

# The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature

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At the beginning of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, cognitive scientist and philosopher Steven Pinker asserts that

[e]veryone 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. (1; emphasis added)

For millennia, the *major theories of human nature have come from religion*. . . *every society* must operate with a theory of human nature. (3; emphasis added)

A “theory of human nature,” as Pinker conceives it, refers to the intrinsic or “natural” ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that distinguish human beings from other forms of life and,

according to him, is inescapable for individuals and societies. Such theories are present whether they are held consciously or unconsciously in the mind, communicated explicitly or implicitly in a text, expressed in traditional customs and folktales, or embedded in religious beliefs and ceremonies. They may be embryonic or fully developed. They may be embodied in myths and legends or expressed in philosophic treatises such as Plato’s *Republic*, Augustine’s *The City of God*, and Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*. However they may be couched, these theories tell us what to expect from people in regards to such vital issues as aggression, or even outright violence, helpfulness, reliability, good will, and spirituality. Beyond these, philosophies of human nature consider meta-issues related to human nature such as, for example, the role of intrinsic nature and extrinsic nurture, the different kinds of needs shared by all humans,<sup>1</sup> personal and collective psychopathology,<sup>2</sup> and the degree of universality of mankind’s physical and mental constitution. Philosophies of human nature also deal with the meaning and purpose of life in this world and the next, mankind’s relationship to the supernatural or nonmaterial world, and the role, if any, of messengers and prophets. Finally, they set the basis for morality by providing a standard for deciding which behaviors we can

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1 See Abraham Maslow’s *Toward a Psychology of Being*.

2 See Robert B. Edgerton’s *Sick Societies*.

expect from all humans, which can be considered natural for the kind of beings we are, which are acceptable, and which are not.

One of the most vigorously debated issues about human nature is the existence of an intrinsic, predetermined nature or essence. Is what we call “human nature” the product of environmental influences, a set of innate attributes and potentials, or a mixture of both? The terms of this controversy have been most famously formulated by John Locke, who maintains that the human mind has no inherent ideas, attributes, capacities, tendencies, or potentials—a view that is now known as the *tabula rasa* or “blank slate” theory (2.1.2).<sup>3</sup> According to this notion, everything in the mind is added after birth by worldly experience and the education provided by others. Locke’s theory suggests that because human beings are shaped entirely by their environment, the “perfectibility of man” is contingent on the manipulation of the social environment. This idea was taken up by others, among them Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who popularized the idea that human nature can be improved by strictly natural, non-religious means.<sup>4</sup> Marxism also holds

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3 Locke actually uses the term “white paper.” This idea was already present in Aristotle (*De Anima*, 429b29–430a1). See also Stoic philosophy and, in the eleventh century CE, Ibn Sina.

4 See Rousseau’s *A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind*.

that human nature is shaped by the environment and concludes, therefore, that we must overthrow all the old social structures in order to create a new kind of human being.<sup>5</sup> Human environmentalism—the belief that it is possible to shape human beings any way we like by controlling the kind of experiences people have—was an idea promulgated most famously by B.F. Skinner and other behavioral psychologists. Perhaps one of the most startling results of Locke’s “blank state” theory is the claim that sexual identity is not intrinsically constrained and determined by biology but is, rather, a matter of preference because there is no particular human nature to limit our choices.

Two globally influential modern philosophers reinforced Locke’s *tabula rasa* doctrine and this line of thinking. One was the atheist existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, who elaborated his views most famously in *Being and Nothingness*. In this work, he observes, “As we have seen, for human reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes from the outside or from within which it can

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5 In Soviet Russia, this philosophy led to Lysenkoism, a 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 other words, the nature of rye was determined by its environment and not by genetics—a belief echoed in today’s denial of human nature and the view that environment is the only relevant factor in its shaping.

receive or accept" (518–19). There is no "pre-made" human nature (or any other nature); there are only individuals making themselves. Elsewhere, 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*" ("Existentialism" 295; emphasis added).<sup>6</sup>

Michel Foucault, one of the premier postmodernists, concurred with Sartre. He explains that he is "suspicious of the notion of liberation" because "it runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature" that somehow exists "apart" from us and that we can rediscover and regain (76). He rejects the existence of any such essence or nature: "behind things [there is] not a timeless essential secret but the secret that they have no essence" (353). Sartre, Foucault, and their followers assert that any concept of human nature is intrinsically tyrannical and dangerous because it marginalizes and oppresses whoever does not fit into the parameters of its definition of human ontology.

Beliefs about human nature have

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6 Unfortunately, Sartre's view is undermined by the observation that if, unlike other creatures, a human is "condemned to be free," then, in effect, s/he has a particular identifiable nature with at least one unique attribute.

powerful and widespread consequences, as can be seen in current legislative and legal battles over sexual and gender identity and, on a larger scale, in the history of the twentieth century. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an attempt at creating a new society by remaking human nature into the "New Soviet Man" (Bauer et al. 157). Communist efforts were based on two principles—that human nature is almost infinitely malleable and that humans are entirely shaped by their natural, social, and, above all, economic environments. There is no innate, pre-determined human nature to be overcome. On 22 June 1941,<sup>7</sup> this materialist and radical environmentalist philosophy of human nature found itself at war with its diametric opposite, German National Socialism, whose philosophy of human nature combined three main principles. First, it accepted Joseph Arthur, Comte de Gobineau's belief that race is the determining factor in history and that Aryans—white and mostly European—are the superior race.<sup>8</sup> Second, it taught that the stronger races were in a Darwinian struggle against the numerically superior but weaker races whom it considered ultimately unfit to survive or rule. The concept of

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7 The official launch date of "Operation Barbarossa," the code name for Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union.

8 Comte de Gobineau's widely read *An Essay on the Inequality of the Races* identifies the Aryans as the white race of northern Europe.

“survival of the fittest” was applied to national and international politics, societies, cultures, and, of course, races.<sup>9</sup> Third, it believed that human nature was genetically determined and that superior gene pools should not be “polluted” by mixing themselves with inferior ones.<sup>10</sup> The one principle that united Communism and National Socialism was that the value of the individual is determined by his or her usefulness to the state. Individuals have no rights against the state and the supposed welfare of the majority. On 7 December 1941,<sup>11</sup> a third theory of human nature emerged in the midst of war—one that held that the individual has intrinsic value and, therefore, inherent fundamental rights against the state and society in general. Although the liberal capitalist theory of human nature emerged victorious,<sup>12</sup> it was

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9 See Richard Weikart's *From Darwin to Hitler*. It should be noted that in no way can one rationally blame Darwin for the abuse of his findings by others.

10 It is important to understand that a belief in the basic genetic determination of human nature does not in itself make anyone a National Socialist. That belief is a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for being a Nazi.

11 This is the date of the surprise Japanese military strike at the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. This attack is officially considered the turning point that led to the entry of the United States into World War II.

12 Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* sees the victory of

eventually challenged by yet a different theory of human nature endorsed by politicized radical Islam.<sup>13</sup> The importance of philosophies of human nature—and of the clashes between them—is clearly visible in daily news reports.

In sharp contrast to Locke and his successors, many of the world's major religions agree about the existence of an innate, divinely created human nature. Some of these religions subscribe to the belief that human ontology is dualistic—on the one hand, we are not what we could and should be; on the other hand, we can “merge with the divine command, walk in its way” (Guru Nanak qtd. in Gill). In other words, these religions assert that every human has a perfectible nature, but

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Western liberal democracy as a permanent achievement. He did not foresee the rise of radical political Islam as a challenge to liberal democratic capitalism.

13 Two of the foundational theorists of radical Islam are Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb, the latter of whom advocates for, among other things, a Muslim version of Vladimir Lenin's doctrine of the evolutionary elite to lead the attack on the West. He also calls for isolation from all non-Muslim learning and the establishment of rigorous Sharia law. In his best known book, *Milestones*, he calls for ceaseless violent jihad against all non-Muslims, but especially against the West. Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* is an in-depth study of this incipient conflict.

unlike their secular counterparts, they believe that achieving such perfection requires the assistance of divine grace and guidance by the Manifestations of God: “Without training and guidance the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature, which is ignorant and defective” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 297). Moreover, human nature has free will—the capacity to choose the way to perfection or to reject it—and must therefore take responsibility for its choices. These attributes of human nature entail moral and spiritual obligations rather than comfortable privileges.

It is important to note that belief in the existence of an intrinsic human nature is not confined to religions and political ideologies. Evidence for a universal human nature, based on observation of its physical aspects, is found in the studies of genetics,<sup>14</sup> medicine, anatomy, physiology, and neuroscience. For example, humans are characterized by an identifiable

skeletal anatomy; by the possession of a larynx, enabling speech; by a fundamentally similar physiology (e.g., blood types) that underlies all medical studies and practice; by the human life cycle; and by a brain with a particularly human structure. While human nature is not limited to our physical existence, the body helps shape human nature vis-à-vis its potentials and limitations for action in the material world.

Further evidence for the existence of a pre-given universal human nature comes from anthropology. Professor of Anthropology (Emeritus) Donald E. Brown’s *Human Universals* has become one of the central texts in the growing field of universal human nature.<sup>15</sup> The work of Pinker supports Brown’s thesis. He explains the “bridges between [human] biology and culture” with evidence from genetics, brain science, cognitive science, and evolutionary biology (31).

In his book *The Blank Slate*, Steven Pinker provides a list of Brown’s more than two hundred universal human attributes (435–39), and expands on some of them—such as the universal ability to learn language—and explores and critiques the intellectual concepts underlying the rejection of a universal human nature.<sup>16</sup> Among psychologists, Abraham Maslow is perhaps most influential in the scientific

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<sup>14</sup> The ability for all human ethnic groups to intermarry and produce viable offspring also indicates the underlying physical oneness of mankind. The Human Genome Project is perhaps best understood, not as the genetic determination of all thought, feeling and behavior but rather as the recognition of the physical basis for Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on the “oneness of mankind.” Details on the National Human Genome Research Project, can be found on its official website <https://www.genome.gov/10001772/all-about-the-human-genome-project-hgp/>

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<sup>15</sup> See also Donald E. Brown, “Human Universals, Human Nature, Human Culture.”

<sup>16</sup> Chapters 6 through 11.

study of human nature.<sup>17</sup> Although it has undergone some relatively minor modifications, Maslow's list of a universal hierarchy of needs remains a familiar part of psychology and educational psychology courses. Evidence for a universal human nature is also available in evolutionary psychology which maintains that human nature developed by evolutionary pressures to make humans what they are now. For example, Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal, Why We are the Way We are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* examines not only the evolutionary origins of selfishness but also of altruism, and mankind's social nature.

In this paper, we shall focus on the philosophy of human nature as presented in the Bahá'í Writings. To do this most effectively, we must equip ourselves with the philosophic concepts, terminology, and arguments that are pervasively and consistently used throughout the Bahá'í Writings to explain relevant key concepts.

#### THE PHILOSOPHICAL TERMINOLOGY OF THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS

Unlike the sacred texts of most other religions, the Bahá'í Writings contain a large number of passages that explicitly develop philosophical arguments and employ a specific set of philosophical concepts and terminology. These

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17 See Abraham Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* and William G. Huitt, *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*.

concepts and terms were originally theorized by Aristotle in *Physics*, *De Anima*, and *Metaphysics* as a method of analyzing and understanding reality.<sup>18</sup> According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, analyzing and understanding reality are the purposes of philosophy: "Philosophy consists in comprehending, so far as human power permits, the realities of things as they are in themselves" (*Some Answered Questions* 59:7).

