

# Seventeenth century Rationalist: On the rationality of the heart.

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Zara Yacob, the subject of my talk tonight lived in the 17th century, in Ethiopia, and is the founder of rationality in Africa. He was a contemporary of Rene Descartes, the founder of rationality in France. He was born at a time in which Europe was looking for adventures and explorations of the world. During this time, Ethiopia the birthplace of Christianity, had captured the imaginations of the Portuguese Jesuits, who attempted to spread Catholicism, and managed to briefly convert an Ethiopian King Susyenyonos. This act repulsed Zara Yacob, partly because he disagreed with the preaching of the Jesuit teachers, and partly because he wanted to defend Ethiopia's sovereignty. It is at this juncture that he develops an original notion of rationality in his Treatise, that he called conversations with the transcendent, out of which I will attempt to develop his vision of the rationality of the Heart.

His method of philosophizing is that of a novelist. Marguerite Duras' method of novelizing, as displayed in her last major work, *C'etout* comes to mind. In this extraordinary novel, she creates an other, in the form of a lover, whom she calls Yann, and with whom she shares her meditations on love and death. Similarly, Zara Yacob creates a powerful and perfect other, whom he calls God and to whom he speaks, everyday. Prayerful discourses are the content of this conversation, during which he searches this God. He looks for him through Hasasa (meditating). God maintains this relationship with Zara Yacob through revealing and hiding. The philosopher celebrates the revealing in the form of thankful prayers. He patiently waits for God, when he is hidden from him through intense prayers of longing and loving anxiety. His belief in God belongs to what W.V. Quine called a form of belief that cannot be disconfirmed. This form of belief is a necessary analytic truth, and not a contingent one.

At the center of Zara Yacob's originality lies the hitherto unrecognized place of the human heart in philosophical activity. No philosopher before or after him (Pascal, the writer, excepted) had attached such a firm significance to the function of the human heart. Philosophers before and after him tend to ignore the role of the human heart in thinking, or they sharply distinguish the heart from the mind, and treat the mind as the seat of thinking, and the heart as the organ of feeling. For Zara Yacob reason itself is placed in the heart, and not in the brain. It is as if the mind itself is located in the heart, and not outside it.

In classical phrases, he tells us "To the person who seeks it, truth is immediately revealed. Indeed he who investigates with the pure intelligence set by the creator in the heart of each [emphasis is mine] man and scrutinizes the order and laws of creation will discover the truth. It is the creator who placed intelligence or the ability to reason in the human heart. He is arguing that what we call analytical thinking is itself a function of the heart, and that the heart has been incorrectly described as the organ that processes feelings only. Zara Yacob contends that thinking itself is the activity of the heart, and that

genuine thinking is passionate, and passion as an expression of feeling, is an integral part of thought. Thought is a passion for truth. The passion for truth takes place inside our hearts, before it is communicated through language. Speaking truth or searching it or meditating about it, is sown in the heart. Truth germinates there, and then it explodes in the form of the passion of speech. Our intelligence tells us to do the right things. God withdraws from our everyday lives once he implants intelligence in our hearts. But He dwells in our actions. He has given us the power with which to live the appropriate life of reason. This reasonable God is always available for direction-only when we consult him through Hassasa (meditation) and Hatata (searching). He gently directs us through examples, not through harsh commandments. He does not tell us what to do. He shows us what we can do, if we use our heart's intelligence correctly.

However, years of scientific scholarship have treated the human heart as particularly suited to absorb and process delicate emotional information. The heart has been so stereotyped that we rarely think of it as a center of reliable and carefully thought out information. When one wants to belittle another persons' thought we are known to say, "your heart is in the right place", meaning that you are not thinking well, if you were, you would not think that way. Zara Yacob reverses this kind of talk. The intelligently created being thinks in and through the heart. This point, Zara Yacob's very own, is repeatedly underscored in the Treatise Rationality for Zara Yacob is an activity of the human heart blessed by a moral intelligence that is given to all human beings, should they choose to make use of this extraordinary gift. Having a gift and actually using it are of course two different activities. But for those who would like to do the morally right thing, the heart is ready to help them do the task, the important task of performing in a morally worthy manner. Such individuals do not have to go beyond consulting their heart when they agonize over their decisions, over their choices and over their dreams of seeking to be exceptional human beings. In almost every other page of the Treatises, both Zara Yacob and Walda Heywat (Zara Yacob's student and successor) continue to refer to the human heart as the ultimate place of profound thought. In none of the modalities of rationality is the human heart acknowledged as the source of thought. The heart is subtly treated as the place of meandering emotions and fickle feelings, or else, it is simply ignored. Zara Yacob was the first to reconfigure rationality, by reordering the relationship between the brain and the heart. The brain for him is a processing machine, nothing more beyond that. The heart is the home of thought. The brain's function is not the production of thought, as the rationality of Descartes assumed. The production of thought is an activity of the heart.

