

The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature

Ian Kluge

1: Introduction

Everyone has a theory of human nature. Everyone has to anticipate the behavior of others, and that means we all need theories about what makes people tick. A tacit theory of human nature – that behavior is caused by thoughts and feelings – is embedded in the way we think about people . . . Rival theories of human nature are entwined in different ways of life and different political systems, and have been the source of much conflict over the course of history . . . For millennia, the major theories of human nature have come from religion . . . every society must operate with a theory of human nature¹

With these words, Steven Pinker introduces *The Blank Slate* in which he explores “the modern denial of human nature” by various philosophers beginning with John Locke to the postmodernists of the present. A philosophy of human nature – whether held consciously or unconsciously in our minds or whether explicitly or implicitly present in a text – is an image of what human are like both in actuality and potentiality. Every personal self-image, every religious, legal, political, social and cultural system contains beliefs about what humans are, could and should be like, are like,’, what is ‘good’ for them and what are the most effective ways of dealing with them. Such considerations include questions like ‘Are they predisposed to aggression or even violence?’ ‘Are they intrinsically spiritual?’ ‘Are they naturally lazy or ambitious, materialistic, conformist or rebellious?’ ‘Which, if any, takes precedence – nature or nurture.’ Our personal and collective answers to questions like these shape the kind of governments and laws we have, the forms of spirituality we develop, as well as child-rearing to name only a few.

The terms of this on-going debate about the existence of the innate elements of human nature was most famously formulated by John Locke; he maintained that the human mind had no innate ideas, attributes, capacities or potentials.² This was later described as “the blank slate.” Everything in the mind is added after birth by experience and the education provided by others. The main consequence of the blank slate is the belief that we can shape human beings any way we like, i.e. that human nature is infinitely malleable without any inherent limits of any kind. The environment in which people are raised is the sole determinant of the ‘human nature’ people exhibit. Therefore, to perfect human nature we need only perfect their social environment.³ This

¹ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* p. 1.

² John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, chapter 1, section 2. Locke actually uses the term “white paper.” This idea was already present in Aristotle (*De Anima*, 429b29–430a1), Stoic philosophy and in Ibn Sina in the eleventh century CE.

³ In Soviet Russia, this led to Lysenkoism, the belief that rejected genetics and natural selection and claimed a plant like rye could be transformed into wheat if raised in the proper environment and treated appropriately. In short, the nature of rye was determined by its environment and not by genetics, i.e. was a forerunner of today’s denial of human nature. ``Lysenkoism dominated Soviet and Chinese agriculture until the later 1950’s.

was precisely the point of B F Skinner and his “Skinner boxes” in which to raise infant by controlling all environmental input.

These beliefs are not inconsequential for all people. We need look no further than the current controversies and court battles about sex and gender identity. The denial of any intrinsic or given elements in human nature, is the basis of the rejection of the concept of an inherent male and female nature and the view that all sex-gender identities are pure social constructs which can be changed- and interchanged – as we choose. Sex/gender identity is strictly a matter of educating the very young. Such beliefs have unleashed intense social and legal clashes vis-à-vis authorized use of public pools, gym and bathrooms in schools.

Even the quickest glance at 20th Century history reveals the real-life importance of philosophies of human nature. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an attempt to create a new society by developing a “new soviet man”⁴ based on the principle the humans were entirely shaped by their natural and social environment. Later, in 1941, this new materialist and radical environmentalist philosophy of human nature found itself at war with the National Socialism’s darwinistic theory of the survival of the fittest.⁵ During the war, the liberal-capitalist philosophy of man chiefly represented by the United States clashed with and helped defeat National Socialism but then found itself in a fifty year ‘cold war’ with Soviet Russia. With the defeat of Communism in 1989, the liberal-capitalist theory of human nature emerged victorious but this is now being challenged by a different theory of human nature promulgated by politicized radical Islam. The importance of philosophies of human nature could not be shown more clearly than in our daily newspapers.

Two globally influential modern philosophers who have developed Locke’s blank slate theory are atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre and postmodernist Michele Foucault. Sartre’s view as presented in *Being and Nothingness* and “*Existentialism Is a Humanism*.” In the former he writes, “As we have seen, for human reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept.”⁶ There is no ‘pre-made’ human nature or any other nature, there are only individuals making themselves. In the latter, Sartre states,

For if, indeed, existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one’s actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, *man is freedom* . . . We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is *condemned to be free*.⁷

⁴ The new soviet man was an ideal image of strong, selfless muscular but educated and thoughtful worker dedicated to spreading the Communist revolution. The new soviet woman balanced the roles of wife, mother and worker. This ideal originated in Marx and Engel’s *The German Ideology*, p. 53.

⁵ Richard Weikart, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics and Racism in Hitler’s Germany*.

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 518 – 519.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, “*Existentialism is a Humanism*,” in Walter Kaufmann, editor, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, p. 295; emphasis added.

Michele Foucault, one of the premier postmodernists, concurs: “suspicious of the notion of liberation”⁸ because “it runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature”⁹ which somehow exists ‘apart’ from us and which we can rediscover and regain. He rejects the existence of any such essence or nature that exists “behind things [there is] not a timeless essential secret but the secret that they have no essence.”¹⁰ Sartre, Foucault and their followers assert that the concept of human nature is intrinsically tyrannical and dangerous because it marginalizes and oppresses whoever does not fit into its scheme.

In sharp contrast to the denial of human nature, the Bahá’í Revelation – along with other religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism as well as major philosophers from virtually all traditions – has a philosophy of human nature and presents it in a clear, logically coherent and carefully developed manner.

As we shall see in more detail below, the Bahá’í Writings reject the belief that human beings have no nature or essence and are blank slates on which we can inscribe anything we want. Moreover, on this issue the Writings have, at least in principle, the support of a growing number of scientists. The most obvious evidence for a universal human nature is found in genetics where the physical aspects of human nature are plainly visible. The same can be said of medicine, physiology, neuroscience and pharmacy. While human nature is not limited to our physical existence, the body helps shape human nature vis-à-vis its potentials and limitations. Medical studies around the world are uniform for the obvious reason we all share the same kind of body and brain.

Other sciences supply additional support for the universality of human nature. Anthropologist Donald E Brown’s book *Human Universals* has become the central text in the growing interest in universal human nature. The work of cognitive scientist and philosopher Steven Pinker and linguist Noam Chomsky’s universal grammar¹¹ bring additional evidence for the existence of a universal nature. On the basis of Brown’s work, Pinker lists over two hundred attributes shared by all cultures. Furthermore, evolutionary psychologists like E.O. Wilson,¹² Leda Cosmides¹³ and Robert Wright¹⁴ maintain that the basic attributes of human nature were developed over several million years of evolution and are passed on from generation to generation. A significant part of our challenge today is how to adapt and train attributes and tendencies that developed over two or three million years for the modern world.

⁸ Michel Foucault, “*The Ethics of Concern for the Self*” in *The Essential Foucault*, p.76.

⁹ Michel Foucault, “*The Ethics of Concern for the Self*” in *The Essential Foucault*, p.76.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, “*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*” in *The Essential Foucault*, p.353.

¹¹ Dana Dovey, “*Noam Chomsky’s Theory of Universal Grammar is Right; It’s Hardwired into Our Brains*,” in *Medical Daily*, Dec. 7, 2015; <http://www.medicaldaily.com/noam-chomskys-theory-universal-grammar-right-its-hardwired-our-brains-364236>

¹² E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*.

¹³ Jerome H Barkow and Leda Cosmides, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*.

¹⁴ Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are, the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*.

2: A Necessary Philosophical Digression

Because the Bahá'í Writings consistently use a specific 'toolbox'¹⁵ of philosophical terms and concepts to explain the teachings in general and human nature in particular, it is advantageous to familiarize ourselves with them now rather than in the middle of explaining other matters. Almost all of these terms and concepts as well as the way they are used in the Writings were originally developed by Aristotle in *The Physics*, *De Anima* and *The Metaphysics*.¹⁶ In our view, the fact that Aristotle's terminology, concepts and occasionally, arguments are so widely employed in the Writings suggests their usefulness and validity in interpreting the Writings as well as for additional developments in Bahá'í philosophic thought. Otherwise, why introduce them into the Texts and, thereby, necessitate studying them by Baha'is around the world?¹⁷ Of course, this does not imprison Bahá'í thinking in the third century BCE because these concepts have been developed significantly since Aristotle's time and will doubtlessly advance farther with the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.¹⁸

The most important of these terms and concepts are essence, substance, attribute and potential and teleology. The essence of a thing is its identity, i.e. that which makes a thing the kind of thing it is and differentiates it from other kinds of things. Airplanes have a different essence than horseshoe crabs and human beings have different essences than ducks or snapdragons. According to the Writings, all things have an essence: "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the *essence of all created things*, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."¹⁹ Even God has an essence,²⁰ as does humankind.²¹ We may conclude, therefore, that essences are ontologically real; they exist as created by God and are independent of human perception in their "first natures." This means that they are not human constructs as held by both past and present postmodernist philosophy.