The fact that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá extensively employ these terms, concepts, and even arguments confirms them as valid tools for interpreting the Bahá'í Writings as well as for understanding reality. This validation applies only to the Aristotelian materials present in the Writings and not to everything Aristotle said; for example, his views on gravity or women have no support in the Writings. Moreover, by introducing them into the sacred texts, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá imply that familiarity with this terminology can assist in obtaining a fuller understanding of the Writings. If these terms had no relevance in this context, their introduction would make no sense.

It should be noted, however, that the use of Aristotle's terminology does not necessarily restrict Bahá'í

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18 For a detailed analysis, see Ian Kluge's "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" in *Lights of Irfan* Vol. 4, 2003, and "Bahá'u'lláh's Toolbox." Both are available at <https://www.bahai-philosophy.com/>.



philosophical thinking to the third century BCE. Perhaps the best illustration of this point is Werner Heisenberg's use of "potential" in "the sense of Aristotelian philosophy" in his discussions about quantum mechanics (*Physics and Philosophy* 154). As indicated earlier, interest in and application of Aristotle's versatile theory of human nature have undergone a serious revival.<sup>19</sup> Its ongoing usefulness can be seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's logical proof of life after death as well as His solution to the centuries-old mind-body problem.<sup>20</sup> In light of these developments, it is reasonable to expect that with the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, significant further developments will be possible.

The Bahá'í Writings confirm seven key Aristotelian concepts relevant to the subject of human nature: essence, potential, attribute, substance, form, fourfold causality, and teleology. These terms constitute the foundation on which Aristotle bases his method for analyzing and understanding reality, and they apply to all phenomenal beings, including mankind. We shall examine these terms and show how

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19 See, for example, Tuomas E. Tahko's *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics* or Daniel D. Novotný and Lukáš Novák's *Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives in Metaphysics*. See also James Madden's *Mind, Matter, and Nature* and the ethical studies by G. E. M. Anscombe, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Alasdair MacIntyre.

20 Both are found in chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*.

they are used in the Bahá'í Writings.

"Essence" refers to the identity of a thing—that which makes it the kind of thing it is and, conversely, that which makes it different from other kinds of things. In other words, it refers to kinds or classes as well as to differences among members of kinds or classes; it does not refer to differences in degree such as the distinctions between water, steam, and ice or those between a tall person and a short one. Mankind has a particular essence that makes us different in kind from animals, a distinction that explains why behaviors that are acceptable in animals are not necessarily acceptable or "moral" in humans. As shall be demonstrated below, essences are static insofar as they do not change or merge into one another—one of the reasons why 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects the theory that humankind has evolved from ancestral apes.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, all things have an essence, an axiom we can discern in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired *the essence of all created things*" and in His reference to "the inmost essence of all things" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 29, 30; emphasis added). In short, according to the authoritative Bahá'í texts, everything in creation possesses an "essence."<sup>21</sup>

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21 See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*, 95:3, and *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, 15:1. For a complete list of essences see Kluge's "The

So it is that humans possess an essence, as demonstrated, for example, in Bahá'u'lláh's statement, "Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man" (*Gleanings* 83:1). Even nature has an essence as indicated by Bahá'u'lláh's references to "the *essence of all created things*" and to "the inmost essence of all things" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 29,30) both of which include nature. Indeed, God the Creator has an essence, as indicated by Bahá'u'lláh's allusion to His "Divine Essence" as well as Bahá'u'lláh's description of Himself as its "Manifestation" (*Gleanings* 13:2; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 53:3).<sup>22</sup>

In this connection, the Bahá'í Writings inform us that the essences of things cannot be known directly in themselves (being essentially metaphysical) but can only be known indirectly via their attributes or qualities:

the inner essence of a thing can never be known, only its attributes. For example, the inner reality of the sun is unknown, but it is understood through its attributes, which are heat and

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Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," section 5.6.

<sup>22</sup> As distinct from "emanation"—the Manifestation is not a "part" of God, nor does the Manifestation possess the same essence as God, though He can reflect or manifest the divine qualities inherent in that Divine Essence of the Creator. (See chapter 53 of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions*.)

light. The inner essence of man is unknown and unfathomed but it is known and characterized by its attributes. Thus everything is known and characterized by its attributes and not by its essence... the reality of the Divinity, too, must be unknown with regards to its essence and known only with respect to its attributes.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 59:4)

Two points should be noted here. First, the translation of "essence" as "reality" is an important indication of how the latter term is used at times in the Writings. Second, it is the Manifestations Who provide us with knowledge of the divine attributes, and on the basis of this insight we can reason about God.

Every essence—except God's—has two kinds of attributes: essential or necessary and accidental or non-necessary.<sup>23</sup> This distinction underlies the doctrine of progressive revelation:

the divine law has two distinct aspects or functions: one the *essential or fundamental*, the other the *material or accidental* . . . The essential ordinances of religion were the same during the time of Abraham, the day of Moses and the cycle of Jesus, but the *accidental or material laws were abrogated*

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<sup>23</sup> God cannot have accidental attributes because it makes no sense to say that a divine attribute is not necessary.



and superseded according to the exigency and requirement of each succeeding age. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation 97*; emphasis added)

Essential attributes are necessary for a thing to be what it is, and they cannot be changed, whereas accidental attributes are optional and/or temporary. For example, being human requires a "rational soul," which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "distinguishes man from the animal" but having red hair or green eyes is "accidental" (*Some Answered Questions*, 55:5; 55:4). 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses this distinction between essential and accidental attributes to prove the immortality of the human soul:

Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by itself, and that the spirit is the accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—the spirit—remains. (*Some Answered Questions* 66:2)

The wording of the new translation of *Some Answered Questions* makes the Aristotelian connection clear insofar as it explicitly identifies "substance" as that which "subsists by itself"—that is, independently—and "accident" as that which depends on the substance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is straightforward: the soul is the substance (essence) of mankind, and the body is an

accidental attribute temporarily needed for living in the phenomenal world. The death of an accidental attribute, such as the body, does not imply the death of the soul (the substance or essence) any more than adult-onset hair loss diminishes our humanity.

To understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's declaration, we must bear in mind that Aristotle also uses the word "substance" to refer to "essence." Unless indicated otherwise, the latter usually alludes to the makeup of a thing, whereas the former usually refers to its ontology as being independent or dependent. However, it must be remembered that every substance has/is an essence and every essence is a substance. This meaning of "substance" as "essence" is noted by the translator of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Tablet on the Unity of Existence," who states, "The term 'substance' (*javhar*) is roughly equivalent to essence (*mahíyya*) and reality (*haqíqa*), which refer to 'that by which a thing is what it is'" (note 2). Thus, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the human spirit or "rational soul" as a substance, He is describing it as both an independent reality and the essence of human beings.

With these two uses in mind, we will find it easier to understand Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the spiritual aspect of the Manifestations "is born of the substance of God Himself" (*Gleanings* 27:4). Here, "substance" emphasizes both God's absolute independence as well as His divine essence, from which Manifestations originate. This demonstrates the ontological

uniqueness of the Manifestations in Their relationship to God—emanating from God's essence and sharing in His absolute independence—which provides a rational basis for accepting what the Manifestations say as God's Word. Furthermore, a substance is a separate or distinct individual that “operates according to its own logos” or final cause and for that reason is also a source of motion and change in itself and sometimes others (Edel 116). A substance exists as a “natural unit,” that is, as an integrated whole (Edel 119). Each of these descriptors is valid for God, Who is a natural unit, Who is distinct from creation, and Who has His own logos.

“Substance” is also something that can possess attributes but cannot exist as an attribute of anything else. For example, a starfish is not an attribute or quality of something else, nor are my pet ducks, Jack and Jill. In addition, a “substance” is objective and real; it does not depend on human perception for its existence, nor is it a mere term of convenience. Finally, the word “substance” in the Writings (and in Aristotle's works) may refer to matter, the material “stuff” of which the things in the phenomenal world are composed. An example of “substance” being used in this way is the admonishment to “consume not the substance of others wrongfully” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle 25*).

Nominalist philosophers deny that essences are ontologically real. In their view, only individual entities are real, and, therefore, classes of things, essences that allegedly identify a kind

of thing, and general and universal terms have no corresponding reality. For example, there are only individual dogs, like Barko, Queenie, and Wag-ger, and what we call their “essence” or “class” is merely a term of convenience to lump together apparently similar things. Their alleged “essences” and “kinds” are nothing but verbal conveniences to facilitate discussion; they do not really exist as such.

The Bahá'í Writings reject nominalism, not only in direct statements about this issue but also in the arguments they present to explain the Faith's teachings. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the “abundant grace of God's oneness that is shed upon *the essences of all created things*,” which make up the phenomenal world (*Selections 266*; emphasis added). Furthermore, the Bahá'í Writings assert that phenomenal reality is divided into four classes—mineral, vegetable, animal, and human ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions 64:1*)—that these classes of extant realities each possess distinct essential natures, and that these categories are not man-made constructs. This Bahá'í concept thus underscores the belief that because human beings are a unique creation, it follows that there may well be a moral imperative or ethical necessity for us to behave in a way appropriate to our essential reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains that essences can only be known or perceived by their attributes or qualities, indicating, therefore, that essences are real because “[a] non-existent thing, it is agreed, cannot be

seen by signs" (*Paris Talks* 90). In addition, He teaches that mankind's distinguishing feature, the rational soul, "encompasses all things and, as far as human capacity permits, discovers their realities and becomes aware of properties and effects" (*Some Answered Questions* 55:5). If the essence—that which distinguishes one kind of thing from another—is not ontologically real, it would not be able to act, as noted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example: "In order to write a man must exist—one who does not exist cannot write" (*Paris Talks* 92). Furthermore, His argument about "the *essential reality underlying any given phenomenon*" makes it clear that in Bahá'í ontology, all things have an essence, whose attributes appear in the phenomenal world (*Promulgation* 421; emphasis added). A final example showing the reality of essences is the teaching that mankind's essence does not change during the evolutionary process: "the development of man was always human in type and biological in progression" (*Promulgation* 358). Elsewhere He explains that "[t]he essence of the species and the innate reality undergo no transformation at all" (*Some Answered Questions* 47:10).

The aforementioned concept of potential is closely related to that of essence.<sup>24</sup> Potential refers to the capacity

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<sup>24</sup> Potentials are not physical "things"—like raisins embedded in a bun—that can be identified by empirical scientific analysis. Instead, potentials are virtues or "intelligible realities" that have "no outward form or place and which are not sensible"

of a thing to change in certain ways, which is to say to reveal or actualize previously hidden and often unforeseeable attributes. Potentials are unique to each kind of thing at two levels—a collective level, such as "duck-kind," and an individual level, like that of my pet ducks, Jack and Jill.