The children of modernity and advocates of Scientific rationality attempt to ground rationality in tradition and customs. Zara Yacob seeks to free rationality from tradition, and locality. For him there is a universal God who created all human beings as equal. All of us are made of the same fabric. Although, we do not speak the same language, all of us are capable of extending our moral imagination to understand the needs and passions of the so-called "others". There is no need for techniques of understanding "others", as if they are made of a different fabric. It does not require much to understand the languages of despair and hunger. All that we need to do is decide how the hungry must be feeling, and what our duties are to end that condition, particularly when we are sitting on wealth and power that we do not really need, apart from the status and power that accompany that condition, and how it sometimes blinds our vision, and crowds our ears with flattery and praise. None of this requires

transversality to understand. We are already in possession of intelligence by which we can identify our duties and obligations. All that we need to do is wake up the sluggish self.

What we should fear the most is the other in us: the vain, selfish, and self-regarding other. The “other” outside will be taken care of by the just transcendent. The frightening other is us, when we become overwhelmed by our projects, our plans, our careers, at the expense of all those individuals who can benefit from our attention, our kindness and care. However, difficult the challenging task is the death of the morally unmotivated other, the other in us. That other needs to be cured from it, and be replaced by a vigilant, morally attentive, caring other, who listens to the voice of the heart. The cultivation of the moral self is one of the perennial themes of moral philosophy. For millennia some philosophers have attempted to cultivate a moral citizen. Others, the philosopher Thomas Hobbes chief among them has argued that there is no such self. The real self is selfish and brutish, whose vices only the law can silence. Zara Yacob too does not have much regard for the natural self, and yet he thinks that this selfish self can be cured by the rationality of the heart, if it dutifully prays to the transcendent. The decision to have a prayerful attitude toward life is the beginning of the healing process. Without that initial decision nothing can be accomplished. The broken self of modernity suffers from this unprayerful attitude, thankless thinking. The rationality of the heart can enable the broken self to mend its heart.

In defense of the Rationality of the Heart

The rationality of the heart (RH) attempts to solve human problems through the mediation of the heart, the heart as the dwelling place of thought; and I am enormously grateful to Zara Yacob for leaving such a powerful vehicle of thought that I am convinced would be in service of modernity, since modernity is desperately in need of the language of the heart. One way of celebrating the virtues, not to say the distinctiveness of the Rationality of the Heart (RH), is to compare it to Scientific Rationality (SR). I will begin with a detailed discussion of SR in the first section, and then proceed to contrast it with RH, in the second section.

SR is the dominant form of thought in the western world, and the non-western world seems to be rapidly racing to embrace it. Before proceeding to compare these rationalities, I would first like to clearly articulate the nature of SR. For the most part SR is exclusively focused on meeting the economical and psychological needs of the individual. On this view rational is the individual who articulates his individual needs and then devises the appropriate means with which to satisfy them. The articulated ends must fit the chosen means perfectly, otherwise the action is irrational. Moreover, the rational individual is not expected to take the needs of others into account, unless recognizing and satisfying their needs is crucial for the satisfaction of her own life plan.

