem of the compatibility of free will and determinism seriously and at length without referring to these authors because most of them do not treat the problem adequately and none of the books on this subject contains any thing like an adequate discussion of Free Will and determinism.

There are five twentieth-century works that have had very extensive influence on Van Inwagen's thesis and they are worth mentioning here: C.D.

Broad's "Determinism, Indeterminism and Libertarianism", R.E. Hobart's "Free Will as Involving Determination and Inconceivable Without It", R.M. Chisholm's "Responsibility and Avoidability", Carl Ginet's "Might We Have No Choice?" and Richard Taylor's *Action and Purpose*.

Free Will versus Determinism

There is no single philosophical problem that is "the problem of free will". There are rather a great many philosophical problems about free will. One of the great central problems of philosophy is the problem of free will and determinism. It is, however, difficult to formulate "the problem of free will and determinism" in a way that will satisfy everyone.

Determinism is the thesis that there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future. There must, of course, be at least one physically possible future; if there is more than one, if at some instant there are two or more ways in which the world could go on, then the thesis of determinism is not valid.

When we say of a man that he "has free will" we mean that very often, if not always, when he has to choose between two or more mutually incompatible courses of action—that is, when it is impossible for him to carry out more than one of each of these courses of action is such that he can, or is able to, or has it within his power to carry it out. A man has free will if he is often in positions like these: He must now speak or now be silent, and he can now speak and can now remain silent; he must now resign his chairmanship or else lie to the members, and he has it within his power to resign as well as to lie.

'Free will', then, is to be defined in terms of 'can.' But how is 'can' to be defined? The concept expressed by 'can' in the above examples – the concept of the power or ability of an agent to act – is as clear as any philosophically interesting concept is likely to be.

If determinism is true, no one can act otherwise than he does. If determinism is true, no one has it within his power to realize any possibility that is in fact unrealized. If determinism is true, no one has any choice about anything. In short, if determinism is true, there is no free will.

Many people have said that there is no such thing as free will. Baron Holbach, for example, writes:

Man's life is a line that nature commands him to describe upon the surface of the earth, without his ever being able to swerve from it, even for an instant.. Nevertheless, in spite of the shackles by which he is bound, it is pretended he is a free agent...

One might wonder how Holbach found this out, just as one might wonder how Mark Twain, Clarence Darrow, and Freud discovered the truth of the very

similar propositions that are to be found in their writings. Does it follow that they do not believe—that is, fail to have the belief—that there is such a thing as free will? This follows only on two assumptions: (i) that they mean what they say, and (ii) that their beliefs are consistent. It can be shown that we all believe in free will and that, as a consequence of their sharing this universal belief, Holbach *et al.* either do not mean what they say or are inconsistent.

According to Richard Taylor, it is a fact that we deliberate. To deliberate is to try to decide between various incompatible courses of action. Some philosophers, like Hobbes, believe that deliberation, while it ends in activity, is not itself an activity but rather a state in which the agent is a passive arena within which various hopes, fears, and desires contend for the prize of causing his next action. Other philosophers see deliberation as activity *par excellence*. But all philosophers who have thought about deliberation agree on one point: one cannot deliberate about whether to perform a certain act unless one believes it is possible for one to perform it. Almost any piece of human behavior manifests certain beliefs of the person who performs it. One very special case of behavior that manifests its agent's belief is verbal behavior. But one's beliefs may also be manifested in one's non-verbal behavior. If one throws his forearm across his eyes, then, in the normal case, this behavior manifests a belief that his eyes are in danger; if someone arranges for his wife to be followed by private detectives, this act manifests a belief that she is untrustworthy; if someone edges carefully away from every cat he sees, this habit manifests a belief that cats are best avoided.

Deliberation, according to Hobbes, is a species of behavior, and it would therefore not be surprising if deliberation manifested certain beliefs of the deliberator. If someone deliberates about whether to do A or to do B, it follows that his behavior manifests a belief that it is *possible* for him to do both A and B.

Let us now return to Baron Holbach. What did he believe? What Holbach *said* is clear enough: that there is no free will: that of any two incompatible courses of action, at least one is within the agent's power to carry out. Did he believe what he said? There is at least some reason to suspect that he did not believe that *he* lacked free will. As stated earlier, no one could deliberate about whether to perform an act that he does not believe it is possible for him to perform. Therefore, either Holbach never deliberated or else he believed in the case of some pairs of incompatible courses of action that each was within his power. Did he deliberate? Well, of course he did. If he had not, he would either move about in random jerks and scuttles, or would withdraw into catatonia. Therefore, he believed in free will, or, at least, in his own free will. Were his beliefs therefore inconsistent? Or should we say that he didn't really believe that there is no free will, but merely said he did?

We should bring to the attention of Baron Holbach—or of anyone else who

denies the existence of free will-the fact, for fact it is, that in deliberating one manifests in one's behavior a belief in one's free will with respect to the act under deliberation. Suppose we were able to convince him of this. What should he do? This, I think, is the important question.

If we convince Holbach of this, there would be two courses open to him (besides changing his mind about free will): he might cease to deliberate or he might simply decide to "live with" having irremediably inconsistent beliefs. The former course is unattractive, implying as it does a life spent in catatonic withdrawal or purely random activity. What about the latter? What precisely is wrong with having inconsistent beliefs? If our statements are inconsistent, one or the other of them is going to be false, and we often want our statements to ourselves to be true". That is to say, having inconsistent beliefs is not "in itself a bad thing. What is bad in itself is having false beliefs. Having inconsistent beliefs is bad only because having inconsistent beliefs ensures having at least one false belief.