Potentials allow a pupa to change into a butterfly or a seed into a tree ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 51:4). Human nature is a unique combination of potentialities and the Bahá'í Writings discuss them extensively. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the various aspects of a tree do not come from nowhere: "All these virtues [of the tree] were *hidden* and *potential* in the seed" (*Promulgation* 90; emphasis added). The leaves and branches "existed *potentially*, albeit invisibly, in the seed" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 51:4; emphasis added). In short, there is more to reality than what we can immediately see or even discover empirically. This is even demonstrable in science. 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 its expansion when frozen. These potentials were

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('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 16:3). However, potentials exist because "[a] non-existent thing, it is agreed, cannot be seen by signs" and because changes cannot come from nothing: "it is impossible that any effect should appear from absolute nothingness" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 91; *Some Answered Questions* 60:5).

“latent and potential in the world of nature” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 310; emphasis added). The same is true of the earth as a whole: “the terrestrial globe was created from the beginning with all its elements, substances, minerals, parts and components but these appeared only gradually” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 51:5). In other words, the potential to form living organisms was already in the earth itself and only required the right time and conditions to become actualized. In humankind as well, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “our Creator . . . has deposited . . . certain latent and potential virtues. Through education and culture these virtues . . . will become apparent in the human reality (*Promulgation* 90; emphasis added). Building on this concept, Shoghi Effendi states that “man *must* always try to develop and reveal the qualities that are to be found potentially in him. It is an urge to self-improvement and individual progress” (qtd. in Hornby 479; emphasis added).

The development of potentials in all things including humanity points to another key Bahá'í teaching, namely, that all parts of creation are teleological in nature and therefore have an inner purpose and a goal for which they strive. The teleological, goal-oriented, purposive impulse in all things, including the universe itself, is shown directly in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s validation of Aristotle’s concept of fourfold causality: “For the existence of each and every thing depends upon four causes: the efficient cause, the material cause, the formal cause, and the

final cause. So this chair has a creator who is a carpenter, a matter which is wood, a form which is that of a chair, and a purpose which is to serve as a seat” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 80:3).<sup>25</sup> The final cause is the chair’s purpose, without which there is no point in having a formal cause (design), a material cause from which to actualize the design, and an efficient cause to do the work.<sup>26</sup> It is also important that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not limit fourfold causality to man-made objects; rather, He explains, it pertains to “the existence of . . . every thing” (*Some Answered Questions* 80:3). The final cause influences the operation of the efficient cause by limiting the effects it can have. Iron filings will rust when watered but will not produce daisies. The final cause is implicit in the nature of the materials—iron and water—which only lets certain effects take place. This limiting function is the final cause in action. Because all things have a final cause, they have a purpose, a reason for their existence. This includes humankind and the universe itself: “If man did not exist, the universe would be *without result*, for *the*

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<sup>25</sup> See Aristotle’s *Physics* (2.7.198ab) and *Metaphysics* (5.1.1013ab).

<sup>26</sup> Fourfold causality offers one way of harmonizing science and religion. Science deals with material and efficient causes, whereas religion deals with formal but, above all, final causes. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Aristotle indicate, all four are necessary for the existence of every thing, whether it be man-made or natural.

*purpose of existence* is the revelation of the divine perfections" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:4; emphasis added). In other words, the universe is incomplete and lacks purpose without humankind, which gives the universe a purpose, just as "the noblest part of the tree, and the fundamental purpose of its existence, is the fruit" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:5).

With this philosophical terminology in mind, we are ready to examine human nature as explained in the Bahá'í Writings.

#### HUMAN NATURE: SPIRITUAL, UNIVERSAL, IMMUTABLE

The most fundamental Bahá'í teaching about human nature is that "[m]an 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*" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 73; emphasis added). Virtually everything else that may be said about the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature is predicated on the principle that human nature is essentially spiritual. This spiritual essence brings in its train a host of profound practical 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 consider not only the good of the body, but also

the good of the soul.<sup>27</sup> It also affects education policy in such areas as curriculum development because questions of spiritual education cannot be circumvented or ignored. Likewise, recognizing the primacy of the spirit in our political constitutions will affect our personal and collective scale of values and rights, which in turn affects societal decisions at every level and turn. If, for example, large numbers of people were to believe that the rewards of this life are "the virtues and perfections that adorn the human reality" instead of material acquisitions, then the nature of economies, governmental planning, and even law would be profoundly changed (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 60:3).

Were it not for the fundamentally spiritual essence of mankind, it would be difficult to explain why Abdu'l-Bahá places such emphasis on recognizing immortality as an essential aspect of human nature:

The conception of annihilation is a factor in human degradation, a cause of human debasement and lowliness, a source of human fear and abjection. It has been conducive to the dispersion and weakening of human thought, whereas the realization of existence and continuity has upraised man to sublimity of ideals, established the foundations of human progress

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to reflect on the meaning of "harm reduction" in light of our spiritual nature.

and stimulated the development of heavenly virtues. (*Promulgation* 89; emphasis added)

Belief or disbelief in immortality affects how we deal with social issues that involve a clash between immediate, short-term solutions and solutions that consider spiritual well-being in this world and the next. For example, while supplying free drugs to addicts may solve some problems, enabling—and, thereby, perpetuating—a self-destructive behavior suppresses the actualization of other, more important human capacities in this life and also affects the next life. When we reflect on human problems, immortality must be taken into consideration.

Other teachings that make no sense without implicitly or explicitly assuming mankind's spiritual nature are the importance of prayer, the revelation of God's names in human nature ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 26), and—since God is not a material being—mankind's nature having been created in the image of God. Without mankind's essentially spiritual nature, there would be no need for religious teachings to strengthen and develop mankind's "spiritual susceptibilities" over the course of progressive Revelation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 7). Moreover, only humanity's essentially spiritual essence explains the "spiritual longing[s]" felt, in varying degrees, by virtually all human beings and cultures ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 73).

This universal need to connect with some form of transcendental reality

is why anthropologists and historians have not found a culture at any stage of development without spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. While there may be individual exceptions to this innate desire for transcendence, there are no collective or societal exceptions to it. Even militantly atheistic revolutions and regimes can be said to do no more than replace one kind of religiosity with another—though they eventually and invariably fail in this endeavor. For example, the French revolutionaries realized that people needed some form of spirituality and devised the militantly atheistic and humanistic cult of reason. The project failed at least in part because it could not satisfy the intrinsic human inclination to transcendence. The same failure was experienced eventually by militantly atheistic Marxist-Leninism. Presenting a list of similarities between Marxism and Christianity, Bertrand Russell notes that "Bolshevism is not merely a political doctrine; it is also a religion, with elaborate dogmas and inspired scriptures" (8).

Spiritual longings—our inclination to transcendence—also express themselves as *ersatz* or substitute forms such as the pursuit of limitless wealth, power, youth, sexuality, risk, drugs—anything that can, if only briefly, make us forget the iron limits of material existence.<sup>28</sup> People find it easier to offer

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian *In Search of Nirvana* for an analysis of the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol as chemical substitutes for



“[t]hat willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith” to the supernatural in films, novels, television series, and comic books rather than to God (Coleridge 2). Forms of divination such as tarot cards, crystals, and rune stones may also be described as attempts to fulfill our inclination to transcendence. Finally, in a more general way, the human inclination to transcendence is also evident in the large numbers of individuals who describe themselves as “spiritual” as distinct from “religious” in an institutional sense. In different ways, these people feel that there is more to existence than the material world and that our bodily existence does not represent the sum total of our lives. These expressions of the spiritual aspirations may all be summarized by the *bon mot* that when you push God out of the door, He comes back in through the window. Because humanity’s inherent spiritual longings are based on our nature as spiritual beings, they are impossible to suppress. They will always be present to challenge the atheistic and materialistic mind-set.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, human nature is not just spiritual but also universal, as evident in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the essentially spiritual nature being true for “all men alike” (*Paris Talks* 72); elsewhere He states that “God created us all of one race” (*Paris Talks* 148). And if all humans are part of one race, it follows

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transcendental experiences.

that there is only one human nature common to all people from all times and places, regardless of the vast diversity of individuals and cultures. In regards to the universality of human nature, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also states, “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” (*Promulgation* 190). Elsewhere He affirms, “The foremost degree of comprehension in the world of nature is that of the rational soul. This power and comprehension is shared in common by all men, whether they be heedless or aware, wayward or faithful” (*Some Answered Questions* 58:3). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly identifies “the rational soul”<sup>29</sup>—which, according to Him, distinguishes humans from animals—as a possession of all humans, even if they are not conscious of it or deny its existence.<sup>30</sup> Human-

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29 See Kluge, “Reason and the Bahá'í Writings” in *Lights of ‘Irfán* 14, 2013, and “Philosophy and the Bahá'í Faith.” “Reason,” “reasonable,” and “rational” in the Bahá'í Writings refer to (1) inferential reasoning from premise to conclusion, either explicitly or implicitly; (2) appropriate or fitting to the subject matter being examined; (3) in harmony with logical thinking though arrived at by intuition and other ways of knowing.

30 Denying human rationality is, logically speaking, a lost cause since denying

ity's rational capacity not only reinforces the universality of rationality in mankind, but it also establishes the basis for world unification insofar as it can bring people together through the power of reason.

Compared to the essential oneness of mankind, the racial, cultural, and individual differences are accidental—which is to say, contingent products of time, place, and circumstances—whereas human nature is permanent and universal. The existence of such enormous diversity within humankind emphasizes the need for a universal human nature, without which it would be impossible to establish the unification of mankind, where “[a]ll men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race, and become a single people” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 12:7).

The oneness and universality of humanity's nature as created by God are essential to the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature for at least three major reasons. First, they establish the foundation for the eventual unification of mankind in a federal global commonwealth. Without such a fundamental oneness and universality, it is difficult to envision humankind achieving such unity. Second, it negates the ontological basis for racism insofar as the characteristics used to differentiate ethnic groups or races

are merely accidental rather than essential attributes of human nature. Indeed, racism is reduced to a logical category mistake, an unsophisticated confusion between what is permanent and meaningful and what is ephemeral and insignificant. Third, it provides an objective foundation for a universal code of ethics by considering morality on an objective rather than a personal and culturally subjective basis, thus undermining the concepts of ethical and cultural relativism. The ethical principles implicitly embedded in our divinely created nature are universal and binding for all.

Another fundamental aspect of human nature, according to the Bahá'í Writings, is that it is permanent; it does not change over time. There may be changes in the potentials that are manifested at different times, but the human essence as created by God does not change. In other words, human nature has unity and coherence in time, in space or location, and in circumstance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms that “the originality of the human species, and of the independence of the essence of man are clear and evident” (*Some Answered Questions* 47:11). 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

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reason requires us to employ it in order to establish our point. The argument against reason is a self-refuting proposition.

mere germ or worm. Gradually as it develops it shows certain divisions . . . *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.* (*Promulgation* 358; emphasis added)

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the stability of human nature or essence by explaining that "when [an embryo] possesses, in the womb of the mother, a strange form entirely different from its present shape and appearance, it is the embryo of a distinct species and not of an animal: The essence of the species and the innate reality undergo no transformation at all" (*Some Answered Questions* 47:10). He applies this principle of immutability to education, as well: "*education cannot alter the inner essence of a 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" (*Selections* 132; emphasis added). In my understanding, this means that while education can improve the way the potentials of "the inner essence" express themselves, it cannot change that essence.