There are two kinds of essences. The first, which is created by God alone and, therefore, is perfect, may be called the 'species essence.' Hegel's convenient term for this is "first nature." It refers to the kind of being we are in contrast to other kinds of being such as lapis lazuli, strawberries or croquet sets. `Abdu'l-Bahá's term for our God-given essence is "natural

¹⁵ Ian Kluge, "Baha'u'llah's Toolbox," <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

¹⁶ Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 4, 2003. Also at <http://www.bahaiphilosophy.com> . See also "Bahá'u'lláh's Toolbox" at <http://www.bahaiphilosophy.com>

¹⁷ It may be argued that these terms and concepts came into the Writings by way of Islamic philosophers and not Aristotle. However, this argument overlooks the fact of the enormous influence Aristotle – see Avicenna and Averroes among others – had on Muslim philosophy. Moreover, in the Writings, these terms, concepts and even arguments are used exactly as Aristotle uses them, so the transmission of his concepts in Persian was accurate.

¹⁸ See for example, *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics* edited by Tuomas E Tahko, Cambridge University Press, 2012 or *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives in Metaphysics*, edited by Novotny and Novak, Routledge, 2014. William Hatcher, one of the premier Bahá'í philosophers, saw platonic elements in the Writings.

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan* 29, 30, italics added; see also *SAQ*, 195. For a complete list of essences see Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings, section 5.6.

²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCIII, p.187; The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 326.

²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXIII, p. 164..

capacity”²² or, in the case of individuals, “innate character.”²³ The second kind of essence – called “second nature” by Hegel – is `Abdu'l-Bahá’s “acquired capacity”²⁴ which is the nature or character we create/acquire for ourselves by our freely willed choices and actions. As we shall see, this distinction is implicit in the Writings as exemplified by such statements as “Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves. Will ye not comprehend?”²⁵ Thus, the questions ‘What kind of being am I?’ or ‘What is my identity?’ can be answered from two perspectives. Our first nature or “natural capacity” is the God-given human identity with all its attributes, potentials and limitations. It is perfect.²⁶ However, questions about our identity and human nature can also be answered by way of our “acquired capacity” which we create from our choices at both the individual and collective levels. This is where “man makes himself”²⁷ by actualizing the potentials we have received from God. Acquired nature is the source of both our moral achievements as well as our ills.

The attributes of an essence are also of two kinds. Essential attributes are necessary for a thing to be what it is. For example, being human requires a “rational soul.”²⁸ Having red hair or green eyes is “accidental”²⁹ i.e. not necessary to being human; we can be human without either but we cannot be human without a rational soul. As we shall see below, `Abdu'l-Bahá’s argument for human immortality depends on this distinction between the two kinds of attributes. The Writings tell us that even our personality - at least our God-given personality – is an essential attribute of our first nature:

*The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.*³⁰

Like the other aspects of our first nature, what we may call the first personality is God-given and perfect, although, of course, it is we who decide how to actualize it in the phenomenal world. We can choose to maximize its positive potentials or we can distort and pervert it and make it a cause of misfortune. It is important to note that no one is ‘pre-determined’ to fail with a deficient first personality from God: “Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves?”³¹

The word ‘substance’ has two possible uses. The Writings sometimes use the word to refer to matter or wealth but philosophically they employ it to refer to anything that exists

²² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214.

²³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

²⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214.

²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXVII, p. 149.

²⁶ Some Baha'is, myself among them, interpret this “first nature” as being the angels who offer us guidance – if we will let them. However, this is a personal not Baha'i view.

²⁷ V Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, a classic of modern anthropology.

²⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

²⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

³⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240; emphasis added.

³¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXVII, p. 149.

independently of human perception. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá' states that the rational soul is a substance.³² He does not mean that the soul is material but rather in the Aristotelian sense of existing independently of human perception. Moreover, a substance – such as the rational soul – can have attributes whereas no attribute can have other attributes. The height of a horse is just the height of a horse; nothing else can be added to it. This Aristotelian definition of 'substance' is seen in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the spiritual aspect of the Manifestations "is born of the substance of God Himself."³³ Obviously God is not a material being and exists independently of human perception.

The term 'potential' is related to essence, substance and attribute. A potential is what a thing may become or be transformed into, as, for example a pupae will eventually become a butterfly, a seed into an oak tree,³⁴ or a blank piece of paper into a paper crane. Reflection makes it obvious that the essence of something includes its potentials for change or development. Every kind of being has its own unique potentials. Thus, human nature is a unique combination of potentials that explain why children do not grow up to become lobsters. The potentials for such change is not there. We should not think of potentials as physical 'things' like raisins embedded in a bun. These potentials or "virtues" are "intellectual realities" that have "no outward form and no place and [are] not perceptible to the senses"³⁵ but we know they must exist because otherwise the effects they create would come from nothing. However, the Writings explicitly assert that "nothingness" cannot cause any effects such as initiating change.³⁶ Elsewhere `Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that "All these virtues [of the tree] were *hidden* and potential in the seed."³⁷ The leaves and branches are "in the seed, potentially, though not apparently."³⁸ In short, there is more than meets the eye – or empirical analysis. This is even demonstrable scientifically. No amount of physical analysis of hydrogen and oxygen atoms can detect their capacity to form water or predict the attributes of water itself such as expansion when frozen. These potentials were hidden as were the potentials to make a telephone and phonograph which "were *latent and potential* in the world of nature."³⁹ The same is true of the earth as a whole: "the terrestrial globe from the beginning was created with all its elements, substances, minerals, atoms and organisms; but these only appeared by degrees."⁴⁰ The same claim is made about human pre-borns.⁴¹

The existence of potentials means that in effect, human nature exists in a dynamic tension between what we are and what we could or should be, i.e. between what we presently are and what we are not. This dialectical process in human nature i.e. the struggle between the need to change as individuals and collectives and the desire to stay the same, to rest comfortably, i.e. the

³² `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

³³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVI, p. 66.

³⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 198.

³⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 83.

³⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.

³⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 90.

³⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.

³⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 310.

⁴⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.

⁴¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.

desire for stasis⁴² constitutes human nature. The strength of desire to stay the same is readily seen in the frequency and the vigor with which Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to overcome ancestral imitations and to advance the spiritual evolution of humankind. Indeed, it seems that the greatest changes can only be made through powerful revolutionary changes such as those released by the Manifestations: “Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System -- the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”⁴³ The purpose of this revolutionary revelation is to free humanity from the past and to open the way to the actualization of new personal and collective potentials.

3: Human Nature: Spiritual, Universal, Immutable

There are, in our view, three general, ‘umbrella’ attributes to keep in mind if we want to understand human nature as presented by the Bahá'í Writings. `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts, “Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. This spiritual longing and perception belongs to all men alike.”⁴⁴ This indicates, if nothing else, that “spiritual longing[s]” are an integral part of human nature and must be satisfied in one way or another if we are to live authentically. If this longing is frustrated for too long, ersatz or substitute ‘spirituality’ will take its place, e.g. money, power, sex, or even superheroes or occult fascination. `Abdu'l-Bahá also informs us that

This spiritual nature, which came into existence through the bounty of the Divine Reality, is the union of all perfections and appears through the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is the divine perfections; it is light, spirituality, guidance, exaltation, high aspiration, justice, love, grace, kindness to all, philanthropy, the essence of life.⁴⁵

Spirit is the source of our “perfections” with which to overcome the imperfections of our physical nature which is subject to “anger, jealousy, dispute, covetousness, avarice, ignorance, prejudice, hatred, pride and tyranny.”⁴⁶ According to `Abdu'l-Bahá, our task and destiny is to perfect our human existence by strengthening and developing the spiritual aspects of our nature. This means that **human nature is characterized by a universal duty and destiny – a struggle to control our unruly animal nature and make it work for the good of the soul and our spiritual development.** In short, human nature has obligations that transcend the natural world. Both as individuals and collectives we succeed in varying degrees in this process and sometimes slip into complete oblivion of our spiritual essence.

Clearly, the spiritual essence of human nature brings in its train a host of profound consequences for the conduct of individual lives and the management of society. For example, it **enlarges our perspective on what is meant by ‘doing good’** or ‘reducing harm’ because we must not only consider the good of the body but also the good of the soul.⁴⁷ It will deeply affect

⁴² Interestingly enough, Freud introduced a similar desire for stasis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) He called it the Thanatos principle.

⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXX, p. 136.

⁴⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.

⁴⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119.

