

Being Thoughtful
A Functionalist Approach to the Mind/Heart Duality
By
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In our society, and much of the world for that matter, the notion the head and heart—thinking and feeling—are separate, even opposites, is taken for granted. It's like the air we breathe; essential, all around us, but most the time we don't notice it. Those favoring intellect can easily dismiss emotion as irrational, while those favoring emotion may consider reason to be cold, calculating, and without compassion. If you're familiar with the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator, based on the theories of Carl Jung, you'll know the *Thinking Type* is considered the opposite of the *Feeling Type*, and that if thinking is one's dominant function, feeling is considered one's most undeveloped and unconscious function, or *vice versa* if feeling is one's dominant function. Jung himself said, "Thinking, if it is to be real thinking and true to its own principle, must rigorously exclude feeling."¹ There are others who would argue life's a whole lot better when, as sung in the animated film, *Thumbelina*, you simply follow your heart.

You're sure to do impossible things
If you follow your heart
Your dreams will fly on magical wings
When you follow your heart

I like how this duality is presented in Frank Baum's, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* because, which is to be considered best, head or heart, remains an open question;

... said the Scarecrow, "I shall ask for brains instead of a heart; for a fool would not know what to do with a heart if he had one."

"I shall take the heart," returned the Tin Woodman; "for brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world."

Dorothy did not say anything, for she was puzzled to know which of her two friends was right..."

So, Dorothy invites both to accompany her along the journey, both the Scarecrow and Tin Woodman, both head and heart. Each of us enters our own journey in an undifferentiated state, meaning when we're born we can't distinguish ourselves from anyone or anything else. But our awareness increases as we learn to discriminate between the boundaries of our bodies and our environments, as we differentiate ourselves from others. As we develop further, this sense of separation becomes less concrete and more abstract, so that we start to create conceptual divisions, like the mind/heart duality. Body and soul, matter and spirit, good and evil, true and false, are other dualisms in our paradigmatic ether, part of the cultural mindset we share without notice.

¹ Jung, C.G., *Psychological Types*, CW Vol. 6, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1971, 1990, p. 405f.

Dualistic thinking may be necessary for consciousness, but it can also lead to the sort of extreme divisions we've seen violently manifested in our world in recent days, in Barcelona, Spain and Charlottesville, Virginia. To counter the mindset of separation and segregation that leads to such violence and injustice, to hate and hurt, we have to be reminded many of the beliefs dividing us are artificial, like the lines we draw on maps to establish boundaries that exist only in our imaginations. We have to be reminded that we're all human beings, we're all male and female, we're all gay and straight, we're all black and white, part of one humanity and one world. Etymologically speaking, this seems to be the function of *religion*, a word that means "rejoin" or "reconnect." Religion, at its best, is supposed to be about making us whole, making our communities whole, our world whole, by healing the rips in the fabric of our societies, restoring the broken threads that tie us all together, and ever widening our circles of inclusion. By definition, groups that use religion to justify hate and discrimination aren't religions at all. They are the opposite. For, as the great theologian, Paul Tillich once said, "...*sin is separation*. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation."² Sin builds fences, and draws boundaries, and segregates, and divides, and sets itself apart from others. Religion tears down walls, crosses lines, welcomes, heals, and makes whole.

Accomplishing this is embedded in Taoism and its offspring, Buddhism, which use the familiar Yin-Yang mandala to symbolize our earthly experience as a unity of opposites ever changing into each other, always containing a spot of contradiction, yet also recognizing the contradictions are illusionary because, in reality, all is one. We just can't perceive this Great Unity with our senses, because they are limited to our immediate surroundings, which is a very small circle of inclusion. So, we must come to grasp the wider circle with our minds, by making the link between ourselves and all our relations, and by envisioning the whole hoop of the world.

That's where reason, or logic, comes in; a mental system, akin to mathematics, for making reliable connections between the things we think about. If the connections we make aren't sound, it tells us that too. Unlike emotions, however, reason is not natural. We usually think we have good reasons for our beliefs, but that's often because we mistake the feeling of certainty for being logical. Even Sherlock Holmes makes this mistake with his famous argument, "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be true." I won't go into the reasons his conclusion doesn't follow from his premise here, which makes this statement illogical. I'd point out, rather, that what Arthur Conan Doyle's famous detective is actually describing here—eliminating all but one possibility—is our natural response to *cognitive dissonance*.

If you're paying close attention, you'll notice I just called "eliminating other possibilities" *natural*, even though a moment ago I said reason isn't *natural*. Unless I'm one who doesn't use his words carefully or consistently, this must mean I don't think eliminating the impossible is logical. Sure, the process of elimination can be useful in reasoning, but it's more often a natural psychological process than a logical one. Eliminating all other possibilities is

² Tillich, Paul, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, NY, 1951, Chapter 19, "You Are Accepted."

how we cope with the discomfort of a divided mind, with the chatter of competing thoughts and contradictions in our heads. As science writer, Jonah Lehrer explains in his book, *How We Decide*, “The default state of the brain is indecisive disagreement; various mental parts are constantly insisting that the other parts are wrong.”³ To cope with this internal strife, he says, “We all silence the cognitive dissonance through self-imposed ignorance.”⁴ In other words, we “eliminate” all other possibilities, rendering them impossible, until we are left with only one solution, which, no matter how improbable, we think must be true, because it’s the only possibility we can imagine. Our self-imposed ignorance prevents it, so we are convinced the only thing left, as Sherlock Holmes says, “must be true.”

