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ARTICLE

Zara Yacob and The Rationality of the Human Heart

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¹To the ancient Egyptians and following them to Zara Yacob, a Seventeenth century Ethiopian Rationalist, the heart is a symbol of Wisdom broadly understood, and a symbol of Reason or Rationality, analytically understood.

That is:

The Heart is a symbol of Reason

Humans can reason

They reason with the Heart

The ancient Egyptians mummified the human heart and sucked out the brain. The heart captured their imagination and stimulated their reasoning power and their wisdom. It is said that hearts were lifted and soaked in wines and herbs, preserved for worship by saints. Aztec priests captured the hearts of their enemies and “offered them to their God’s”. The Egyptians were cardiocentrists. They considered the brain worthless, whereas they worshipped the heart. The human heart also fascinated the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. Plato, however, was much more concerned with the wisdom of the Soul than he was with the heart. In *The Republic*, he divides the soul into three inseparable parts, the Rational, the Spirited and the Desiring, and primacy of governance is given to Rationality, a foundational attribute of the Soul. Plato was a cerebocentrist. Aristotle, his brilliant student, parts company from his teacher. As the son of a biologist, and influenced by his father, and accustomed to shrewd observation, he dissected and studied animal hearts, his *Historia Animalum* and *De Partibus Animalum*, are a wealth of empirical evidence and detailed documentation of the structure and function of the heart. He disagreed with Plato that the heart is a cushion, by arguing that, in fact, the heart is the seat of the soul, therefore, the seat of wisdom and rationality.

The human heart, this industrious and muscular pump, the size of a fist, which beats 100,000 times, and pumps 2000 gallons of blood, through 60,000 miles of blood vessels, and which in a life time will beat more than 2.5 billion times, is also the site of penetrating intelligence and the seat of wisdom and generator of not merely irrational feelings but passionate thought impulses. It is the heart which carves out the right moral path and the originator of thought impulses in the form of

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1. This is a short but interesting and reflective thought on African Philosophy kindly provided by Teodros Kiros, Professor of Philosophy at Berklee College and DuBois Fellow at Harvard University, as part of the inaugural volume of *Intellectus*.

emotion. It is the ultimate house of what we moderns have come to call moral intelligence. The heart as part of the body is indeed a diligent blood pumper, and as the seat of the soul, it originates thought impulses. Thus, the heart has both a scientific function and a transcendental function, the heart is both a physical/ material and non- physical/ transcendental organ. The body and mind dichotomy, which raged in the seventeenth century, was made prominent by Descartes, who was claiming that the body and the mind cannot possibly interact, and that the body is merely sensations, and the mind a thinking organ.

However, in contrast, Zara Yacob, orchestrated a Copernican revolution by arguing that Leb (Heart), (in Geez, a classical Ethiopian language) is in fact both the seat of emotion and the seat of thoughts. That the dichotomy between the body and mind is overcome inside the heart, the seat of the soul. Zara Yacob's resolution of the dichotomy is his view that the heart is part of the body, as a blood pumper, and part of the non-bodily, the penetrating intelligence which originates and dissects thoughts, and directs them to the brain, where thought impulses are processed and linguistically articulated, thereby facilitating communication and producing discourses. For Zara Yacob, a spiritual/ religious thinker, the transcendental function, is given by God to persons, so that they can think wisely and act rationally. From this angle, one can develop a modality of rationality.

One is wise, therefore potentially rational, when one uses the God given penetrating intelligence and put oneself on a moral path, guided by self-generated limiting conditions of discourse and action. I presuppose, this particular view of Zara Yacobian rationality, and I am calling it the Rationality of the Human Heart (RH) which I distinguish from the popularly modern Scientific Rationality (SR). I will briefly contrast these modalities of Rationality. I do not wish to draw the line too deeply. I allow the possibility of SR, when it is not purely instrumental and calculative, to draw from RH, also. After all, scientists have hearts also and not all rationalists consult their hearts, either. When Science is instrumental (calculating), then the distinctions, which I have drawn, are plausible. When science is not instrumental, then the dichotomy which I have drawn is unnecessary. RH and SR could work in tandem when ideal speaking and acting subjects choose wisely and efficiently.

In the moral/rational sphere, the speaking and acting subjects consults the heart prayerfully and humbly before intervening in the flow of life to realize their possibilities and life chances. They think deeply before they act to correct an injustice or articulate a vision of the good life boldly but humbly. The penetrating human intelligence located in the human heart, as we learn from Zara Yacob propels us when it is functioning transcendently, to change the consciousness of the world and address human miseries-miseries which SR for the most part ignores as permanent features of the natural world. It is at this level that SR and RH give us irreconcilable articulations of the human condition.