⁴⁷ It is interesting to reflect on the meaning of “harm reduction” in light of our spiritual nature.

education policy in such areas as curriculum because questions of spiritual education cannot be circumvented or ignored outright. Recognising the primacy of the spirit in our constitution will also have effects on our personal and collective scale of values which in turn affects decisions at every level and at every turn. Most obviously this would affect the operations of a consumer-driven economy or, at least, the kind of products in demand, especially if large numbers of people were to believe “[t]he rewards of this life are the virtues and perfections which adorn the reality of man”⁴⁸ and not the acquisition of ‘things’ or material wealth. These rewards are attainable both in the earthly life and in the next.

The second overarching umbrella attribute is that despite seemingly infinite individual and cultural diversity, there is essentially only one human nature, i.e. the “natural capacity” or “first nature” as made by God. We have already noted this above, but there is more to be said. Speaking metaphorically – but delivering the same message – the Writings teach “the oneness of mankind: that all men are the sheep of God, and God is their loving Shepherd, caring most tenderly for all without favouring one or another.”⁴⁹ Since all humans are God’s equally loved sheep, they all share one nature. In more philosophical language, `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

When we observe the human world, we find various *collective expressions of unity* therein. For instance, man is distinguished from the animal by his degree, or kingdom. *This comprehensive distinction includes all the posterity of Adam and constitutes one great household or human family, which may be considered the fundamental or physical unity of mankind.*⁵⁰

Elsewhere he states,

The first condition of perception in the world of nature is the perception of the rational soul. In this perception and in this power *all men are sharers, whether they be neglectful or vigilant, believers or deniers.*⁵¹

The oneness and universality of humanity’s first nature are essential to the Bahá’í philosophy of human nature for at least three reasons. First, it lays the foundation for the eventual unification of mankind in a federal global commonwealth in which “All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people.”⁵² Without such a fundamental oneness and universality, it is difficult to envision humankind achieving such unity. Second, the oneness and universality of human nature negates the ontological basis for racism insofar as there are no essential distinctions to differentiate ethnic groups. Racial differences are accidental not essential attributes. Indeed, racism is reduced to a logical category mistake, i.e. confusing essential and accidental attributes. This does not make it any less evil but reveals the unsophisticated thinking that underlies it. Third, the oneness and universality of

⁴⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 223.

⁴⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 248.

⁵⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 190; emphasis added.

⁵¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217; emphasis added.

⁵² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 65. Whether or not this “common faith” will be the Bahá’í Faith or a successor Manifestation and faith remains is a matter of some debate. My personal belief is that it refers specifically to the Bahá’í Faith.

human nature provides an objective foundation for universal code of ethics, i.e. it puts ethics on an objective rather than on a personally and culturally subjective basis and thereby undermines the basis of ethical and cultural relativism. The ethical principles implicitly embedded in our divinely created first nature are universal and binding on all, while the ethical ideas of our second nature are only valid – from a Bahá’í perspective – insofar as they harmonize with our divinely created first nature.

Another essential aspect of human nature is that according to the Bahá’í Writings, human nature does not change over time. There may be changes in the potentials of human nature that are manifested but the first nature or “natural capacities” from which is the source of these potentials does not change. `Abdu'l-Bahá affirms this, saying, “For the proof of the originality of the human species, and of the *permanency of the nature of man*, is clear and evident.”⁵³ This position is maintained even in regards to human evolution:

This anatomical evolution or progression does not alter or affect the statement that the *development of man was always human in type* and biological in progression. For the human embryo when examined microscopically is at first a mere germ or worm. Gradually as it develops it shows certain divisions; rudiments of hands and feet appear. . . . *But at all times . . . it was human in potentiality . . .* Throughout this progression there has been a transference of type, a *conservation of species* or kind. Realizing this we may acknowledge the fact that at one time man was an inmate of the sea, at another period an invertebrate, then a vertebrate and finally a human being standing erect.⁵⁴

Appearances to the contrary, `Abdu'l-Bahá’s declaration does not conflict with contemporary evolutionary science. The Writings simply assert that (1) humans went through stages of outward developments that physically resemble the development of other species, (2) despite outward resemblances of form, the early humans already possessed all the innate potentials i.e. “natural capacity” needed to evolve the human race as it currently exists. Nor is this a mere dogmatic assertion. The unique nature and appearance of mankind today makes it obvious that such a difference of potentials must have existed in the past – unless we wish to claim that our characteristics appeared from nothing. They may have been ‘lurking’ under an animal appearance but there were there nonetheless. Even claiming that mutations – random or not – cause change does not negate the fact that for a mutation to have a particular effect, the potential to achieve that effect must have already been present prior to the mutation itself. That is why mutations in horse shoe crabs have no potential to lead to horses. As we can see, by itself the mutation ‘solution’ simply leads to an infinite regress which in science signals an error in thinking.

Elsewhere, Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the stability of human nature or essence by saying, Never, through training and cultivation, will the colocynth and the bitter tree change into the Tree of Blessedness. That is to say, *education cannot alter the inner essence of a*

⁵³ `Abdu'l-Bahá’, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184; emphasis added.

⁵⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 358; emphasis added.

man, but it doth exert tremendous influence, and with this power it can bring forth from the individual whatever perfections and capacities are deposited within him.⁵⁵

This stable essence can be asserted of both individuals and collectives.

But even when in the womb of the mother and in this strange form, entirely different from his present form and figure, he is the embryo of the superior species, and not of the animal; *his species and essence undergo no change.*⁵⁶

The immutability of the human essence is also demonstrated in the declaration that

The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.⁵⁷

In other words, our personal essences or *haecceitas* is also created by God. Although in-itself the personal essence cannot change, we can choose to actualize it in our second nature. How we adapt it by our persona situation and choices depends on us. Finally, the stability of human nature is supported by Shoghi Effendi's statement that the successive Manifestations "restate the "eternal verities"⁵⁸ over the course of human history. If the "eternal verities" do not change i.e. are "restat[ed]" then it is obvious that human nature has remained constant throughout time. If human nature changed, then the "eternal verities" would no longer be relevant.

4: Humanity's Place in Creation

In order to understand human nature, it is necessary to consider its origins, place and role in the cosmic order. The existence of teachings on these issues is significant because it denies that humankind is cosmically insignificant and has no role in the evolution of the universe. Nor are we the accidental products of random physical processes.⁵⁹ Instead, the Writings assert that humanity has a necessary and special role to play in the cosmic order and thereby, has an objective basis for its claims to innate value.

Let us begin with the obvious: first human nature was created by God. In other words, human nature is the object of intentional action by a transcendental being Who wished mankind to exist. This means that the existence of human nature is established by the will of God and, therefore, is real and objective, i.e. independent of human perception. Therefore, we cannot regard human nature as infinitely malleable and re-shape it as it suits our ideological preferences without seriously distorting and disturbing both individuals and societies. Entrenched as it is in the will of God and fundamental metaphysics of His creation, the existence and value of human nature is not conditioned by subjective views or preferences; they are simply facts that are either

⁵⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá'*, p. 132.

⁵⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184; emphasis added.

⁵⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240; emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.88

⁵⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.

recognized or not with particular consequences for each choice. For this reason, the Bahá'í theory of human nature cannot easily be reconciled with philosophies such as Marxism, Sartrean existentialism or postmodernism which are based on the complete malleability of human nature. This also puts the Writings at odds with many utopian visions of mankind - either in books or utopian communities – which also implicitly depend on the concept of endless human malleability.

Human nature is created with a special essence – the capacity to reflect all the names of God – which distinguishes us from all other things and gives humankind a special position in the scale of being.⁶⁰ Mankind, i.e. human nature, stands out because the reality of man is the collective reality, the general reality, and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth -- that is to say, for each name, each attribute, each perfection which we affirm of God there exists a sign in man.⁶¹

Our special position vis-à-vis the divine virtues is why the Writings say humanity is made in “the image of God, in the likeness of the Supernal Light.”⁶² According to Abdu'l-Bahá “the image and likeness of God constitute the virtues of God, and man is intended to become the recipient of the effulgences of divine attributes.”⁶³ The latter statement is also significant because it implicitly asserts the teleological nature of man; only God can “intend” for us receive the divine virtues – from which we can infer that human nature is endowed with a purpose, i.e. a goal. Because it is God Who bestows this purpose, it is ‘natural’ or appropriate for us, and, therefore, any deviations from this purpose are ‘unnatural’ or inappropriate. This, in turn, has extensive outcomes both for individuals and societies; both can deviate from our innate purpose and lead themselves astray.⁶⁴

Humanity occupies a special place in the scale of being, a fact which distinguishes humans from animals. Indeed, human nature is the vanguard of the evolutionary process. Such a fundamental difference between human and animal is a difference in kind, i.e. a difference that cannot be reduced to a common factor in the way ice, steam and water can all be reduced to water. There is, for example, no common denominator between animal behavior and such human behaviors as writing operas, public schools, engaging in religious services, creating legal systems with codified laws and a charter of individual rights or the systematic pursuit of scientific knowledge. When we turn our attention to human achievements, it is soon obvious that humans occupy a distinct and superior place in the scale of being. Indeed, our special capacities are “the essential foundation of all the divine religions, the reality itself, common to all.”⁶⁵ Finally, we should note Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that as mankind evolves, “The enveloping clouds shall pass away and the heat of the divine rays will dispel the mist. The reality of man shall develop and

⁶⁰ The scale of being in the Writings goes from the mineral, plant, animal and man – in the phenomenal world.