And that one truth, that single solution, derived at by unconsciously tuning out all other possibilities, provides us with a false feeling of certainty. And that’s what certainty is, a *feeling*. As neurologist Robert Burton says, “the *feeling of knowing*, and its kindred feelings should be considered as primary as the states of fear and anger...⁵ Certainty and similar states of ‘knowing what we know’ arise out of involuntary brain mechanisms that, like love or anger, function independently of reason.”⁶ This is why I say we tend to think our beliefs are reasonable, because, we can’t imagine anything else might be true. A few days ago, for example, one of the white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville last week responded to being disowned by his family by arguing white supremacists aren’t, “politically incorrect, we’re factually correct,” adding, “I’m certainly not a hateful person.”⁷ He believes this, and that he’s part of a new civil rights movement, and that his beliefs reflect his love for family and his country, because he can’t imagine any other possibilities and, thus, believes he has all the facts, because, for him, they are the only conceivable facts. This makes him feel certain his views are right no matter what anyone else says.

How, then, can any of us be sure we are not deceiving ourselves in the same way, unable to consider any possibility other than what we believe is true? Well, we can’t be sure of anything, which is why reason is such a powerful tool, because it’s an objective method of checking the soundness of our own thoughts. One quick test, for example, is to simply ask if the argument we’re making supports something we already believe is true? For logic is meant to help us draw new conclusions, to make inferences, not to defend what we have already convinced ourselves is true. That’s the difference between reason and rationalization. “Rationalizations,” Erich Fromm says, “are essentially lacking this quality of discovering and uncovering; they only confirm the emotional prejudice existing in oneself.”⁸ Precisely because it is rooted in our emotions, rationalizing, unlike reason, does come naturally for us. Just like any emotional reaction, rationalizing is involuntary, and happens without us even trying, and it’s usually what’s happening when we’re convinced our ideas have been well reasoned.

³ Lehrer, Jonah, *How We Decide*, Mariner Books edition, New York, NY, 2010, p. 210.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵ Burton, Robert, *On Being Certain*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, NY, 2008, p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, preface.

⁷ <http://www.twincities.com/2017/08/14/fargo-man-who-marched-in-charlottesville-new-civil-rights-era-has-begun/>

⁸ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965) p. 219.

This is where the Scarecrow-Tin Woodsman metaphor breaks down. For it's not really a choice between head and heart. Unless one is a complete sociopath, we all have emotions, and most the thinking we do is but an extension of our emotions, through rationalizing and the feeling of certainty. Reason, or logic if you will, is, again, not natural to us. It is a discipline that must be learned and practiced to be good at it, and it is something most people never study. Yet rationalizing feels like thinking. It seems so clearheaded, so many mistake it for good reasoning.

So, the real question is whether we're going to take the head along with the heart, since the heart gives us no choice. Do we want to know if our thinking is reasonable or do we prefer the dopamine reward we get from the positive feeling of certainty, and from the false sense of security rationalizing our preconceived notions provides? The choice seems obvious when I ask such a loaded question, but, again, emotions come over us naturally, involuntarily, and, usually, uncontrollably. Questioning our presumptions doesn't. Being unreasonable is always easier than being reasonable.

Reason takes effort. It requires study, exercise, memorization, practice. It takes discipline, which is a big reason so few learn logic. Another is that it requires us to question and consider the soundness of our own opinions, which doesn't feel anywhere near as good as the come-easy feeling of certainty, the feeling of being right and righteous, along with feeling we are justified in being angry at, even retaliating against those who disagree with us. Some, I have discovered, even become angry at the mere mention of logic—understandably so, since it is, indeed, a genuine threat to the kind of "self-impose ignorance" Jonah Lehrer talks about.

Some on the heart-only-side, think logic isn't "spiritual," and that people who use it too much are "stuck in their heads." I would argue, to the contrary, since thoughts come as close to anything noncorporeal the human body produces, can be shared non-physically, and even transcend the minds they originate in to inspire the minds of others, that thinking logically is about as spiritual as anything we're capable of. And since reason, unlike rationalizing, leads to "discovering and uncovering," as Fromm says, it enables us to transcend the confines of our own minds so that we don't stay stuck in our heads. After the death of Aristotle, the discoverer of logic, his writings about it were gathered into a book its compilers named, *Organon*, from the Greek word meaning, "organ," or, "instrument." Logic, for them was a living thing as essential as a beating heart and as beautiful as the sound of music. "This great system of classical logic..." celebrated logician Irving Copi once said, "remains an intellectual tool of enormous power, as beautiful as it is penetrating."⁹

Obviously, in light of all I've said, I consider it beneficial to invite the head to accompany us upon our journey. But I don't think it's necessary. Like other creatures, we can simply let our behaviors be guided by emotional impulses and repetitive instincts and get along okay most of the time. Thinking well isn't vital. When the doctors check our life signs, they don't check our reasons for fallacies, or ask us to form logical syllogisms. The Tin Woodman is coming whether we want him or not. It's the Scarecrow we must decide to invite.