Modernity in Africa is being rapidly rationalized, but I think this decision is a mistaken one. To be sure, the rich and powerful are using SR for their own ends. Some of the richest men in the world are now in Africa; shamelessly depleting African resources; enriching themselves on the backs of the poor; subjecting six year olds to psychological and physical abuse; sending their children to the most expensive universities in the west; when they can they place their own children in unearned positions of

power and financial comfort. Merit is a play thing of the scientific rationalists, indifference to suffering is a way of life, the struggle of the fittest is an ideology, going to church and praying is a habit without the heart. The church in Africa is the rich man's church. It is there to justify the begetting of wealth by any means necessary, since the rich and powerful believe that God helps only those who cannot help themselves. It is widely believed that the poor are poor because they cannot help themselves that they are irrational, that they do not plan well. These are the myths of SR that have been used as weapons of the rich.

RH has the potential 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 the age. Game playing is the name of human relations. We play people. We like to say play him this way. Make sure that you play her that way is the other side of the coin. We do this without shame. We even like to say (sadly), "do not be emotional." Be reasonable. Note the way we separate emotion from reason. Worse still, we always make sure that our decisions are rational, to the extent that we remove our passions, the center of emotion from guiding our decision. Just imagine the persons that we encounter daily; those who devotedly clean our offices, those who silently man our elevators, those who look after our children when we work away long ours, those who smilingly serve us at restaurants. We treat them indifferently. We say to ourselves they are doing their job, performing a task for which they are being paid. Yet, we know that most of these jobs are inadequately paid, but are miserable, insulting. They deaden the nerves. They harden and embitter the people who perform them. Study after study has documented this. To respond to these facts of modern life requires not only the calculative services of SR but also more fundamentally the participation of the human heart, and that is how RH enters the picture, to protect us against ourselves. When we listen to the heart-the seat of thought - we will not suffer from the subtle assaults of thoughtlessness in the peculiar form of indifference and internalized cruelty. We have become accustomed not to respond to these conditions, as Zara Yacob and Walda Heywat demand from our hearts. We conclude too quickly that these individuals are fated to live this way, and that the best that SR enables us to do for them, is at least employ them. Even that is not looked at as a right that these human beings have.

Indifference and cruelty, we have been told by a long line of philosophers (Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hobbes) and novelists (Dostoyevsky and Camus) are natural emotions, and that there is very little that we can do to change them. The philosophers and novelists seem to be right if we evaluate the proposition by the yardstick of human practices over a long period of human history. A proposition however is not only a descriptive affirmation of a practice, but also a symbolic, however, mythical the symbol is, of possibility, and a new way of leading our lives against the background of what we know about human beings. The symbolic possibility challenges human beings by signaling to them that they can be other than what they have become. Nothing can change us if we are dogmatically convinced that there is very little that we can do to change the world that constantly bombards us with pessimistic diagnoses of the human condition. SR does not help very much when all that it teaches us is the exact calculation of our interests, with very little encouragement to come out of the cocoon of comfort and docility.

If we decide to pay attention to the heart, first and foremost, we will be flooded with the warmth and the love that we immediately feel for our fellow human beings. The heart will force us to pay attention to all those who labor silently. A smile at the busy cashier, a conversation with the garbage keeper, a hefty wage for the care taker, a place in our heart for those who cannot see a doctor, become our daily moral practices. We do not do them reluctantly as Kant sometimes preaches. We do them lovingly and willingly because we are thinking through our heart, not because we are reluctantly enforcing the principles of moral reason, like many proficient bureaucrats. This is not to say that principles are not important. They are so important that the heart itself can produce them. Principles do not have a life of their own. To think is not merely to be stimulated by moral reason. Thinking is to be genuinely affected by pain in the world. It is an exercise in going out of the enclosed space of self-obsession to embrace another human being. To think is not merely to be stimulated by moral reason. Thinking is genuinely affected by pain in the world. It is an exercise in going out of the enclosed space of self-obsession to embrace another human being. Thinking in this sense is an activity of the heart. To argue that the call to action that the thinking heart stimulates is rational is not to denigrate the role of moral principles. In a very subtle sense the principles of reason are not produced by the mind but are generated by the activity of the heart. Principles are the vehicles of the thought that takes place in the heart itself, and which the brain organizes. Principles are the mediations of thought. This is particularly true of moral thought, which is the sphere to which I am applying RH, provoked by Zara Yacob's ordinary modernity anchored on the rationality of the heart.