⁶¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.

⁶² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 140.

⁶³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 403.

⁶⁴ In my view, Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia are examples of entire societies gone mad on the basis of a false philosophy of human nature. Their extremes of brutality defy imagination. In Germany's case it was biologism and a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” view; in the case of Russia, the Marxian the constructivist view of human nature and the doctrine of relentless class warfare.

⁶⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá', *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 403.

come forth as the image of God his creator.”⁶⁶ In other words, the sun-blocking clouds of our second natures will pass and our pristine first nature shall appear, i.e. our two natures will be harmonized instead of being in conflict with each other.

According to the Writings, human nature has not only a unique place in the cosmic hierarchy of being but also a unique function. `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The reflection of the divine perfections appears in the reality of man, so he is the representative of God, the messenger of God. *If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the object of existence is the appearance of the perfections of God.*⁶⁷

Human nature is not only made in the image of God, but is also the capstone or crown of creation without which the universe would be incomplete. It represents the necessary degree of perfection which gives the universe a goal and purpose (note the teleological thinking) just as the fruit “is the reason”⁶⁸ for the existence of the tree. In other words, human nature plays a necessary place in the existence of the universe which is why `Abdu'l-Bahá states, “it cannot be said there was a time when man was not.”⁶⁹

The ontological basis for these claims about human nature is that all existences – including the universe itself – are teleological because without purpose there can be no order and unity. The reason is that everything is in process.⁷⁰ The existence of things is not a once-and-for-ever accomplishment, but rather is an on-going process by which existence, unity and identity must actively be maintained. They must be achieved from moment to moment – and to do that, a purpose is required, something that imposes order, direction and harmonization, that causes the atoms (in a physical thing) and relevant laws to consistently prefer certain outcomes over others. Whenever sunlight falls on a window ledge, the ledge gets warmer – it does not sprout parsley. Purpose gives order, and order is what every particular thing essentially is.

Human nature’s origin, place and role in the cosmic evolution also imposes important limitation on our capacities. One of these, the claims by some mystics to have become ontologically ‘one’ with God, is not supported by the Bahá’í philosophy of human nature. Because mankind is a creation of God, and, therefore dependent on Him, and is different in kind from God and because there is

no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, [] no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute⁷¹

From this it follows that all claims to be ontologically one with God are in error. They are misunderstandings about the intrinsic limits of human nature, viz. we cannot transcend our

⁶⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá’, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 21.

⁶⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196; emphasis added.

⁶⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 197.

⁶⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.

⁷⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.

⁷¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 65.

ontological limits. This principle is so strict that according to the Writings, even God cannot discard His Infinite nature and become finite: “Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men.”⁷² Moreover, “[f]or God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections.”⁷³ In other words, the mystical experience may be experienced as an ontological union but it is not so in reality. Denying this principle would, in effect, undermine the foundations of the Bahá’í scale of nature, epistemology and emanationist metaphysics all of which implicitly assume different classes or kinds of beings.⁷⁴

5: Dualities in Human Nature

As our exploration has shown so far, the Bahá’í concept of human nature is distinguished by four sets of dual aspects: (1) essence and attribute; (2) species essence and individual essence (*haecceitas*); (3) first and second nature; (4) potential and actuality. The first term of each pair subsumes the second. However, these dualities do not undermine the unity of human nature for two reasons. First, they have functional unity; the various aspects work together towards a common goal, namely, the whole human being. Second, these dualities are all aspects of each individual rational soul which, according to the Writings, is a substance.⁷⁵ Attributes do not divide or disunify a substance because they are simply the way a substance or essence appears on the physical plane, i.e. the phenomenal world. These attributes are also the signs by which we may recognise the existence of a substance and gain some knowledge about its nature. Knowledge, as `Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear, comes by way of the attributes that a substance manifests and not by insight into the essence of things.⁷⁶

A physical analogue for this situation is a pencil in a glass of water. The pencil is not really broken or fatter although it appears that way. The attributes of being broken and fatter are how a pencil appears in those circumstances just as a body and brain are how the human spirit manifest or appears on the physical plane. Moreover, just as the brokenness and fatness of the pencil must not be taken at face value but rather understood by the laws of refraction, so the human body must not be misunderstood as ultimately real as if it were the whole of man. We need to understand ourselves in light of the teachings of the Manifestation. Nor does this turn humankind – or the pencil – into an illusion. The brokenness, fatness and physicality are real but they must not be misunderstood as ultimately real in which case they will be illusory. It might also be noted that both the broken pencil effect and the appearance of human attributes occur at

⁷² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.

⁷³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.

⁷⁴ Because God cannot incarnate Himself in the finite, it is logically difficult to interpret references to ‘omnipotence’ to mean able to do anything at all. This brings the Baha’i understanding of ‘omnipotence’ closer to the Thomistic understanding of ‘omnipotence’ as non-self-contradictory action. To confine the infinite into the finite – as in the Incarnation – is self-evidently contradictory and is rejected by the Writings.

⁷⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.

transition points – water and air, and “the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality,”⁷⁷ i.e. the point or border at which the physical and spiritual encounter one another.

The Bahá’í Writings also recognize the duality of higher and lower natures which are respectively identified with our spiritual and material or animal natures.

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature . . . Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, [are] expressions of his higher nature . . . all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature.⁷⁸

This duality is also based on humanity’s ontological position as “the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality,”⁷⁹ i.e. where two different planes of being encounter one another.

From mankind’s various natures, it follows that our lives are constituted by the continuous tension and struggle between our lower animal aspects and our higher spiritual selves. However, while this struggle constitutes human nature as long as we exist in the physical world, some people – called “saints”⁸⁰ – have learned to control their lower animal nature so that it never gets the upper hand. They resemble a tight-rope walker; the danger of a fall, i.e. the tension between lower and higher aspects, is always present but the walker’s skills keep him/her in control. This reminds us that Bahá’u’lláh’s prohibition of asceticism⁸¹ requires that we control our animal nature through moral skills but do not seek to eliminate it.

It is also vital to realize that the struggle between “the animal side and the angelic side”⁸² is not an imperfection in human nature. It is not a Bahá’í ‘counterpart’ of the Christian doctrine of original sin in which the guilt of an intentionally committed crime is transmitted from an ancestor to his and her descendants. Rather, the struggle for supremacy between the higher and lower aspects of our being is an opportunity, a necessary pre-condition for our existence and evolution as ethical beings. This choice requires free will – another essential feature of human nature – so that we can make our ‘second natures’ for ourselves. To guide us to the right choices is precisely the mission of the divine Manifestations.

From a Bahá’í perspective, the right choices are those that harmonize with our divinely created first nature or “natural capacities” i.e. choices based on the recognition that “Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. This spiritual longing and perception belongs to all men alike.”⁸³ Making right choices explicitly or implicitly

⁷⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

⁷⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.

⁷⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

⁸⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 61.

⁸¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 71.

⁸² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

⁸³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73.

recognizes that “human nature is teleological; that is, there are certain qualities intended by God for “human nature”, and qualities which do not accord with these are described as ‘unnatural’.”⁸⁴ The guidance given by the Manifestations helps us to meet these two standards which, it is important to note, are objective, i.e. do not depend on human perception to be real. Unlike Sartre’s atheist existentialism which claims that all choices are ‘right’ and ‘natural’ as long as we live in “good faith”, the Bahá’í Writings teach that ultimately God, not humanity determines moral standards. Ethics are not subjective and cannot be ‘made up’ as we go along.

5.1: Body-Mind Dualism

The last duality comprising human nature may be studied under the rubric of ‘body and soul’ or as some call it, mind/body dualism. In its modern form, the problem was revived by Descartes (1650 CE), who claimed that human nature is comprised of two substances, extended and unconscious matter and non-extended and conscious spirit, soul or mind.⁸⁵ The problem of Cartesian dualism is to explain how these ontologically distinct and incompatible substances can interact as constituents of a unified human organism which is itself a substance. There is a long history of proposed solutions but these tend to fall into two groups. The first group – such as the occasionalists⁸⁶ – maintains the dualism and tries to bridge or coordinate the two parts. The second group, known as identity theorists, rejects dualism. They identify mind with brain while denying the existence of soul and spirit. Both types of solutions have serious difficulties some of which will be considered below.