The Problems Created by Rejecting Free Will

What would rejecting free will mean for us without asking what the denial of free will logically entails. The answer is: to reject free will is to condemn oneself to a life of perpetual logical inconsistency. Anyone who rejects free will adopts a general theory about human beings that he contradicts with every deliberate word and act. This perhaps sounds worse than it is. We have seen that it is the best course to adopt for one who is convinced that he is in the possession of evidence that proves that we have no free will. When described abstractly, the man who rejects free will may seem rather a comic figure. And indeed we do generally regard the man whose acts belie his words as comic. But this is partly because we suppose that the contradiction of word by act is not an inevitable feature of life. But anyone who denies the existence of free will must, inevitably, contradict himself with monotonous regularity. Far from finding such a person comic, one might very well see him as a kind of philosophical hero, particularly if one approves of his reasons for rejecting free will. He is certainly likely to see himself that way.

Let us now examine the question, "What does the thesis that we have no free will logically commit its adherents to?" If we do not have free will, then there is no such thing as moral responsibility. If someone charges you with, say, lying, and if you can convince him it was simply not within your power *not* to lie, then it would seem that you have done all that is necessary to absolve yourself of responsibility for lying.

Moral Responsibility Requires Free Will

Without free will there is no moral responsibility: if moral responsibility exists, then someone is morally responsible for something he has done or for something he has left undone; to be morally responsible for some act or failure to act is at least to be able to have acted otherwise, whatever else it may involve; to be able to have acted otherwise is to have free will. Therefore, if moral responsibility exists, someone has free will. Therefore, if no one has free will, moral responsibility does not exist.

Three principles relating ability and responsibility cannot be refuted:

- A person is morally responsible for failing to perform a given act only if he could have performed that act;
- A person is morally responsible for a certain event-particular only if he could have prevented it;
- A person is morally responsible for a certain state of affairs only if (that state of affairs obtains and) he could have prevented it from obtaining.

These three principles entail that moral responsibility requires free will. We can deduce from these three principles the following conclusion: The thesis that there is such a thing as moral responsibility entails the free-will thesis. It means that *someone* is morally responsible for *something* – for some act, some event, some state of affairs, the false propaganda, malicious rumor, or the decline of morals at some institution. The 'free will' thesis means that most people, if not all people, are very often, if not always, in the following position: When they are faced with having to choose among various incompatible courses of action, *each* of these courses of action is such that they can choose *it*.

It would be impossible for us to cease behaving in ways that manifest a belief in free will. But I don't think it is *impossible* for us to cease talking in ways that manifest a belief in moral responsibility. It would be merely very, very difficult. Just imagine what it would be like never to make judgments like 'What a perfectly despicable way for him to behave' or 'You'd think a person with her advantages would know better than that' or 'I can never think of what I did without feeling sick! We all, believe that people are sometimes morally responsible for what they do. We all believe that responsibility exists. We cannot but view our belief in moral responsibility as a justified belief, a belief that is simply not open to reasonable doubt. The proposition that often we are morally responsible for what we have done is something we all know to be true. If someone were asked to *defend* his belief in free will, he could not reply by saying that neither he nor anyone else had any choice about what he believed about free will. But it is as adequate a defense of the free will thesis as

has ever been given for any philosophical position to say, "Without free will, we should never be morally responsible for anything; and we are sometimes morally responsible".

Thus, Van Inwagen's free-will thesis establishes that when we are faced with having to choose between incompatible courses of action, each of them is such that it is within our power to choose it. Or, more idiomatically, we very often have a choice about what we are going to do. Determinism is the thesis that given the past and the laws of nature, there is only one possible future. The free-will thesis and determinism are incompatible. This can be seen on the basis of several detailed arguments, all of which are elaborations of the following simple argument:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.

Moreover, there seems to be no good reason to accept determinism. Therefore, we should reject determinism. This conclusion is, at least in principle, open to scientific refutation, since it is not inconceivable that science may one day present us with compelling reasons for believing in determinism. Then, and only then should we deny free-will. But the followers of Zarathushtra see nothing in his teaching that would work against the laws of science in any way. Rather, they see them as ultimately leading to scientific progress and Frashokereti in every way. Insofar as they do so, they perceive science as ultimately upholding Zarathushtra's thesis of Free Will as a very scientific principle governing human behavior, particularly as more and more psychologists are rejecting Skinnerism and its deterministic principles.. Just as I was finishing this paper, I read an announcement by The Jewish Theological Seminary of America in the *Newsweek* issue, of September 12, 1994, (page 59) about Free Will which struck me so much for its relevance to Zarathushtra's own teachings that I am tempted to reproduce it here — not as an illustration of Zarathushtra's influence on the Judeo-Christian concept of Free Will, as that is left to the scholars to debate, (and it is outside the scope of this treatise) — but as a veritable evidence of how valid as well as relevant the principle of Free Will is in our own times.

“Look what you made me do. She was abused as a child. He was driven mad... (by racial hatred. — “It’s as though we’ve never heard of Free Will. As a society we’ve just about given up expecting people to take personal responsibility for what they do--”

For Jews, the ultimate acceptance of responsibility comes on Yom Kippur, our day of atonement. (Compare this with Pateti, the last day in the Zoroastrian

calendar set aside for atonement.)

Year after year at this time, we picture a book open before God. In this book, awaiting judgment, is a record of our deeds. (Compare it with similar Zoroastrian beliefs about GANJ-E- MATIKAN and Chinvat Bridge.)

These Jewish emphases on Free Will and Personal Responsibility lends us further proof of how valid and inspiring is Zarathushtra's emphasis on Free Will in our own times and how contemporary and eternal are his Gathic precepts.