The immutability of human nature is important for at least a few reasons. First, the doctrine of progressive revelation and the unification of humankind require it. As Shoghi Effendi points out, God, through His Manifestations, "restates the eternal verities" over the course of successive

Revelations (*Promised Day* 108). If human nature were changeable, there could be no "eternal verities" because they would not be applicable. Moreover, if human nature were not constant, it would be difficult to imagine how humanity could ever be united, because unification can only be achieved on the basis of some durable common ground. There are at least two other reasons for rejecting of the concept of human nature as changeable. One is theological: the concept of essential malleability suggests that the human spirit or essence is not a perfect creation by God. Bahá'u'lláh explicitly contradicts such notions; He says, "I have perfected in every one of you My creation," thus indicating that both humans and creation as a whole have been created perfect (*Gleanings* 75:1). The second, practical reason for rejecting the changeability of human nature is to protect humans from themselves and their limited understanding of themselves and their spiritual destiny. To appreciate the need to protect human nature from man-made designs based on our limited knowledge, we need only examine the disastrous attempts at such changes by Communism, Fascism, and Nazism.

Of course, the immutability of human nature does not mean that new, hitherto latent potentials cannot be actualized. Doing that is precisely the point of progressive revelation. However, it is important to ensure that what we are attempting to actualize are genuine potentials and not ideological impositions. From a Bahá'í

perspective, that can best be done by looking at guidance from the Manifestations of previous Divine Dispensations—and in our time, at Bahá'u'lláh, the Manifestation of God for this age. A study of the Bahá'í Writings would leave no doubt that theories of racial superiority, the absolute equalization of wealth, and the complete submission of the individual to the state are untenable because they cannot be harmonized with the essentially spiritual nature of human reality.

#### HUMANITY'S ORIGIN, PLACE, AND ROLE IN CREATION

In order to understand human nature, it is necessary to consider its origins, place, and role in the cosmic order. Mankind's existence is the result of a conscious, intentional, and willful act of God, and more than that, it is the result of an act motivated by divine love. Through Bahá'u'lláh, God says, "O son of man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee" (Hidden Words, Arabic no. 4). Human nature is the object and product of intentional or willful action by God, Who, motivated by love for humanity, brought it into existence as a particular kind of being. Mankind is not a chance creation that may or may not have come into existence depending on serendipitous chemical reactions; rather, like the rest of the phenomenal world, it is part of a plan, and as will be shown below, it is a necessary part of the universe. In other words, "it is evident that it is the creation of God, and is not a fortuitous

composition and arrangement" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 181).

The divine origin of mankind has at least three significant consequences. First, human beings are loved by God, Who created them freely. He did not have to create them; He could have omitted them from creation, or He could have created them for motives other than love.<sup>31</sup> Recognizing this divine love as the origin of human nature has momentous positive consequences for our attitude toward and understanding of the importance of ourselves and others. Indeed, it would revolutionize them altogether. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, we will then "[I]ook upon the whole human race as members of one family, all children of God; and, in so doing, [we] will see no difference between them" (*Paris Talks* 171). Second, the divine origin of human nature also means that its value is intrinsic, that it is not subject to devaluation due to prejudices or subjective preferences. Nor can it be degraded by outward circumstances. It can only be disgraced by our own actions against our essential nature. Third, because human nature is divinely made, we observe once again that it is not a construct dependent on personal or collective human perception, nor is it subject to "re-design" by humans. Man

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31 An ancient Babylonian myth, for example, gives the creation of man as motivated by the gods' drunken desire to amuse themselves; they make clay models of humans—including all kinds of distorted ones—for their pleasure.

is not man-made, and neglecting this fact has led to disastrous results in the twentieth century.

Although human nature, like all other phenomenal things, is created by God's will, it is especially favored or privileged by God. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "There is no doubt then, that of all created beings man is the nearest to the nature of God, and therefore receives a greater gift of the Divine Bounty" (*Paris Talks* 26). Bahá'u'lláh states:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God . . . To a *supreme degree* is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that *no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.* (*Gleanings* 90:1; emphasis added)

These teachings are noteworthy because they contradict secular beliefs in humanity's cosmic insignificance, its status as a mere fortuitous event like all other entities in the universe—a view that suggests it has no more and no less intrinsic value than anything else. To the contrary, human nature is created with a special essence and place in the cosmic order—the capacity to reflect all the names of God—which

distinguishes it from all other things and gives humankind a special position on the scale of being.<sup>32</sup> In short, human nature is ontologically and cosmically "privileged." This does not, of course, entitle humans to abuse the rest of creation but rather imposes a special duty to look after the world in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*.<sup>33</sup>

Contrary to contemporary scientific opinion, the Bahá'í Writings assert that there is a fundamental difference between human nature and the nature of other life forms and that this is a difference in kind and not in degree. A difference in kind is one that cannot be reduced to a common factor. A rock and a seagull are different in kind; each has essential attributes that the other does not and cannot have. All essential differences are differences in kind—pine-apples versus ponies, surgeons versus sturgeons, wizards versus washboards. On the other hand, in a difference of degree, there is at least one essential attribute that makes it possible to see one thing or condition as a degree or variation of another. For example, the three states of water—liquid water, steam, and ice—are different in degree but alike in their essential attribute of molecular structure. Knowledge

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<sup>32</sup> The categorization of phenomenal being, according to the Bahá'í Writings, goes from mineral, to plant, to animal, and finally to man.

<sup>33</sup> "Nobility obliges"; or, in the evangelist's words, "unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required" (Luke 12:48 KJV).

and ignorance, daylight at noon and daylight at dusk, muscular strength and muscular weakness illustrate differences of degree or a variation of a common element.

The Bahá'í Writings assert that the "human spirit" or "rational soul" is the feature that distinguishes human nature from animals and, by implication, from plants and minerals:

The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one and the same thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is called the rational soul, encompasses all things and, as far as human capacity permits, discovers the realities and becomes aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 55:5)

Because the "rational soul" is the essential attribute of human nature that no other creature has or can have, the difference between mankind and other beings is a difference in kind. This distinction is shown in several ways. One is that humankind includes and comprehends the lower forms of existence such as mineral, plant, and animal and, in addition, has reason: "In the human world the characteristics of the mineral, vegetable and animal worlds are found and in addition that of the

human kind, namely the intellectual characteristic, which discovereth the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles" (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 61). Mankind achieves such comprehension by means of the absolutely unique human activities that have no counterpart in the non-human world: "All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul" (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 58:3). This list is easily unpacked, containing such activities as writing operas, establishing public schools, engaging in philosophical debates, creating legal systems with codified laws and rights, as well as inventing modes of democratic governance.

Not only do the Bahá'í Writings establish the uniqueness of human nature, but they also teach that humankind occupies a distinct place in the structure of the physical cosmos. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, "The splendour of all the divine perfections is manifest in the reality of man, and it is for this reason that he is the vicegerent and apostle of God. If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the purpose of existence is the revelation of the divine perfections" (*Some Answered Questions* 50:4). Human nature is not only made in the image of God; it is also the capstone or crown of creation, without which the phenomenal universe would be incomplete. It represents the necessary degree of perfection that gives the universe a goal and purpose (note the



teleological thinking) just as the fruit is the reason for the existence of the tree (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:5). In other words, human nature plays a necessary role in the existence of the universe, which is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “We cannot say, then, that there was a time when man was not” (*Some Answered Questions* 50:6).

Human nature also occupies a unique place in the cosmic order in other ways:

In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof. For instance, all minerals, plants and animals are captives of nature . . . Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet* 9)

In other words, mankind’s essentially spiritual nature transcends or surpasses physical creation; therefore, humans have “mastery over nature.” As noted earlier, this is not, of course, a license to abuse the natural world, in which humans are embedded for their earthly tenure, because the phenomenal world is also one of God’s creations. Humanity’s “mastery” is the basis for our responsibility to take care of the phenomenal world and is not an excuse for predatory environmental attitudes and practices.

Elsewhere ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lists the ways in which human nature is essentially distinct from the rest of creation:

It is evident therefore that man is ruler over nature’s sphere and province. Nature is inert, man is progressive. Nature has no consciousness, man is endowed with it. Nature is without volition and acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is incapable of discovering mysteries or realities whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not in touch with the realm of God, man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God, man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues, nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices, nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts. *Altogether it is evident that man is more noble and superior; that in him there is an ideal power surpassing nature. He has consciousness, volition, memory, intelligent power, divine attributes and virtues of which nature is completely deprived, bereft and minus; therefore man is higher and nobler by reason of the ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in him.* (*Promulgation* 178; emphasis added)

Human nature is also unique insofar as it is the microcosm of the macrocosmic creation:

*The human kingdom is replete with the perfections of all the kingdoms below it with the addition of powers peculiar to man alone.* Man is, therefore, superior to all the creatures

below him, *the loftiest and most glorious being of creation. Man is the microcosm; and the infinite universe, the macrocosm.* The mysteries of the greater world, or macrocosm, are expressed or revealed in the lesser world, the microcosm. The tree, so to speak, is the greater world, and the seed in its relation to the tree is the lesser world . . . the greater world, the macrocosm, is latent and miniaturized in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man. This constitutes the universality or perfection of virtues potential in mankind. Therefore, it is said that man has been created in the image and likeness of God. (*Promulgation* 69; emphasis added)

Human nature, in other words, summarizes in miniature, “latent” form within itself the principles, the “mysteries,” and the “virtues” of the entire phenomenal world.<sup>34</sup> This inherent nobility of human nature is not just a matter of building human self-confidence; it is, more importantly, a matter of ethics, insofar as humans are expected to live up to their noble nature as an ethical duty. In the Hidden Words, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts, “O son of spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then

unto that for which thou wast created” (Arabic no. 22). In effect, this means that the special status of human nature in creation imposes certain obligations on us if we are to be worthy of the great gifts bestowed upon it. To do otherwise is to squander these gifts; we are not here to rest on our divinely conferred laurels but to strive for the self-actualization of our higher capacities and the progress of humanity as a whole:

All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. The Almighty beareth Me witness: To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 109:2)

Bahá'u'lláh enjoins humankind to act in accordance with its divinely bestowed nature, thereby making such behavior an ethical imperative.

However, human nature's origin, place, and role in the cosmic evolution also impose important limitations on mankind's 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 is, therefore, dependent on Him; because it is different in kind from God; and because there is “no tie of direct

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<sup>34</sup> Bahá'u'lláh makes a similar claim: “For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed” (*Gleanings* 90:1).

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 Absolute" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 27:4). From this it follows that all claims to be ontologically one with God are in error. They are misunderstandings of the intrinsic limits of human nature, namely, that we cannot transcend our ontological limits. This principle is so strict that according to the Bahá'í 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" (*Gleanings* 20:1). Moreover, "[f]or God to descend into the conditions of existence would be the greatest of imperfections" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 27:4). In other words, the mystical experience may be experienced as an ontological union, but it is not so in reality.

#### DUALITIES IN HUMAN NATURE

In my view, the Bahá'í concept of human nature is distinguished by five sets of ontological dualities that establish the general structure of human nature. All the other features of human nature have their place within this framework and can be related to it directly or indirectly. For example, the teachings about change, physical and spiritual evolution, progressive revelation, and even the afterlife are part of the rubric of potential and actuality. Teachings about morality fit under the

heading of higher and lower natures. The rest of this paper will illustrate this point. The five sets of dual aspects are as follows:

(1) (species) essence and (species) essential attributes: a horse and being a mammal;

(2) (species) essence and (species) accidental attributes: a horse and its chestnut coloring;

(3) potential and actuality: a seed and the actual tree that grows from it<sup>35</sup>;

(4) our higher spiritual and lower animal nature; the rational soul and the body;

(5) "innate and acquired" capacity<sup>36</sup>: human nature as created by God (first nature) and what humans choose to do with the divine endowments (second nature).<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the fifth set of dualities, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that while our "innate capacity"—or "first nature," as it is sometimes called—"is purely good,"

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35 "But the whole of the great tree is potentially latent and hidden in the little seed. When this seed is planted and cultivated, the tree is revealed" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 69).