In our view, the Bahá’í Writings present a simple and elegant solution to the dualism problem: the problem is chimerical, an illusion caused by Descartes’ faulty analysis in identifying both the non-extended spirit and the extended body as distinct, separate and wholly incompatible substances. The dualism problem is an artefact of this confused analysis. The question about how the two parts can interact is perfectly logical – if one accepts Descartes’ mistaken analysis.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá points out Descartes’ error while presenting his argument for the immortality of the soul.

Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident -- that is to say, the body -- be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains.⁸⁷

The solution to the Cartesian dilemma is ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s identification of the spirit or soul as the “substance” and the body as “accidental.” Being “accidental” makes the body into an attribute of the spirit substance; indeed, it is an “accidental” attribute, i.e. one that is not even essential to the existence of the substance. Thus spirit and body are not necessarily eternally connected and spirit

⁸⁴ The Universal House of Justice, 1993 Jun 05, *Homosexuality*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ In the Bahai view, mind is a power or aspect of spirit.

⁸⁶ Occasionalism asserts that mind and body are connected by God’s on-going intervention.

⁸⁷ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

will eventually leave the body behind. This, as we shall see below, does not mean the body is not necessary for existence on the physical plane.

At this point a vital question arises: What are attributes? As we have already indicated above, attributes are the way essences or substances manifest themselves on the material plane where we can perceive them. Attributes are how substances make themselves known in “the plane of the visible.”⁸⁸ In other words, attributes or qualities are signs that a certain substance exists.⁸⁹

The human spirit makes itself known on the physical or “visible” plane by means of its attributes, i.e. the body and, of course, the brain. Consequently, there is no ‘connection’ or interaction problem between mind and body/brain any more than there is an ‘interaction problem between a ripe tomato and its redness. ‘Redness’ is how a ripe tomato exists in the material world. The concept of interaction does not apply to the relationship between a substance and its attributes, or as John Hatcher says in regards to things and their activities, “there is no interface problem between things and their activities.”⁹⁰

Substance or essences on the other hand are “intellectual realities,” a term which covers a wide range of entities for ‘Abdu'l-Bahá. Among them he lists

the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing; on the contrary, they are intellectual realities. So love is a mental reality and not sensible; for this reality the ear does not hear . . . Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an intellectual reality . . . *nature, also, in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality.*⁹¹

He also states, “the intellectual realities do not enter and descend”⁹² (which is why the soul does not leave the body when we die), and that they “have no outward existence.”⁹³ Other “intellectual realities” are “the mind, the spirit, the qualities, the characters, the love and sorrow of man.”⁹⁴

Of particular interest is ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s identification of the nature or the physical universe – including such forces as electromagnetism – as an “intellectual reality.” It is worth repeating that “*nature, also, in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality.*”⁹⁵ This means that everything in nature is the expression of an “intellectual reality” in the material plane. He illustrates this by pointing out that there are innumerable things on the “plane of the invisible” and that “[t]hrough an ideal inner

⁸⁸ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 359.

⁸⁹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 91.

⁹⁰ John Hatcher, *Close Connections: The Bridge Between Spiritual and Physical Reality*, p. 174.

⁹¹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 83; emphasis added.

⁹² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.6

⁹³ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 186.

⁹⁴ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 186.

⁹⁵ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 83.

power man brings these realities forth from the invisible plane to the visible.”⁹⁶ Consequently, we may infer that the human body is a manifestation on the physical plane of the “intellectual reality” of humankind, or, as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá indicates. A spacio-temporal attribute of an “intellectual reality.”

‘Abdu'l-Bahá also explains the relationship between spirit and body by means of an analogy, stating that “the spirit is connected with the body, as this light is with this mirror.”⁹⁷ Let us explore this frequently used analogy. There are two key points in it, the first being that the sun and the mirror, and the spirit and body have an accidental relationship, (as we have seen above). The sun does not ‘need’ the mirror and can exist without it; however, the mirror cannot be a mirror without something to reflect and, therefore, needs the sun. Second, the sun in the mirror is merely a *formal* representation of the sun itself: it has the outward shape and appearance of the sun and it reflects the sun’s brightness but it is not the actual sun. In short, the sun in the mirror is not substantial but rather is accidental. Here, too, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá provides in analogical form what he said in philosophical language before: the body – including the brain – is in an attributional and accidental relationship to the spirit or soul. Consequently, we have the same solution to the so-called mind-body problem. There is no such problem because there is no interaction or communication problem between a substance and its accidents.

Some may still ask the question, ‘Where does our thinking take place – in the brain or in the mind? The answer depends on what type of ‘thinking’ we mean? There is little doubt that algorithmical thinking, i.e. thinking based on following learnable procedures, formulas, literal ‘computational’ thinking take place in the brain where they and all simple algorithmic brain functions can be studied. However, this cannot be the case for higher level thinking such as the metaphorical thinking; comprehension of meaning; the formation of intentions; or the existence of qualia and subjective experiences. Of course, an fMRI machine can record the electrical brain correlations of these higher level thoughts – but, as we shall see below, insurmountable problems arise.

Let us first examine the “zombie problems” or the complex of problems regarding subjective experience. Simply put, why should the brain produce subjective experiences of physical facts such as the blueness of the sky or the spiritually exhilarating effect of “divine music.”⁹⁸ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is speaking of the qualia, the whole of our subjectively experienced ‘life-world.’ No amount of physical analysis can show how and why physical vibration of air can or should produce such effects on our subjective experience or ‘life-world.’ Indeed, from a strictly scientific perspective, there is no need for qualia, subjective experience at all. A (philosophical) zombie could easily distinguish between the blue sky and a red fire without ‘feeling’ i.e. subjectively experiencing anything. Yet qualia are incredibly important to people – in fact, much of human life is driven by the quest for certain qualia or subjective experiences.

Another problem concerns intentions. Without subjective experience, how can we form intentions? Intentions require a concept of the future and a will to do something. Of course, a

⁹⁶ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 70.

⁹⁷ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

⁹⁸ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West*, 8; also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 52.

machine can have a built in timer to do X under certain circumstances but this is nothing like what subjective experience, i.e. the formation of intention and the *willingness* to take action. A zombie may take action but not willingly because s/he has no independent will.

We shall take one more example. Whether it is a printed document or on a computer screen, a text is a combination of inherently meaningless letters or symbols. The meaning of the text cannot be detected by any amount of physical analysis. Thus the question arises, ‘How can we know the meaning of a text such as “Love you forever” or ‘Hate you from the bottom of my heart!’ If we try to use a physical device – such as the brain – we can only work with physical marks in which the message is written which in themselves have no meaning at all. Repeating this process with another ‘machine’ which can only read the literal marks, merely initiates an infinite regress. An infinite logical regress, of course, is a sure sign of logical failure. Therefore, if meaning cannot be comprehended by physical analysis, it follows that the comprehension of meaning requires a non-physical process or entity because otherwise we are locked in an infinite regress of physical processes. At some point or another a non-physical intervenor, i.e. soul, spirit, mind, must be involved in the comprehension of meaning. No physical intervenor can meet the requirements of understanding all but the simplest literal messages.

Moreover, a machine or measuring device cannot be used to study subjective experience because a machine is always, by definition, an external intruder. Subjective experience can only be studied by its external correlations just as an essence can only be studied by its attributes.

The conclusion of the foregoing is clear: if the higher mental functions – what `Abdu'l-Bahá's “intellectual realities” – cannot, even in principle, be explained by physical brain processes, then there must be a non-physical plane on which they operate. The Writings refer to this – in various contexts – as “the invisible realm.”⁹⁹

This level is the spirit or substance which affects its bodily attribute, i.e. the brain. What we observe happening in the brain are simply the actions of the spirit-substance manifesting on the physical plane.

6: The Rational Human Nature

According to the Bahá'í Writings, human nature is fundamentally rational. However, what this means will have to be explored more carefully. Let us begin with `Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that

[t]he human spirit which *distinguishes man from the animal* is the rational soul, and these two names--*the human spirit and the rational soul*--designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, Volume 2, p. 444.

¹⁰⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

Since the rational soul distinguishes human nature from other kinds of beings, it follows logically that without a rational soul, we would not be human. In other words, rationality is an essential attribute that cannot be separated from human nature because it endows human nature with its unique capacities to know “the realities of things.” Of course, various individuals and cultures may develop humanity’s intrinsic rationality to different degrees or may even misuse it but such ‘accidentals’ do not negate the universal possession of the rational soul by all human beings:

The first condition of perception in the world of nature is the perception of the rational soul. In this perception and in this power *all men are sharers, whether they be neglectful or vigilant, believers or deniers.*¹⁰¹

In short, all persons and collectives make use of their rational powers though not all will use them carefully and skillfully and others will even deny the existence of the rational soul and its powers. We shall explore the latter phenomenon below. Given `Abdu'l-Bahá’s teaching that human nature has never changed and will never change, it is clear that humans have always been and will always be rational souls.