Generally, I contend that SR is not motivated by the goal of becoming wise. The goal is efficiency and practical results and maximizing profit and benefit at work places. RH is centrally guided by the vision of wisdom, or at the least, valuing wisdom, and seeking to become wise and make wise decisions. If one is religiously inclined and is a believer, the quest for wisdom is accompanied by a committed passion to reach God prayerfully, so that one's speech and action is purely motivated by Zara Yacobian Hasasa (looking for, searching God) and Hatata (praying and meditating). For Zara Yacob, the possibility of becoming wise, at a certain point in one's impermanent life, requires a steady company of God. In short, one must have faith in this Transcendental power, located in the Heart, in order to realize wisdom and rationality simultaneously. SR on the other hand, is not guided, unless one wishes to do so, to engage in Hatata. All that the person has to do is use rationality to produce efficient accounts.

A plan of life is felt in the heart as a thought impulse, and the relevant principles of what to do originate there, as the subject intensely feels the thought impulses. In this sense the heart produces intelligent life plans and seeks to realize them. As it does so, it wears a meditative and prayerful mood to empower the urge of its agency. These plans of life and principles of moral action are knowledge

producing moments for speaking and acting subjects. They are productive of Noesis. Following Zara Yacob, I would like to modestly contend that the heart is wise/ rational as are the speaking and acting subjects who consult Noesis, which is located in the human heart, originating thought impulses and seeking to express in language, so that it could share its possibilities with others with whom it shares the world.

Whereas SR restricts itself to the relationship between means and ends to produce efficient and cost-effective outcomes, RH seeks to change the consciousness of the world to minimize, and if possible, eliminate unnecessary human suffering, such as poverty, diseases and exploitation at work places. RH is committed to the idea of making means and ends themselves rational.

When we consult the heart, and say, it is from the heart, what we mean is: the feelings which ground the thought impulses are authentic; that the subject intuitively feels that she must act; that the thought impulses are sincere; that the thought impulses are deeply felt; that the speaking and acting subject has carefully distinguished authentic thoughts from inauthentic ones intuitively; that her intuition is informed by guidance originating from the companionship of the Transcendent through Hasassa and Hatata; that the speaking subject means what she says and acts in accordance with what she feels, following an intuition penetrated by wisdom, and ;finally, the thought impulses provoke moral action, they compel the speaking subject to act in the world, to change human consciousness.

SR and RH could further be contrasted through the following ways. The most salient features of SR are: (a) Humans are desiring beings, that is their natural constitution, therefore, (b) humans are economic animals and their psychological and material needs can be satisfied by the relationship between means and ends, (c) the desires of these beings must somehow be satisfied, even at the expense of destroying the environment, as drilling oil, deforestation, coal mining and others attest, and yet we continue ignoring the consequences as long as money and wealth are procured, and the masses are somehow minimally satisfied, and revolts and revolutions are systematically averted.

In direct contrast to SR, (a) the human is a potentially peaceful and justice loving, but this potential has to be patiently evoked out of the recesses of the unconscious where it is covered by desire, (b) humans are in fact caring and sensitive beings, evident in the language of the heart, if they are inclined to consult the heart before they act, a capacity, that critical education could unravel, patiently and lovingly, (c) humans are drawn to mystery, which includes the possibility of discovering a Transcendental power, such as God to put them on the right moral paths, and change the consciousness of the world, (d) humans, when correctly challenged and critically enlightened, can and are willing to explore extraordinary possibilities motivated by the power of the intuition to discover the Good on their own. The Good is inside them, and consulting the heart with a reflective, meditative mood could get them there. Following Zara Yacob, I modestly contend that the possibility of the best in each and every one of us begins with engaging in Hassasa and Hatata as self-imposed moral projects propelled by the quest for moral excellence as a lifelong quest for cultivating new habits covered by the weight of SR, which has become our second nature.

RH has the power to redeem us all from ourselves, from the slumber of our sleep, our callousness and indifference. These are turbulent times. Indifference is the signifier of our age. Game playing is the name of our alienated human relations. Marketing everything is our new nature. We play people, as opposed to caring for them and helping them, when we can. We even like to say, sadly, "do not be emotional". By saying so, we think that to be emotional is to be foolish, thoughtless, when the opposite is the case, that emotions themselves are thought impulses, and that it is only when we feel that we think, that we encounter the company of God, if we are religious in that particular sense, or we become one with Brahma, the Imperishable in Hinduism.

To be rational and wise is in fact, the power which makes it possible for us to thank all those who serve us, our house cleaners, our maids, our babysitters, all those whose lives can be changed only when we listen and are guided by the Heart, the seat of thinking. When we listen to the heart—the site of thought—we will not suffer from the pangs of thoughtlessness and indifference and internalized

cruelty. RH awakens us from indifference and helplessness, as the first step of organizing the world to participate in peaceful marches, informed participation in social movements, where hearts meet hearts, and wisdom interacts with wisdom.