36 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 57:9.

37 "'First nature' is Hegel's term for nature including human nature as created by God and/or untouched by human activity in any way. 'Second nature' is his term for nature including human nature as affected by mankind and society" ("Normativity and Subjectivity: First Nature—Second Nature—Mind").

our “acquired capacity” or “second nature,” which is the result of choices we make, explains, among other things, “the cause of evil” (*Some Answered Questions* 57:9).<sup>38</sup> While the “natural capacity” (first nature) is essentially spiritual, it does not exclude the body as an accidental attribute that participates in the goodness of God’s creation. It is “accidental” because, while necessary in the phenomenal realm, the body will eventually be left behind while the spirit will continue to evolve. Of course, the body is not in itself necessarily evil; evil comes into play when, as a result of human choices, the body and the material world are misused.

According to the Bahá’í Writings, these dualities are ontologically real and are not merely arbitrary verbal distinctions without objective reference.<sup>39</sup> Because these are ontologically real features of human nature, any analysis of human nature that omits them is intrinsically incomplete and is, to that extent, distorted or even false. For example, ontological materialism, the belief that only matter is real, cannot logically admit the existence of the soul and therefore develops an in-

complete and distorted understanding of mankind. Consequently, it becomes impossible to avoid serious errors in governance, administration, leadership, law, economics, medicine, and education. In economics, for example, the subject of marketing highlights this issue in that it ignores the effects of consumerism on people’s psychological and spiritual well-being, both in their short-term relationship with the material world and in the long-term with respect to their spiritual life. The consumerization of sexuality in the modern world also illustrates how denying the reality of the spirit affects humanity.

These dualities do not undermine the unity of human nature because they are the very constituents of human nature itself. If any of these dualities were missing, human nature would be incomplete in some essential way; as necessary constituents of human nature, they cannot undermine it. Moreover, these dualities show that human nature is processual. It is constituted in its unique human identity by such processes as actualizing potentials, developing a second nature, and struggling to control its animal nature. Thus, these dualities and their seeming contradictions are dialectical; that is, they create a process that unifies the opposites in the process itself, thereby helping to constitute human nature. In addition, these dualities have a functional and teleological unity inasmuch as they work toward their common goal of sustaining human nature and delineating its present

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38 As I shall discuss later, the distinction between these two capacities or natures is the basis of a Bahá’í theodicy for explaining the existence of evil in this world despite the fact that the phenomenal world, as created by God, is perfect.

39 See section 2 of this paper, “The Philosophical Terminology of the Bahá’í Writings,” for specific evidence.

objectives as well as its final goal of cosmic development ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* ch. 49).

The dialectical nature of some of the essential dualities of human nature causes man to be in a state of tension between actuality and potential: to wit, between what one *is* and what one *could* be; between what one *is* and what one *should* be; between our higher and lower nature; and between "innate capacities" and "acquired capacities" (first and second nature). In addition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies another aspect of this intrinsic tension; it is due to humanity's ontological position in creation:

Man is the ultimate degree of materiality and the beginning of spirituality; he is at the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the further degree of darkness and the beginning of the light . . . He has both an animal side and an angelic side and the role of the educator is to so train human souls that the angelic side may overcome the animal. Thus, should the divine powers, which are identical with perfection, overcome in man the satanic powers, he becomes the noblest of all creatures, but should the converse take place, he becomes the vilest of all beings. That is why he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection . . . *In no other species in the world of existence can such difference, distinction, contrast*

*and contradiction be seen as in man.*  
(*Some Answered Questions* 64:6–7;  
emphasis added)

In other words, human nature finds itself in an ontological borderland between different levels of reality, between matter and spirit, between the animal "captive to matter" and the angel free in the spiritual realms; between perfection and imperfection ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 38). Precisely because of this ambiguous ontological position, Manifestations are needed to guide humanity's physical, intellectual, and moral development. Finally, in this statement, 'Abdu'l-Bahá re-emphasizes humanity's distinctive nature as a processual being constituted by the previously examined dualities as well as its unique ontological position.

This ongoing constitutive conflict underscores that human nature is teleological. For example, in a letter from the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre to the Universal House of Justice, we find the following: "*The Bahá'í concept of 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'" (letter dated 5 July 1993; emphasis added). In other words, mankind has an innate goal or purpose, which is to actualize and develop those potentials that are in harmony with its "first nature" as created by God—their "spiritual susceptibilities" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 7). However,

some people develop qualities that are unsuited or inappropriate to human nature.

The full importance of possessing the intrinsic goal of actualizing the potentials bestowed by God becomes clearer when reflecting that this goal is a universal ethical imperative that is valid regardless of time, place, and historical circumstance. Here, too, it is evident that bringing mankind's animal aspects under spiritual control sets an objective standard by which the ethical merit of behavior can be assessed. Applying this standard is essential to preventing humanity from being misled by technological achievement as a measure of civilization, because it quickly becomes apparent that movements like Nazism used great technological achievements to pursue the lowest moral goals:

For if the spiritual qualities of the soul, open to the breath of the Divine Spirit, are never used, they become atrophied, enfeebled, and at last incapable; whilst the soul's material qualities alone being exercised, they become terribly powerful—and the unhappy, misguided man becomes more savage, more unjust, more vile, more cruel, more malevolent than the lower animals themselves. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 97)

From a Bahá'í perspective, the ethically right choices are those that harmonize with our divinely created first nature or "natural capacities"

as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, the right choices are those based on the recognition that "[m]an 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" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 73). Making ethically correct choices involves recognizing our own spiritual nature and spiritual longings and fitting our choices to our true identity, which is the only part of us that will endure after physical death. At this point, the significance of metaphysics for ethics and human development becomes clear. If humans do not recognize their spiritual nature, it becomes more difficult and ultimately impossible to make correct ethical choices. The denial of spirit easily reduces choices to physical advantages or disadvantages. But what if there is a conflict between short-term physical good and long-term spiritual good?

The necessity of making the right choices is also another indicator that human nature is teleological, which is to say that we are obligated to pursue certain divinely intended choices and qualities and to avoid "unnatural" ones that do not reflect our spiritual character. The guidance given by the Manifestations helps us meet these standards, which are objective and therefore 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"; statist ethics, which are based on what



is good for the state; or utilitarian ethics, which are based on whatever the majority decides is good, the Bahá'í Writings teach that ultimately God, not humanity, determines moral standards. Ethics are not individually or collectively subjective.

#### BODY-MIND DUALISM

The relationship between the physical brain and the human spirit or non-material mind is vital to a full understanding of the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature for at least three reasons. First, the Bahá'í Writings establish the fundamental unity of human nature by showing that it is not constituted by two apparently incompatible aspects and that it is not a form of mind-body materialism. Second, the Writings also prioritize these two aspects of human nature in a way that shows how they work together and supports the teachings on immortality and mankind's essentially spiritual nature. Finally, it is also important to understand the Bahá'í solution to the mind-body problem because it will inevitably face criticism from mind-brain identity theory.

There are basically two views on mind-body duality. The first view is dualism, which was revived by René Descartes, who claimed that human nature is comprised of two substances: an extended and unconscious substance that forms the body (including the brain) and a non-extended, conscious, and thinking substance that forms the soul or mind (*Meditations* no. 6). The challenge of Cartesian dualism

is to explain how these ontologically distinct and incompatible substances can interact as constituents of a unified human organism. How can matter interact with non-matter? There is a long history of proposed solutions, one of which—occasionalism—accepts dualism and tries to coordinate the two parts by means of direct divine action. That is, mind and body are connected by God's ongoing intervention: when the mind decides to lift an arm, God causes the arm to rise.<sup>40</sup> The second solution to the mind-body problem is monism—whether materialistic or idealistic. Both reject mind-body dualism altogether. Idealistic monists assert that both body and mind are mental in nature.<sup>41</sup> For materialists, the mind and the brain (which is part of the body) are the same, which is why this view is sometimes call “identity theory.” Because it is materialist, identity theory also denies the existence of soul and spirit. In the contemporary world, the brain-mind identity theory is dominant and is, therefore, the chief rival of all forms of brain-mind dualism and the Bahá'í solution. Whereas the Bahá'í Writings offer a third alternative, namely that the whole mind-body problem is chimerical, an illusion caused by Descartes' faulty analysis in identifying

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40 Unpromising as this theory seems at first glance, it remains an option because of the serious difficulties attending its chief rival, identity theory.

41 Hegel is an example in the West; Buddhism is also monist in this sense.

both the non-extended spirit and the extended body as distinct substances and thus as separate, independent, and intrinsically incompatible.

'Abdu'l-Bahá points out Descartes' error while presenting His argument for the immortality of the soul:

Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by itself, and that the spirit is the accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that *the rational soul is the substance* through which the body subsists. *If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—the spirit—remains.* (*Some Answered Questions* 66:2)

In summary, the solution to the Cartesian dilemma is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's identification of the human spirit, or rational soul, as a substance and the material body, including the brain, as "accident." As a substance, the human spirit exists independently and is able to possess attributes. By "exists independently" I mean that every individual rational soul is distinct from every other and does not depend on them to exist. For example, Bucephalus the horse possesses the essential attribute of being a mammal and the accidental attributes of being black and having a star on his forehead. However, "black" and "starred forehead" themselves cannot be distinct substances because they cannot exist independently as things in their own right. In the case of humans, the rational soul can exist

and be human without the accidental body. For this reason, spirit and body are not necessarily and eternally connected, and the spirit will eventually be able to exist without the body.

Because the human spirit, or rational soul, is a substance and the body is an attribute, there is no interaction problem between them any more than there is an interaction problem between a ripe tomato and its redness. "Redness" is an attribute that ripe tomatoes exhibit at certain stages of their existence in the material world. It might be said that the essence of the tomato expresses and manifests itself by means of redness as it actualizes certain potentials in the physical world. How can there be an interaction problem between a substance or essence, its inherent potentials, and the actualization of these potentials? It would be like saying that there is an interaction problem between the seed and the tree growing from it. Such a claim is not logically tenable. Bahá'í scholar John S. Hatcher makes a similar point when, in regards to things and their activities, he says, "there is no interface problem between things and their activities" (174). To paraphrase William Butler Yeats, we cannot "separate the dancer from the dance" (113).

'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains the relationship between human spirit and body by means of an analogy, stating that "the connection of the spirit with the body is even as the connection of this lamp with a mirror" (*Some Answered Questions* 66:3). In this analogy,

the sun and the mirror have an accidental relationship: the mirror is in no way necessary for the existence of the sun or for the sun to retain its essence as a giver of light. Moreover, the sun in the mirror is an expression or manifestation of the actual sun and in that sense is an attribute of the sun, just as the body is an attribute insofar as the body's actions are expressions of the rational soul. In other words, the relationship between the sun and its mirror image replicates the relationship between the human spirit and the body. Again, there is no interaction problem because no such problem can exist between a substance and its attribute.