Before proceeding to examine the character of ‘reason’ in human nature, we must consider an important caveat about the powers of reason:

But the human spirit, *unless assisted by the spirit of faith*, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. It is like a mirror which, although clear, polished and brilliant, is still in need of light. Until a ray of the sun reflects upon it, it cannot discover the heavenly secrets.¹⁰²

The powers of reason in human nature are necessary but they are not sufficient to acquire supernatural or “heavenly” knowledge and truths. Only with the help of “the spirit of faith” and the guidance of the Manifestations can reason attain such knowledge. Consequently, human nature has the capacity to reason about “heavenly realities” but only by following the guidance of the “spirit of faith” and the Manifestations.

Let us now examine more closely what the Writings say about reason.¹⁰³ In the first place, reason is identified with the principle of non-contradiction which is the basis of every-day logic and is used pervasively and consistently throughout the Bahá’í Writings. The basis of this everyday reasoning is the principle of non-contradiction according to which a statement and its opposite cannot both be true in the same sense at the same time and under the same circumstances. All living things use this logic, even though some humans deny doing so. For example, Nagarjuna and Hegel – who developed alternative logical systems – still obey classical logic in their practical daily lives. They know that either they have eaten lunch or have not eaten lunch but not both in the same sense at the same time and under the same circumstances. A baby, or animal, knows it has been fed or not been fed but not both in the same sense etc. Our stone

¹⁰¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217; emphasis added.

¹⁰² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

¹⁰³ See Ian Kluge, “Reason and the Baha’i Writings” in *Lights of Irfan* Volume 14, 2013, for a detailed discussion of reason and the Writings.

age ancestors knew that either they were bringing home a kill or not, but not both. The Bahá'í Writings make considerable use of every-day logic in presenting arguments. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá dismisses the traditional Christian account of the Trinity as “unreasonable and evidently wrong”¹⁰⁴ because of its self-contradictory nature. If it were true,

[t]he foundations of the Religion of God would rest upon *an illogical proposition which the mind could never conceive, and how can the mind be forced to believe a thing which it cannot conceive? A thing cannot be grasped by the intelligence except when it is clothed in an intelligible form; otherwise, it is but an effort of the imagination.*¹⁰⁵

If the Trinity were accepted religion would be based on “an illogical proposition,” i.e. one that makes a self-contradictory assertion, i.e. that one can be three in the same sense etc., that divine unity cannot be divided into three. God’s unity “admits of no division; for division and multiplicity are properties of creatures which are contingent existences, and not accidents which happen to the self-existent.”¹⁰⁶ Another example of classical logic is ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s argument for the immortality of the human soul is that that a thing cannot be a substance and an attribute at the same time.

What the foregoing shows is that practical logical reasoning is an inherent part of human nature. At the basic level, it is grasped instinctively – fed or not fed – but at more advanced, abstract levels the formulation of its rules requires conscious learning. Because such practical logical reasoning is intrinsic to human nature it is immutable and universal and, thereby, contributes to the unification of mankind because the principle of reasoning, i.e. non-contradiction is shared by all. It is something we can all work with.

The inherent rationality of human nature in the Bahá'í teachings is not confined to the intellect but also includes the heart and what we may call ‘other ways of knowing.’ According to `Abdu'l-Bahá, reason, religious teachings, the heart and faith are inter-dependent:

If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; *the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible.* How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? Is this possible? *Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is in harmony with it.*¹⁰⁷

In a similar vein, he states, “among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that religion must be in conformity with science and reason, so that it may *influence the hearts of men.*”¹⁰⁸ Precisely because “reason is the first faculty of man” i.e. the prime distinguishing attribute of the human soul or “rational soul,” the heart also requires its beliefs or faith to be reasonable. However, this should not mislead us into overlooking the distinction between the *process of reasoning* and the

¹⁰⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 115; emphasis added.

¹⁰⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 299.

product of reasoning. The process of reasoning involves a chain of logical inferences in an orderly, discursive manner while the product of reasoning is concerned with the result and whether it can withstand rational analysis and/or be practically applied. For example, Bahá'u'lláh often tells us to “ponder this in thy heart,”¹⁰⁹ which makes it clear that we also ‘think’ with the heart and even acquire knowledge. However, while pondering in the heart may be a process analogous to logical reasoning, it is not the same. The heart’s process is non-discursive: it cannot be laid out in a chain of logical inferences. The heart ‘reasons’ and communicates by feelings, metaphors, analogies or various forms of artistic expression. However, the result or the product i.e. the conclusions we reach on the basis of the heart’s non-discursive process must, at the very least, not contradict the Writing’s emphasis on meeting the standards of reason. They must not engage in self-contradiction, in doing or believing two contradictory things at once.¹¹⁰

Intuitions and ‘transcendent experiences’ are other non-discursive ways of knowing that are a part of human nature. Before we continue, however, it is important to note that while these other ways of knowing – the heart, intuitions, transcendent experiences – are not irrational even though they work differently than discursive, logical inferential reasoning. The Writings as a whole would be weakened by serious self-contradictions in their philosophy of human nature vis-à-vis epistemology if rationality and ‘other ways of knowing’ come into conflict instead of complementing or at least being neutral to each other. Even if the process of attaining knowledge is non-discursive or non-inferential, the results must still make sense in and be applicable to this world. If they do not, they will simply be irrational – something which the Writings reject. It is our contention that both the discursive and non-discursive, rational and trans-rational results complement each other to form a unified whole.

In our interpretation of the Writings, intuition is a kind of direct ‘sight’ or understanding. Speaking about logical arguments for God’s existence, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, says,

These obvious arguments are adduced for weak souls; but if the *inner perception* be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible. Thus, when man feels the indwelling spirit, he is in no need of arguments for its existence; but for those who are deprived of the bounty of the spirit, it is necessary to establish external arguments.¹¹¹

Direct sight or experiential knowledge replace the need for abstract argument: if we have experienced the “indwelling spirit” we do not need to prove a certain truth anymore than we need to ‘prove’ the sun. The direct experience is identified with feelings in this passage, once again suggesting that feelings are the medium of this kind of direct, non-discursive knowledge. After discussing the immortality of the soul, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares,

¹⁰⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XVIII, p. 45.

¹¹⁰ It could be replied that the heart can want two contradictory things. It can do so if the two things are desirable from two different perspectives because that does not violate the law of non-contradiction. We may want to climb mountains from the perspective of excitement yet feel enormous fear from the perspective of bodily safety. When we desire two contradictory things from the same perspective we are simply confused and/or suffering heart-break.

¹¹¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.

This is a rational proof which we are giving, so that the wise may weigh it in the balance of reason and justice. But if the human spirit will rejoice and be attracted to the Kingdom of God, *if the inner sight becomes opened, and the spiritual hearing strengthened, and the spiritual feelings predominant, he will see the immortality of the spirit as clearly as he sees the sun, and the glad tidings and signs of God will encompass him.*¹¹²

Here, too, we observe the distinction between rational discursive argumentation and direct insight of intuition whereby the truth of a subject becomes known. Their differences aside, however, they come to the same rational conclusion; there is no intrinsic conflict between the two ways of knowing.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, these intuitions are necessary for human nature to rise above the material level.

True distinction among mankind is through divine bestowals and receiving the *intuitions of the Holy Spirit*. If man does not become the recipient of the heavenly bestowals and spiritual bounties, he remains in the plane and kingdom of the animal.¹¹³

Since the human spirit is the “rational soul” it seems obvious that the intuitions of the Holy Spirit could not violate the rational nature of the human soul. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also shows the necessity of intuition for ontological reasons:

Know then that the Lord God possesseth invisible realms which the human intellect can never hope to fathom nor the mind of man conceive. When once thou hast cleansed the channel of thy spiritual sense from the pollution of this worldly life, then wilt thou breathe in the sweet scents of holiness that blow from the blissful bowers of that heavenly land.¹¹⁴

In our understanding, this passage refers to the ‘transcendent experiences’ (called ‘mystical’ by some) by which we become aware of higher, “invisible realms” the existence of which the intellect may deduce but which is beyond actual experience and insight. Influence and inspiration from these realms can only come by means of intuition, i.e. non-discursive ways of knowing. However, receiving such inspiration requires spiritual preparation on our part, by “cleans[ing] the channel of [our] spiritual sense” i.e. by achieving “detachment”¹¹⁵ and turning towards God and the Manifestation.

Human nature’s rationality is also connected to *the theme of justice*. Simply put, we cannot be in harmony with our essentially rational nature without practicing justice in our lives.

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with

¹¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225; emphasis added.

¹¹³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 316; emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 185.

¹¹⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 174.

thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart;¹¹⁶

It takes only little reflection to realize that if we cannot see with our “own eyes” then we cannot really see at all, and if that is the case, we cannot really be our true selves either. If we cannot be our true selves, we inevitably weaken the manifestation of our human nature in our “second nature” or “acquired character.” This in turn has negative effects on the world around us.