⁹ Copi, Irving M., & Cohen, Carl, *Introduction to Logic*, 12th Edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2005, p. 177.

All of this, however, is but a response to the dualistic question, which is best, head or heart? Like Dorothy, I don't know which is best and try to include both in my life. But let's consider looking at the question nondualistically for a few minutes. Let's suppose that heart and head, that emotions and thinking, aren't polar-opposites, but are different ways of experiencing the same event. In Philosophy, this is called *functionalism*, which, to be brief, defines things by what they do, not by their intrinsic attributes. In doing so, the mind/body, or spirit/matter, or heart/head dualisms disappear. Whatever the mind, spirit, or emotions are, they are expressed physically. They are embodied functions. We don't have a mind and a body, they are one.

This explains why emotions and rationalizing occur simultaneously, because they are part of the same experience. Feelings surge through our bodies, preparing us for action, even as our thoughts formulate to justify our response. Since feelings and certainty come from the same part of the brain, the limbic system, they come packaged together, as part of the same experience, the same reaction that suddenly alters everything about us, our mood, our heartrate and pulse, our blood pressure, our physical posture and expression, and our thinking. So, yes, logic, like math, or reading, or some other technique, must be learned, but thoughts and feelings are already happening together, two experiences of one function that begins in the emotional layers of our brains.

The newest layer of our brains, however, the neocortex, the frontal lobe, unlike the emotional limbic system, is not autonomic. The neocortex is the part of the brain responsible for executive function and empathy—for considering the consequences of our decisions before we make them, especially regarding how our actions might impact others. In other words, emotions, along with rationalizing and feeling certain, just come over us and we suddenly find ourselves needing to deal with whatever mood they put us in. Thinking before we act, and about how we will impact others, however, is not involuntary. Thinking well doesn't naturally sweep over us, though it can, with practice. Yet, as important as executive function and empathy are for thriving in community, they are not yet autonomic responses to our environments. The neocortex is new technology that still takes effort, energy, and intention to make good use of it.

Even so, what I find most intriguing about the neocortex is that it also combines head and heart, though at a higher level than the limbic system. The limbic system, again, unifies them through emotion and rationalization, two expressions of the same experience. The neocortex unifies them through executive function and empathy. So, from a functionalist perspective, head and heart remain one experience. As I've come to this realization, that we don't really have to make a choice between the two because thinking and feeling are one, and that thinking things through and having empathy for others are one, I've tried to figure out the best way of saying all this without having to give an entire sermon on the subject, and have finally settled upon the term, "being thoughtful."

Being thoughtful means both thinking about things, and being considerate of others. When one sends a card, or brings flowers to someone unwell, we say, "how thoughtful," just as planning ahead is "thoughtful." *Being thoughtful* expresses both the emotional and

intellectual quality of our actions. This is why, I have come to see logic, not only as a method of thinking clearly, but as an expression of love and compassion. Being reasonable is a kindness. In his book on logic, my old philosophy professor, Wallace Roark, says, "The reason behind many bad things that happen in the lives of individuals and society can be expressed in the words of a blundering friend of mine, 'I just didn't think about *that*.' We have a moral and social, as well as prudential, obligation to think about *that*."¹⁰ For Dr. Roark, thinking well is part of what it means to be ethical and socially responsible. It's part of what it means to be a caring person. Thinking well means being considerate, compassionate, thoughtful. Erich Fromm says something similar, that "Thinking is a form of productive love,"¹¹ and its function "is to know, to understand, to grasp, to relate oneself to things by comprehending them."¹² Fromm believed knowledge is fundamental to love, that it underlies all types of love, and knowledge involves thinking well, it means being reasonable, being thoughtful. "Reason," Fromm says, "...penetrates through the surface of things to discover their essence, their hidden relationships, and deeper meanings, their 'reason.'"¹³

When I consider all the troubles in our world today, masses of people supporting populist authoritarians, pretending we're not in an environmental crisis, a continuation of age old racist systems and the emergence of new white supremacists groups, the silencing of dialogue through things like Fox News and Political Correctness, the relentless will of some to take healthcare away from millions, horrific acts of terrorism against innocent people, and so much more, the word that now comes to mind is, "thoughtlessness." Those who engage the world in these tragic ways, are thoughtless. To counter and to help heal our world, we must bring along both our hearts and our heads by being thoughtful. For being thoughtful is a way for us to love one another, and, in the end, may be the only way.

¹⁰ Roark, Wallace, *Think Like an Octopus: The Key to Becoming a Good Thinker*, Wasteland Press, Shelbyville, KY, 2010, p. 21.

¹¹ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*, Henry Holt & Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ *Ibid.* 102f.