'Abdu'l-Bahá draws attention to two major difficulties in the identity theory. The first is the problem of meaning and how it is communicated. He writes that music has emotional and spiritual effects on man even though the "vibrations of the air [are] an accident . . . accounted as naught" (*Some Answered Questions* 69:4). In themselves, the physical sound waves have no emotions or meaning, yet somehow they become very meaningful to listeners even though no amount of scientific analysis can detect such meaning. The same problem is even more acute for written texts. The letters, words, and phrases have no meaning in themselves, and physical analysis cannot reveal any.

This raises a crucial question: How can physical brains know the meaning of a text as mundane as "Gone for lunch" or as metaphoric and laden

with meaning as "I smell a rat"?<sup>42</sup> Using a physical device—whether a computer, an MRI, an EEG, or a physical brain—to decipher the meaning of a text leads only to more physical marks on a computer screen, or electro-chemical "blips" in the brain, or squiggly lines on a printout. Physical analysis cannot reveal the meaning of these "ciphers" because the meaning is not in the physical marks themselves. None of these marks are the meaning; one set of marks has simply been replaced by another. Repeating this process with a different machine or brain that also can only scan literal marks merely initiates an infinite regress and, consequently, provides no answer. In principle, therefore, meaning cannot be comprehended by physical analysis; from this it follows that the comprehension of meaning requires the intervention of a non-physical process and/or entity. To solve this problem, a non-physical intervenor must be implicitly or explicitly imported to make identity theory viable, otherwise there would be no escape from the infinite regress of physical processes and no one would be able to understand the meaning of any text.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at some point a non-physical interve-

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42 Even if we decipher the mysterious script, we are still faced with the problem of understanding the translation.

43 In my experience, attempts to claim the contrary inevitably "slip in" a non-physical intervenor in order to achieve understanding.

nor—whether we call it soul, spirit, or mind—must be involved in the comprehension of meaning.

Clearly, the need for such a spiritual intervenor constitutes a major self-contradiction in an identity theory of brain and mind. Indeed, this contradiction throws the tenability of the theory into doubt because it inadvertently resurrects Descartes' substance dualism insofar as it requires both a physical brain and a non-material intervenor. On the other hand, the Bahá'í substance-attribute solution does not suffer from such a self-contradiction because there is no need to import any non-physical intervenors to understand meaning. The human spirit or rational soul takes on that role.

The second major problem for identity theory mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerns issue of qualia. He says, "[C]onsider how the vibrations of the air, which are an accident among accidents and which are accounted as naught, attract and *exhilarate* the spirit of man and move him to the utmost: They cause him to *laugh* and to *weep*, and can even induce him to throw himself in harm's way" (*Some Answered Questions* 69:4). The term "qualia" refers to the subjective qualitative experiences of our own conscious states of mind. These states of mind include each person's unique experiences of sensations (such as "blue," "cold," or "sad"), real and/or imaginative experiences, and events. Qualia consist of the "what it is like" mental states,<sup>44</sup> that is, the qualitative

aspects of our experiences such as being six years old, viewing Vincent Van Gogh's "Sunflowers," or reading Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. They make up the whole of our subjectively experienced "life-world," which is why they are so incredibly important to humans. Much of human life is driven by the quest for certain qualia or subjective experiences, as seen in the pursuit of beauty, friendship, love, poetry, stories, pleasure, music, ritual, humor, justice, truth, spirituality, and meaning, among other things.

Why do qualia and subjective experience pose difficulties for brain-mind identity theory? In the first place, like meaning, qualia are not physical things—there is no way to gather or measure someone's subjective experiences. None of the criteria of scientific evidence—physicality, measurability, objective and external observability, and falsifiability, among others—can be applied to qualia and subjective experience. Physical measuring devices only provide knowledge of things as can be "acquired through the senses" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 16:2)—which excludes qualia and subjective experiences. Consequently, they are not appropriate targets of scientific study. Furthermore, because qualia and subjective experiences are not physical, their actions and interactions cannot be explained in terms of physical cause and effect. The non-physical nature of qualia creates a conundrum for brain-mind identity theory: How can a physical organ like the brain accommodate a class of non-physical

44 See Thomas Nagel's "What Is It

Like to Be a Bat?"

qualia and subjective experiences? This is self-contradictory. How, for example, can there be aspects of brain function that cannot be measured? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the existence of qualia and subjective experience is incompatible with brain-mind identity theory.

By contrast, the Bahá'í substance-attribute solution “locates” non-material “things” like meaning, qualia, and subjective experience “in” the “rational soul” because they are “intelligible realities” (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 16:3). But just as the deliberations of the rational soul are expressed or manifested in the physical world through the accidental attribute of the body-brain, so are meaning, qualia, and subjective experiences. In other words, in the material world, physical sounds or visual marks are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the communication of meaning or the explanation of subjective experiences and qualia.

fMRIs and EEG machines do not solve the difficulties of identity theory. While they provide real-time correlations with qualia and subjective experiences, in themselves they are not subjective experiences and are not what a person is experiencing; neither do they provide any clues as to what is being qualitatively and subjectively experienced. The fMRI may tell us about which parts of the brain are engaged—but these are not the qualia or subjective experiences themselves. Indeed, no amount of analysis of fMRI images and EEG printouts can

suggest the existence of qualia. All they record is electrical and biochemical brain activities. Given the enormously important role played by qualia and subject experience in mankind's existence, this disconnect suggests a serious shortcoming in purely physical explorations and explanation of brain function. If brain and mind are truly one and the same, a disconnect of this magnitude should not occur, and the fact that it does suggests a flaw in identity theory. A materialist theory that cannot avoid invoking the existence of non-physical features cannot help but undermine itself. Furthermore, it has no way of studying in themselves the qualia and subjective experiences that play such a decisive role in the lives of all individuals and, therefore, is not an adequate theory to explain the mind-brain relationship.

#### THE RATIONAL HUMAN NATURE

The essential rationality of human nature is one of the key features of Bahá'í philosophy and, in our time, one of the most philosophically controversial. This teaching is opposed by the entire project of postmodernism, which views rationalism as a Western cultural invention (a charge easily disproven, as we will soon observe) and rejects all notions of privileging reason and logic above other methods of acquiring knowledge and thinking. According to Richard Wolin, a specialist in intellectual history, “in the lexicon of deconstruction [a post-modern method of textual analysis]

'reason' is identified as a fundamental source of tyranny and oppression . . . [and for Foucault] a source of domination" (21). Moreover, according to such a philosophy, because reason is only one method among many of acquiring knowledge, it cannot really give us truth, for postmodernism assumes that all methods of obtaining knowledge and thinking are equally valid. Therefore, reason must not be privileged and humans should not fear being "tempted to seek refuge in myth, magic, madness, illusion, or intoxication" (Wolin 21). Therefore, if privileging reason as a method of thinking and acquiring knowledge is untenable, then neither can it be privileged in a philosophy of human nature. In effect, from a postmodernist perspective, "privileging reason" is viewed as an attempt to dominate and denigrate other "ways of knowing." Objections notwithstanding, the Bahá'í Writings promulgate the concept that human nature is fundamentally rational insofar as the human spirit and the rational soul are identical. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares:

The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the *human spirit* and the *rational soul*—designate one and the same thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is called the rational soul, encompasses all things and as far as human capacity permits, discovers their realities and becomes

aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things. (*Some Answered Questions* 55:5; emphasis added)

In other words, mankind not only is essentially spiritual,<sup>45</sup> but more specifically, it is essentially rational; the human spirit and the rational soul are one and the same and constitute the definitive attribute of human nature. Rationality is the differentia that identifies mankind as such and makes humans what they are. 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates on this subject:

reason, which comprehends (or detects) the realities of things, is a spiritual reality, not physical (or material). Therefore the animal is deprived of reason, and it (reason) is specialized to mankind. The animal feeleth realities which are perceptible to the senses, but man perceiveth intellectual realities (or things perceptible to reason). Consequently, it hath become evident that reason is a spiritual faculty, not physical (or material). (*Tablets* 208)

It is apparent that the rational soul and reason are identified with one another because they are both spiritual and have the same power to transcend the senses and "discover [the] realities" of things ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some*

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45 "Man is, in reality, a spiritual being" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 73).



*Answered Questions* 55:5). Without a rational soul or reasoning powers, humans would lack their essential, defining attribute, which is to say, without reason we would not be human.

Furthermore, the rational soul and the capacity of reason are universal among mankind: "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*" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 58:3; emphasis added). Willingly or not, consciously or not, all individuals and collectives possess these rational powers given by God. Possessing these powers is not a matter of choice. However, because humans have free will, they may choose to ignore, deny, or misuse their powers of reason. For example, philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and his postmodernist supporters like Foucault and Paul Feyerabend<sup>46</sup> reject the validity of reason and its "privileged position" over other ways of knowing. Other individuals simply neglect reason; they do not necessarily oppose it but find it irrelevant to their dominant interest in pleasure, wealth accumulation, advantage, or social success. In still others, their "innate capacities are completely subverted" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 57:9). These

people may use humanity's reasoning capacities to strive for irrational ends. A *prima facie* example is the Cold War policy of mutual assured destruction. Reason was perverted insofar as extremely rational and logically devised technology was applied to an irrational goal—mutual annihilation. However, such mis-developments are accidental in regards to human nature and therefore do not negate the value and the universal possession of the rational soul.

The rational soul and its logical powers are not only necessary for discoveries in the phenomenal world; they are also essential to understanding religious and spiritual truths. Bahá'u'lláh declares "religion is in complete harmony with science and reason," and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's states that "[r]eligion must stand the analysis of reason" and specifically criticizes several Christian religious teachings as "irrational and clearly mistaken" because of their self-contradictory nature (*Promulgation* 232; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 29:9). If the traditional understanding of the Trinity were true, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts,

[t]he foundations of the religion of God would rest upon an illogical proposition which no mind could ever conceive, and how could the mind be required to believe a thing which it cannot conceive? Such a thing could not be grasped by human reason—how much less be clothed in an intelligible form—but would remain

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46 See Feyerabend's *Farewell to Reason* and *Against Method* for arguments against reason based largely on the political "needs" of society.

sheer fancy. (*Some Answered Questions* 27:9)

In other words, even religious interpretations must be amenable to reason and logic to be understood and believed. It is, for example, impossible to believe in square circles or that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo because no logical thought can derive such a conclusion from the evidence in hand. More specifically in regard to religion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá critiques the Christian interpretation of Christ's resurrection and replaces it with a rational interpretation, of which He says, "it is in no way contradicted by science but rather affirmed by both science and reason" (*Some Answered Questions* 23:7). Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates the importance of applying reason to religion by discounting the literal interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve. He says, "If the outward meaning of this account were to be attributed to a wise man, all men of wisdom would assuredly deny it, arguing that such a scheme and arrangement could not possibly have proceeded from such a person" (*Some Answered Questions* 30:4). The clear implication is that an intelligent being would not tell an irrational story. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a rational explanation for the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which He regards as irrational in its traditional interpretation (*Some Answered Questions* 27:1–10).