The connection between reason and justice is clarified in ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s statement, “Know that to do justice is to give to everyone according to his deserts.”¹¹⁷ In other words, examining a situation, event or person rationally requires us to be impartial and even-handed and complete in our analysis. Every aspect must be given its due. Without that, it is impossible to make rationally and logically justifiable decisions. We shall inevitably be biased and, thereby, unjust.

Bahá'u'lláh’s and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements identifying reason with the essence of humankind have far-reaching implications especially for the goal of unifying human kind into one global commonwealth. Because rationality is a universal, it applies to people across cultures, across historical epochs and across geography. Superficial appearances notwithstanding, there is a core of rationality within all cultures although the vicissitudes of historical circumstances may shape – or even distort – the development of these cultures in various ways. Its universality makes rationality a connecting principle among all cultures that transcends differences and is, therefore, a basis for positive global dialogue and the unified world order of Bahá'u'lláh. Even our evolutionary ancestors are included in the circle of reason. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that “man, from the beginning of his existence in the matrix of the world, is also a distinct species -- that is, man,”¹¹⁸ which means that we have always possessed the distinguishing attribute of man i.e. the rational soul. Precisely because we recognize that our stone-age ancestors were rational, we are able to interpret the artefacts they left behind. Thus, the human race has been one in essence since the beginning of the evolutionary process. Because the rational soul is the common feature joining all human beings into one species, both the possession of a soul and its rational nature are foundation stones of the unified global world order Bahá'u'lláh came to establish.

Since rationality is an essential part of human nature, we possess a universal standard, an ‘Archimedean standpoint’ by which to evaluate individual and collective action and ideas as well as truth. (A truth, for example, cannot be self-contradictory or lead to self-contradiction.) In short, we can be self-critical of our own thinking, measuring our own thoughts against a common rational standard. Moreover, this standard enables us to evaluate the work of others not against subjective personal standards but a universal criterion. The ability to be objectively critical both of ourselves and others is implicit in the “rational soul” and distinguishes us from animals because they lack both self-critical and critical faculties. They know what they like or don’t like but that is not the same as critical understanding of oneself. Indeed, to make progress and to

¹¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 36.

¹¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 108.

¹¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Some Answered Questions*, p. 193.

overcome imitations and vain imaginings,¹¹⁹ a critical and self-critical capacity is an intrinsic part of human nature.

With human nature's capacity for rationality and its entailed capacity for criticism we have another foundation stone for the eventual unification of humankind into a global federal commonwealth united by "one common faith."¹²⁰

7: Free Will

Free will is one of human nature's essential attributes. All humans are born with it and all are expected to use it, as illustrated in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we cannot blame our disbelief in God on others because "the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself."¹²¹ God will reject such an excuse. However, free will is not absolute; we are constrained by bodily needs and the laws of the material universe¹²² but we are free in regards to our ethical choices be they words, actions or attitudes. Regardless of what our circumstances are, we are always free to choose our response. According to `Abdu'l-Bahá,

Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions . . . in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.¹²³

Ethically speaking, we all possess radical or complete freedom by virtue of being human, though, of course, we understand that the choices are not always easy. On this issue, the Writings concur with Sartre asserted that we are "condemned to be free"¹²⁴ whether we want to be or not. There is no way to escape our 'fate' of being free although we can, of course, lie to ourselves and claim that others or various circumstances took our freedom away. What legitimately gives us hope when making extremely difficult choices is God's justice and mercy based on His knowledge of all aspects of a situation.

The converse of radical freedom is radical responsibility, and here, too, the Writings are akin to Sartre whose concept of living in "good faith" insists that we make choices and then unblinkingly face our responsibility for whatever the results may be. As shown by Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of the disbeliever's excuse, we are expected to take responsibility for our actions. We abstain from seeking any excuses or justifications for our bad actions in the circumstances of the external world nor do we blame God for making us the kind of person we are, i.e. for our innate and inherited character. That is the point of `Abdu'l-Bahá's Bible-based discussion about the mineral not having any right to complain to God that it was not giving vegetable perfections. Each state of being is perfect in its own degree and "must strive after the perfections of [its] own

¹¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 79.

¹²⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXX, p. 255.

¹²¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXV, p. 143.

¹²² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248.

¹²³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248.

¹²⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 156.

degree.”¹²⁵ That is all it can be responsible for because perfecting one’s own degree of being is all that one has the power to do.

The fact that human nature is endowed with ethical free will does not, of course, mean that we must overlook other factors that influence a statement or an action. Once again ‘reason’ enters the picture for to be reasonable in the Writings also means to speak or act appropriately vis-à-vis a person or situation. All aspects of the situation are given their due or proper emphasis, which, in the end turns out to mean we treat all aspects of a situation justly: “Know that to do justice is to give to everyone according to his deserts.”¹²⁶

It should be noted that nothing in the Writings suggests that free will is limited to one group, ethnicity, class or culture; rather it is possessed universally by all human beings at all times because it is a constitutional part of human nature. Thus, we cannot practice the ‘bigotry of low expectations’ by excusing any one group from responsibility for their ‘sins’ of omission or commission on the ground of diminished free will.

8: Human Nature and Character

In the Bahá’í Writings the term ‘character’ is primarily used in a philosophical and not psychological sense. The philosophical sense focuses on ethics and virtues and how to acquire them rather than the psycho-analytical factors that form or deform a specific individual. The two approaches are not inherently opposed and can work together but the emphasis in the Writings is clearly philosophical.

Character in its broadest sense is the aspect of human nature concerned with how we interact with the world. Living with others requires us to be ‘somebody,’ i.e. to be a specific person with identifiable attributes, i.e. with “stable and distinctive qualities built into an individual’s life which determine his or her response regardless of circumstances.”¹²⁷ These response patterns can be positive or maladaptive. We can also think of character as ‘good character,’ i.e. as being in possession of virtues. This, of course, is what the Writings aim for.

Character in this latter sense is so fundamentally important that `Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Character is the *true criterion of humanity*. Anyone who possesses a good character, who has faith in God and is firm, whose actions are good, whose speech is good -- that one is accepted at the threshold of God¹²⁸

In other words, attributes like race, nationality and even talent and intelligence are not decisive about ‘being human’; only good actions, speech and firm faith in God can secure our humanity. That faith in God is a requirement for good character is, of course, a severe challenge to contemporary thinkers. One of the reasons can be found in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that disbelief in God is an act of “treacher[y] because it is so colossally ungrateful to the source of everything we have. Ingratitude is usually recognized as a sign of bad character. The importance of

¹²⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 249.

¹²⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 108.

¹²⁷ “What is Character,” <http://www.character-training.com/blog/>

¹²⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 427.

character is also evident in `Abdu'l-Bahá's praise for an ignorant child of good character over an educated child of bad character¹²⁹ because the former is of benefit to humankind. The history of the 20th century CE is replete with examples of how much damage intelligent and educated persons with bad character can do.

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, `Abdu'l-Bahá points out another criterion for recognizing good character which should be based on “reason and knowledge and true moderation,”¹³⁰ It is noteworthy that reason and knowledge are counted as attributes of good character. Knowledge, of course, does not necessarily mean ‘book knowledge’ but knowledge of God’s presence in the world. Reason is necessary to think wisely using our knowledge of God and the world. Irrationality is not compatible with good character.

One other attribute of character must be mentioned, namely that “Good character must be taught.”¹³¹ It does not simply develop by itself. Teaching good character especially in the young is essential to success in the missions of the Manifestations. After all,

*the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent*¹³²

The success of the Manifestations is built on the fact that character can – and must – be taught. Here, too, we observe the importance of the universality of human nature since teaching good character must be built on a common basis if the world is to be unified. Unity in diversity requires a common foundation just as different plants grow out of the same soil.

According to `Abdu'l-Bahá, human character has three aspects: “the innate character, the inherited character, and the acquired character which is gained by education.”¹³³ The “innate character” refers to the “intelligence and capacities”¹³⁴ that all humans possess albeit to different degrees. These bestowals are “intellectual realities” which are not sensible. In these bestowals, there are natural differences among mankind but they are “all excellent.”¹³⁵ No degree is ontologically flawed or unworthy insofar as each is created by God¹³⁶ and as to ‘worthiness’ or ‘unworthiness’ they are related to what we do with the capacities we have been given and not the capacities themselves. `Abdu'l-Bahá also refers to the “innate character” as the “natural capacities.” In this paper, we have referred to them as “first nature” as well.

¹²⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 135.

¹³⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secrets of Divine Civilization*, p. 59.

¹³¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 136.

¹³² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 240.

¹³³ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

¹³⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

¹³⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

¹³⁶ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

The second aspect of character is the “inherited character” which refers to our physical inheritance: “The variety of inherited qualities comes from strength and weakness of constitution,”¹³⁷ i.e. through the physical ancestral line. This aspect of our character can be studied through DNA and actuarial tables, whereas with the “innate character” this is not possible because they are “intellectual realities.” Again, there is very little that can be done to change our inherited character in itself.