It would, however, be a serious mistake to conclude that the inherent

rationality of human nature is confined to the intellect. The Bahá'í concept of human nature also recognizes other ways of knowing and reflecting than by intellect alone. The process of intellectual reasoning requires sequential steps of logical inferential reasoning that can be explained and analyzed verbally and are, therefore, discursive. In contrast, other ways of knowing—for example, intuition, spiritual susceptibilities, and even transcendent or mystical experiences—do not work in this inferential manner, nor can their processes of deliberation be verbally explained or analyzed. For this reason, they are non-discursive. However—and this is essential—a non-discursive process of deliberation is not necessarily non-rational or irrational, so there is no inevitable conflict with the rational soul. The process used by these other ways of knowing may be described as trans-rational; that is, it provides knowledge that unassisted reason cannot acquire. However, this knowledge is complementary to and compatible with reason and the concept of the rational soul. Were it not, such knowledge would contradict belief in the unity of the human spirit, would be incomprehensible, and would therefore be unfit for practical applications in the phenomenal world.

This complementarity and compatibility between the nature of reason and the other ways of knowing is evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that these other ways enable 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" (*Promulgation* 316; emphasis added). He also says:

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. (*Selections* 185)

In other words, there are "invisible realms" whose existence is beyond the intellect's comprehension and can only be known by non-discursive means of transcendent or mystical experiences once we have detached ourselves from the world. Such knowledge may also come through the heart (of course intended in its metaphorical sense) and intuition, thus suggesting that some knowledge may be obtainable only through "other ways of knowing." However, it must be emphasized that this conclusion does not mean that such knowledge is necessarily and inherently irrational because if it were, humans could not understand and apply it in the phenomenal world. An example of remaining excessively attached to this physical plane and being

deprived of the perspectives opened by heavenly bestowals is the scientific approach of interpreting the phenomenal world in strictly materialistic terms, neglecting or even denying the relevance of the spiritual origin and basis of material reality.

The need for spiritual augmentation—not displacement—of the powers of reason is made clear by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He says, "But the human spirit [the rational soul], *unless assisted by the spirit of faith*, cannot become acquainted with the *divine mysteries and the heavenly realities*. It is like a mirror which, although clear, bright and polished, is still in need of light. Not until a sunbeam falls upon it can it discover the divine mysteries" (*Some Answered Questions* 55:5; emphasis added). One way of understanding this teaching is that the divine secrets are not just rational but also trans-rational; that is, they provide knowledge that unassisted reason cannot acquire. It is important to note that this passage does not say that *reason* cannot discover divine mysteries but that *unassisted reason* cannot. In other words, reason is necessary but not sufficient. However, this knowledge is complementary to and compatible with reason and the "rational soul" because if it were not, there would be a fracture in human nature. The "spirit of faith" *assists* the rational soul, that is, works with it but does not deny or displace it. In regard to heavenly realities, reason must be supplemented by direct and non-discursive experience of the truth that only the spirit of faith can

provide. Here is a mundane example to which most people can relate: No amount of rational analysis or reflection can provide complete knowledge and understanding of a kiss. Only the actual experience can do that, and once that is obtained and the experience is there, we will know—in non-discursive terms—why reason may be necessary but is still insufficient.

The same principle of needing certain non-discursive experiences to make knowledge and understanding complete applies, albeit at a higher level, to knowing these heavenly realities. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s mirror metaphor in the quotation above teaches the same lesson. The appearance of the sun in the previously darkened mirror provides the experience of light that cannot be known by mere thought alone. In short, the trans-rational completes reason, which helps prepare us for the trans-rational. They are logically correlated and both part of a coherent logical progression. Of course, the decisive role in this preparation belongs to the spirit of faith, which makes human beings into more sensitive and fit instruments to receive these divine secrets. In other words, some knowledge may be received non-discursively by direct insight if our spiritual susceptibilities are sufficiently developed. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “if the inner eye be opened and the spiritual ear attuned, and if spiritual feelings come to predominate, the immortality of the spirit will be seen as clearly as the sun” (*Some Answered Questions* 60:7).

Although intuitions and transcendental experiences are non-discursive ways of knowing, they are part of human nature. The fact that such experiential knowledge is non-discursive does not make it non-rational; indeed, as we have already noted, if it were, it would be in disharmony with the human spirit, which is the rational soul. Speaking about logical arguments for God’s existence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá avers:

These are theoretical arguments adduced for weak souls, but if the *eye of inner vision* be opened, a hundred thousand clear proofs will be seen. 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 grace of the spirit, it is necessary to set forth external arguments. (*Some Answered Questions* 2:8; emphasis added)

Inner perception—that is, direct sight, intuition, and transcendental experiences—can replace the need for abstract argumentation and chains of inferential discursive reasoning. If we have experienced the “indwelling spirit,” there is no need to prove a particular truth any more than we need to prove the sun. We simply open our eyes. 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. However, there is no intrinsic conflict between the two ways of knowing. In other words, the

rational soul or human spirit remains a unity.

The interdependence and consequent complementarity of the “rational soul,” the heart, and other ways of knowing are manifest in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that

[i]f 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.* (*Promulgation* 231; emphasis added)

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*” (*Selections* 299. Emphasis added.). Precisely because “reason is the first faculty of man” that is, the prime distinguishing attribute of the human soul, and because the human spirit and the rational soul are one, the heart and other ways of knowing are included in mankind’s rational nature.

If human nature were subject to a conflict between the “rational soul” and other ways of knowing, the Bahá'í Writings as a whole would have a

serious self-contradictions in their philosophy of human nature. Even if the process of attaining knowledge is non-discursive the results must still make sense, that is, explicable in terms we can understand and be applicable to this world. If the results do not, they will simply be irrational—something which the Writings clearly reject. The self-evident conclusion is that both the discursive and non-discursive, rational and trans-rational results complement each other in the quest for spiritual and intellectual evolution.

#### THE CONCEPT OF REASON IN THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS

To deepen our understanding of the rational soul and human nature, it is necessary to examine, at least briefly, the Bahá'í concept of reason more closely. To avoid a lengthy discussion, we will consider three main aspects of reason.

In the first place, the Bahá'í Writings associate reason and rationality with logic as, for example, in the following statement: “In divine questions we must not depend entirely upon the heritage of tradition and former human experience; nay, rather, we must exercise reason, analyze and logically examine the facts presented so that confidence will be inspired and faith attained” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 326). The same association is found in His declaration that “[t]he *human spirit consists of the rational, or logical, reasoning faculty*, which apprehends general ideas and things intelligible

and perceptible" (*Tablets* 115; emphasis added). That is to say, this faculty is constitutionally part of the human spirit. This association of reason and rationality with logical thought is also evident in the assertion that "[i]f religion were contrary to logical reason then it would cease to be a religion and be merely a tradition" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 144).

Furthermore, the "rational soul" can use logical reason to understand spiritual and religious issues within the epistemological limits of human nature. For example, reason can prove the existence of God, although it cannot discover God's essential nature: "The existence of the Divine Being hath been clearly established, on the basis of logical proofs, but the reality of the Godhead is beyond the grasp of the mind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 46). God's existence is provable by reason, but His "reality" or essence is not. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes even further, saying, "The intellectual proofs of Divinity are based upon observation and evidence which constitute decisive argument, *logically proving the reality of Divinity, the effulgence of mercy, the certainty of inspiration and immortality of the spirit*" (*Promulgation* 326; emphasis added). Reason can not only prove the existence of God; it can also discover the divine attributes as articulated and exemplified by the Manifestation. It cannot discover these attributes by itself, but it can deduce why the divine attributes must logically exist. For example, because God is not compelled by anything outside Himself, creating

the universe was a free, intentional act that bestows the gift of existence on all things. Reason can also deduce the "immortality of the spirit" as without it, the divinely given "spiritual longings" would have no object and be in vain. Indeed, such longings would be deceptive, and that would contradict the loving and merciful attributes of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá summarizes the teachings on reason and rationality and logic when He asks, "If we insist that such and such a subject is not to be *reasoned* out and tested according to the established *logical modes of the intellect*, what is the use of the reason which God has given man?" (*Promulgation* 63; emphasis added).

The second attribute of reason and logic is the principle of non-contradiction. This principle asserts that a statement and its negation or denial cannot both be true in the same sense, at the same time, and under the same circumstances. The Writings demonstrate this principle in the insistence on the oneness of truth; a self-contradictory truth cannot possibly exist because it simultaneously makes two opposite claims that cancel each other out. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that "truth or reality is not multiple; it is not divisible" and that "*truth is one*, although its manifestations may be very different" (*Promulgation* 106; *Paris Talks* 128; emphasis added). If contradictions appear, it is necessary to look deeper because superficial differences in the expressions of truth do not necessarily imply *logical* contradictions in the underlying reasoning.



'Abdu'l-Bahá seeks to avoid contradictions, and in doing so, He sets the example for resolving contradictions where possible. Shoghi Effendi reaffirms this theme, saying, "Truth may, in covering different subjects, appear to be contradictory, and yet it is all one if you carry the thought through to the end," a principle he emphasizes by asserting that "[t]ruth is one when it is independently investigated, it does not accept division" (qtd. in Hornby 476; *Japan* 35).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to rationally resolving contradictions is exemplified in His explication of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which He regards as irrational in its traditional interpretation: "The reality of the Divinity... admits of no division and multiplicity for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things... For that divine reality to descend into stations and degrees would be tantamount to deficiency, contrary to perfection and utterly impossible" (*Some Answered Questions*, 27: 2–3). In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá finds the traditional understanding of the Trinity to be self-contradictory and He therefore replaces it with a non-self-contradictory explanation (*Some Answered Questions*, 27: 6–10) showing thereby that He views contradictions as problematical and undesirable in our thinking processes, even on spiritual matters. His insistence on logical consistency—which requires the elimination of contradictions—is evident in His declaration that were we to accept

traditional interpretations based inexplicable and irrational beliefs,

the foundations of the religion of God would rest upon *an illogical proposition* which no mind could ever conceive, and *how could the mind be required to believe a thing which it cannot conceive?* Such a thing could not be grasped by human reason—how much less be clothed in an intelligible form—but would remain sheer fancy. (*Some Answered Questions* 27:9; emphasis added)

Another example of classical logic is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument regarding the immortality of the human soul, which is that a thing cannot be a substance and an attribute at the same time. Logical consistency, whether it be propositional agreement and/or complementarity or neutrality, is an essential principle in the Bahá'í Writings.

The third attribute of reason and logic is universality. In other words, the principle of non-contradiction is universally applied by all human beings and, indeed, all living things. My pet ducks, Jack and Jill, know that Dozer, my neighbor's big yappy dog, is either outside the front gate or inside the front gate and cannot be both at the same time and in the same sense, and they make their decision to step outside for a stroll accordingly. Even humans who deny the principle of non-contradiction—such as Nagarjuna and Hegel—still obey this principle

in their 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. Thus, this principle is universal—at least in actual practice—and that makes it an essential attribute of human nature or the rational soul. Because all humans have at least the capacity for reasoning, it can be one of the foundation stones of the unification of mankind because deliberations will be based on the common ground of discursive reasoning.

Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements aligning reason with the essence of humankind have far-reaching implications, especially for the goal of unifying humankind into one global commonwealth. Because rationality is a universal characteristic of human nature, it applies to people across cultures, historical epochs, and geographical locations. 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 that transcends differences among all cultures 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 remained a distinct essence—that is, the human species—from the beginning of his formation in the

matrix of the world," which means that we have always possessed the distinguishing attribute of man, that is, the rational soul (*Some Answered Questions* 49:8). Precisely because we recognize that our ancestors were rational, we are able to interpret the artifacts they left behind. 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 that Bahá'u'lláh came to establish.