The third aspect of character is the “acquired character which is gained through education.”¹³⁸ We must, however, remember that education also includes self-education, i.e. how we form ourselves, our character, by the choices we make as well as what we learn from others. This brings us to a distinction of vital importance: while we cannot change the innate and inherited character in themselves, through our free choices we can choose what aspects of them to actualize and manifest and to what degree. That is why we have also referred to it as “second nature.” It is quite possible for a person with a greatly gifted innate character and natural capacities¹³⁹ to do very little or even “pervert[]”¹⁴⁰ his or her gifts. These choices form the second nature or “acquired character” and unlike the innate or inherited character, the “acquired character” is morally responsible and blameworthy. Here, too, the Bahá’í Writings emphasize our radical freedom.

It may be objected that some people are born with an innate and inherited character and, therefore, have been not given a fair chance in life. The Writings take a different view, stating that even so-called negative qualities can be put to good use.

So if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praiseworthy. If he exercises his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, it is very praiseworthy; but if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy.¹⁴¹

In other words, we have the freedom to put even our potentially negative attributes to a personally and socially good use. The same is true of someone who puts jealousy to positive use, not by theft, but by struggling for more just distribution of wealth. In short, by good applications, the negative can be sublimated into the positive. No attribute is negative in and of itself.

From the teachings about character, there are three things to learn about human nature. First, the Writings inform us that human nature possesses radical freedom and responsibility. God intends us to be free and responsible beings and we can even be called to account for our belief or disbelief in God. Passing responsibility off to others is not acceptable.¹⁴² This subject invites much deeper reflection than we can provide here.

¹³⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

¹³⁸ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

¹³⁹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 213.

¹⁴⁰ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 213.

¹⁴¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.

¹⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXV, p. 143.

Second, difficult as it may be for some to accept, God has not bestowed intellectual and other capacities equally upon all. There is no injustice in this fact because innate character by itself does not bestow worthiness of character which must be earned. We must not confuse equality of valuation with sameness of endowments. This is easy to illustrate. Whose life is more worthy – the highly intelligent and multiply gifted criminal, or the person with meager endowments living practicing good will towards all?

Third, character formation is the key to the construction of the new world order. If character is not changed, i.e. new capacities actualized and others – potentially ‘negative’ ones – manifested in new ways, then all attempts at a new order will fail. We will simply resurrect the old world order in new form, i.e. go from the ‘czar’ to the ‘commissar’ as Russia did in 1917. Character reformation is one thing every individual can and must perform for him or herself.

And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent¹⁴³

He calls on Bahá'ís to “seek to excel the whole world in moral character.”¹⁴⁴ Good character, but intelligence or talent – is what makes people equal in the most important way.

The distinction between divinely given first nature or innate character and our man-made second nature or acquired character has one further consequences. Theologically, it undermines any concept of ‘original sin’ i.e. the belief that humans are born inherently flawed. This contradicts the Christian view as well as Hinduism and Buddhism both of which maintain that rebirth is the consequence of a tainted life. (In Buddhism Boddhisattavas are the exceptions) According to the Bahá'í Writings, humans are not innately burdened by any sin or moral malfeasance. This lays the foundation for a positive evaluation of human nature and a positive self-image.

9: Humanity's Social Nature

The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that human nature is intrinsically social, i.e. we cannot actualize and manifest our full intellectual and spiritual capacities without positive interactions with other human beings. At the most obvious level, this means,

There are no solitaries and no hermits among the Bahá'ís. *Man must work with his fellows.* Everyone should have some trade, or art or profession, be he rich or poor, and with this he must *serve humanity.* This service is acceptable as the highest form of worship.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh says,

¹⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 240.

¹⁴⁴ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 129.

¹⁴⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *`Abdu'l-Bahá, in London*, p. 93; emphasis added.

O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in your churches and cloisters. Come ye out of them by My leave, and *busy, then, yourselves with what will profit you and others.*¹⁴⁶

In other words, human nature requires others to complete itself. This has a metaphysical basis:

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are *the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.* It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association.¹⁴⁷

`Abdu'l-Bahá's words – so reminiscent of Buddhism's concept of 'dependent origination' – means that all existent things including human nature are interdependent not only for their existence but also their "development and growth." A story from my youth illustrates this fact. In 1968, I worked as an orderly in a German Catholic charity mental institution for 'hopeless,' beyond treatment, cases. I asked one of the nuns I had befriended, Sister Anne, what was the point of keeping such sad cases. Her answer illustrates the truth of `Abdu'l-Bahá's words: "Every one of these hopeless cases is an opportunity for us to develop our humanity (menschlichkeit)." In we develop and grow our humanity, our character, our spirituality. Without service to others, including others who need service our inner growth will be stunted.

The practical implications of the social aspect of human nature do not become apparent until we reflect on putting them into practice. For example, Bahá'í teachings make it logically inconsistent to permit any imbalance between the rights and responsibilities of the individual and those of the community, whether it be a nation, a tribe or even a service club like the Rotarians. Individual rights are preserved by such teachings as the independent investigation of truth, consultation, and the right to stand for election; these teachings as well as the recognition of the United Nations Declaration of Human, i.e. Individual Rights make it impossible to see individuals as nothing but instruments of the state or some other collective. However, at the same time, the Writings clearly oppose 'atomic individualism,' which overemphasizes the rights of individuals vis-à-vis the rights good of society. The need for this balance is recognized in the following statement by The Universal House of Justice:

The successful exercise of authority in the Bahá'í community implies the recognition of *separate but mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities* between the institutions and the friends in general, a recognition that in turn welcomes the *need for cooperation* between these two interactive forces of society.¹⁴⁸

To establish "mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities" requires recognizing legitimate interests and responsibilities of both individuals and collectives and harmonizing them.

¹⁴⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 49; emphasis added.

¹⁴⁷ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178.

¹⁴⁸ The Universal House of Justice, 1994 May 19, response to US NSA.

The importance of balancing individual and collective rights and responsibilities prevents us interpreting the call to be “as one soul”¹⁴⁹ as favoring collectivism in some way. In our understanding this is a call for a teleological unity not an ontological unity. A teleological unity is a unity of purpose that harmonizes action but preserves diversity whereas an ontological unity requires oneness by removing all individual distinctions, i.e. diversity in order to create both unity and uniformity. This runs against one of main themes of the Writings.

10: Conclusion

This study supports three major conclusions about the Bahá'í Faith and human nature.

First, the Bahá'í Writings have a logically coherent philosophy of human nature. This philosophy is a vertically integrated whole with its foundations in metaphysics and ontology and apex in a divinely guided personal and social ethic. Consequently, the Faith is open to deep and far-reaching opportunities for dialogue with other religious or non-religious world-views that also have well-developed philosophy of human nature. Among these are Catholic Thomism; Marxism in both its humanist and Leninist forms; theistic and atheistic existentialism as well as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. Moreover, precisely because of its logical coherence and structure, the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature is able to offer constructive evaluations and suggestion to the current troubles afflicting societies. Finally, the logically coherent nature of the Bahá'í world-view on mankind allow the Faith to defend itself intellectually against critiques from other systems of thought.

Second – and this deserves special mention – the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature provides support to belief in the unique status and intrinsic value of humankind in creation, i.e. to the principle that humans cannot be understood correctly by reductionist methodologies. This is more important than many people realize. The reduction of man to an animal, a machine or a complex of chemicals and the concomitant denial of spirit, soul and even mind inevitably leads to a distorted understanding of human nature which in turn opens the way for confusions in personal and collective ethics, law, psychology, anthropology, history and economics to name a few. Indeed, it may be argued that wide-spread belief in a reduced, distorted and devalued understanding of mankind contributed to two of the greatest moral disasters in history – the Nazi and Soviet death-camp systems.¹⁵⁰ A positive future for humankind can only be built on a complete and appropriate

Third, this paper illustrates the advantages of using the Aristotelian concepts and arguments pervasively and consistently employed throughout the Writings by Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá. The Writings show how the philosophical concepts They have adopted and, thereby, approved, can solve modern philosophical problems – such as mind-body dualism – and be used to explain complex theological and philosophical issues such as the immortality of the soul. This is not to say that we cannot develop these concepts further with the guidance of the

¹⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXVI, p. 169.

¹⁵⁰ If man is only an animal, subject – like all other animals – to the survival of the fittest, then the Nazi ‘cult of the fist’ and mass murder of ‘competing species’ can be ‘justified.’ The Marxist doctrine of class-warfare, i.e. exterminating the class enemies and the denial of intrinsic individual value, ‘justified’ the Gulags.

Writings; indeed, further developments in neo-Aristotelian concepts are on-going. The example set by Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá should encourage Bahá'í philosophers to follow in Their footsteps.

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