Finally, it should be noted—albeit briefly—that reason has other, yet related uses in the Writings, though none that contradict the ideas articulated above. One meaning of reason is "appropriateness," that is, treating one kind of thing as befits it and not as if it were another—for example, not treating a human being like an animal.<sup>47</sup> The concept of reasonableness as appropriateness is the foundation of the doctrine of progressive revelation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "All religious laws conform to reason, and are suited to the people for whom they are framed, and for the age in which they are to be obeyed" (*Paris Talks* 141). The fact that revelations are "suited to the people for whom they are framed" means that they are appropriate—and, therefore, reasonable—for that particular

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<sup>47</sup> Their essential natures are too different because the latter has no rational soul. See p. 122 of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Paris Talks*.

time and those specific circumstances. Comparing religious cycles to the life cycle of a tree, He further elaborates by stating that “[i]t is not reasonable that man should hold to the old tree, claiming that its life forces are undiminished” (*Promulgation* 142). Moreover, if a thought or action is appropriate and reasonable, it is also just. This principle underlies the following assertion of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Know that justice consists in rendering to each his due (*Some Answered Questions* 79:1). The third sense of reason, or being reasonable, refers to having a purpose. Actions that have no purpose are simply arbitrary and random and therefore are not informed or shaped by reason. This is one of the aspects of purpose that seems appropriate to Shoghi Effendi’s reference to a “rational God” (*World Order* 112). Bahá’u’lláh tells us that God created us for a purpose: “the purpose of creation . . . is the knowledge of Him Who is the Eternal Truth” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* n. 23). Creation is not “accidental” or fortuitous but is informed by a plan and purpose (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 47:5). It is evident that all of these meanings of the terms “reason” and “reasonableness” are compatible with the logical principle of non-contradiction.

#### FREE WILL

The subject of free will brings to light additional aspects of human nature. It touches on mankind’s essentially spiritual nature, consciousness and

intentionality, mankind’s intrinsically privileged place in creation, the roles of the body and the rational soul, the universality of free will, freedom from nature, the foundations of ethical freedom, individual and social responsibility, and the origin of evil. Each of these shall be examined in turn.

The existence of individual free will is an essential feature of the Bahá’í philosophy of human nature. Indeed, the work of Manifestations in guiding individuals and societies toward their spiritual and material evolution would be completely futile if humans were unable to choose to alter their ways of thinking, beliefs, and behaviors. Indeed, without free will, ethics *per se* are not possible because ethical behavior has at least two characteristics: it must be conscious and intentional. No ethical act—whether good or bad—can be performed accidentally or inadvertently (without knowledge or forethought). That is to say, without choice and without intention to act on this choice there is no ethical act. To claim otherwise would be equivalent to asserting that a rockslide acted ethically by missing a doe and a fawn. No one can claim to have acted morally if, due to a sudden unconscious and involuntary spasm in his arm while driving, he avoided hitting a pedestrian who had slipped in front of his car. No conscious choice and intention to act on this choice took place; therefore, it is not an ethical act. A good event is not necessarily ethical: if there was no use of free will, no choice and intention were involved. Nor do we say a

teething baby acts immorally by biting down on a finger put in its mouth. An event may be bad or even evil, but the lack of conscious choice and intention make it inappropriate to call the event morally bad or evil.

Free will—and humans' existence as ethical beings—are based on the human spirit, or rational soul, which is not subject to the physical laws of cause and effect. The human spirit is not part of any natural causal chain that, according to materialists, determines our ethical choices and makes them predictable in a scientific way. In *Free Will*, materialist neurophilosopher Sam Harris asks, "How can we be 'free' as conscious agents if everything that we consciously intend is caused by events in our brain that we *do not* intend and of which we are entirely unaware?" (25). As an advocate of mind-brain identity theory, he is left with no logical conclusion but that free will as an illusory exemption from cause and effect is impossible and that our "feeling of freedom arises from our moment-to-moment ignorance of the prior causes of our thoughts and actions" (32). In short, for Sam Harris, free will is a delusion.

A simple but effective response to Harris's conclusion would result from inquiring whether or not he freely chose to write his book. If he did not, then perhaps he should not receive any royalties. But in all seriousness, common sense dictates that we do have some degree of free will, though we may not, in this life, ever know the full extent of that freedom. Therefore, our

rejection of determinism has three consequences for our understanding of human nature. First, an act of free will is uncaused, which is to say, it has no antecedent causes that determine the rational soul's intention, choice, or action. The soul is a "first cause" or "originative causality" of a choice or act (Adler 481). This requires it to be intrinsically active or dynamic, which is affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He states that "nothing that exists remains in a state of repose—that is, all things are in motion" (*Some Answered Questions* 63:1). In short, the human spirit is active in nature and can take the initiative and "spontaneously originate a series of events" (Adler 481).

Second, although human beings have been endowed universally with free will in their first nature as created by God, the decisions as to whether or not to actualize free will, and to what extent and in what way, remain with the individual. These decisions and their consequences constitute our second nature, which results from what we do with God's initial gift. Although in the external world there may be many obstacles to the exercise of free will—physical, political, cultural, and social—as we will see, the Bahá'í Writings make it clear that moral choices are always available and, therefore, humankind has radical responsibility for the courses of action it pursues.

Third, the capacity for choice and action makes mankind intrinsically superior to the natural world, which is governed by the law of cause and effect. Nature leaves no room for

choice and intention. Causality necessarily predetermines particular outcomes and makes no exceptions in its operations. Innocent babies drown on beaches as much as war criminals and torturers do.<sup>48</sup> In short, nature is amoral; ethical categories such as conscious choice, intention, and ethical responsibility do not apply to it.

From this it follows logically that free will is the foundation of our existence as ethical beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out:

All the sciences, arts and discoveries were mysteries of nature, and according to natural law these mysteries should remain latent, hidden; but man has proceeded to break this law, *free himself from this rule* and bring them forth into the realm of the visible. Therefore, he is the ruler and commander of nature. *Man has intelligence; nature has not. Man has volition; nature has none. Man has memory; nature is without it. Man has the reasoning faculty; nature is deprived. Man has the perceptive faculty; nature cannot perceive.* It is therefore proved and evident *that man is nobler than nature.* (*Promulgation 17*; emphasis added)

Each of the ways in which humankind is superior to nature concerns mental or spiritual gifts, which are

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<sup>48</sup> Dr. Josef Mengele, the notorious "Angel of Death" at Auschwitz, drowned on a beach in Brazil in 1979.

essential aspects of human nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that nature has no will or volition, which means that it lacks intentionality, the ability to choose certain outcomes over others, and the capacity to act toward their attainment. The other qualities mentioned here by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are all attributes of consciousness, without which there can be no free will: "*all other beings, whether of the mineral, the vegetable or the animal world, cannot deviate from the laws of nature, nay, all are the slaves thereof. Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature*" (*Tablet 10*; emphasis added).<sup>49</sup>

The body, which is an accidental attribute of the human spirit or rational soul, is part of the cause-and-effect process of nature and in that way is "captive" when it comes to physical conditions like sleep, sickness, and eventually death. However, mind and soul—that is, essential constituents of mankind—are not subject to physical causality: "Certain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity—in other words, the choice of good or evil actions . . . [*H*]e is free in the choice of good or evil actions, and it is of his own accord

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<sup>49</sup> Self-sacrificing instincts in animals are not conscious and intentional ethical choices. The two must not be confused or conflated because they are not the same kind of things. Therefore, such instincts cannot be seen as a "pre-figuring" or "anticipation" of ethical activities in humans.

that he performs them" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 70:3; emphasis added). In other words, the Bahá'í Writings maintain that all humans possess radical freedom by virtue of being human and having a spiritual essence.

The existence of free will is not dependent on external circumstances, whether natural or man-made. On this issue, the Bahá'í Writings may be said to concur with Sartre, who asserts that we are "condemned to be free" whether we want to be or not (156).<sup>50</sup> There is no way to escape our "fate" of being free, although we can, of course, deceive ourselves and claim that others—or various external circumstances—took our freedom away. There is no denying that some choices are extraordinarily difficult, but from a Bahá'í perspective we can rely on God's justice, mercy, and understanding, grounded in His omniscient knowledge, as a source of hope and comfort.

Furthermore, the capacity of human beings to transcend nature in making moral decisions leads to another fundamental aspect of Bahá'í ethics: the obligation to live in a way that is appropriate to our nature as human beings and not to fall to the animal level. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us that "[t]o act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness

towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth" (*Gleanings* 109:2). For this reason, the Writings contradict attempts to justify certain behaviors as "only natural" in the animal sense. The proper (in the sense of appropriate, befitting) use of free will is to actualize individuals' higher capacities and spiritual susceptibilities because the failure to meet this obligation results in deficiency in the development of their second nature.

The existence of free will also leads to an emphasis on individual responsibility. Humans are expected to take responsibility for their actions and to refrain from seeking excuses or justifications for their intentionally bad actions. God's rejection of the disbeliever's attempt to blame others for his disbelief in God demonstrates the importance of responsibility in the Writings: "the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 55:1). Nor may humans blame God for making them the way they are in terms of innate and inherited character. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes that point with a Bible-based discussion about the mineral not having any right to complain to God for not having been given vegetable perfections. Each state of being is perfect in its own degree and "must strive after the perfections of [its] own degree" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 24:9). Being responsible for one's own intentional actions—that is, perfecting one's own degree of being—is all that one has the power to do.

In addition, responsibility for

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<sup>50</sup> Although, from a Bahá'í standpoint, free will is not seen as a chastisement but as one of God's gifts to mankind.



appropriate use of free will does not end at the personal level. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us: "Each human creature has individual endowment, power and *responsibility* in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation" (*Promulgation* 292).

Having "responsibility in the creative plan of God"—which is to say, responsibility for the advancement of humankind—requires all persons to make the correct ethical choices in their own lives (*Promulgation* 292). In other words, we must be aware that we not only create our own second nature with our choices but also bear some responsibility for the spiritual progress of mankind: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 109:2). In short, our responsibilities in using free will stretch beyond ourselves. It is noteworthy that 'Abdu'l-Bahá exhorts us to use our "own reason and judgment" in regard to ethical choices.

In his two-volume study, *The Idea of Freedom*, Mortimer Adler outlines the theory of natural freedom, which states that free will is "(i) inherent in all men, (ii) regardless of the circumstances under which they live and (iii) without regard to any state of mind or character which they may or may not acquire" (149). The Bahá'í Writings agree with these three conditions. Free will is an essential component of human nature, and as such, it can

never have been absent from human nature, for "[w]e cannot say... that there was a time when man was not" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 50:4). Free will exists as a potential in humankind regardless of their present level of moral and intellectual development. In short, free will is intrinsically and, therefore, universally present in human nature and serves as a basis for the unification of humankind.

The existence of free will in human nature brings with it the capacity to do evil if we so desire. According to the Writings, evil—not be to be confused with unconscious and unintentional natural disasters or accidents—finds its source in humanity: "Every good thing is of God, and every evil thing is from yourselves" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 77:1). Despite our wishes to the contrary, the capacity for wrongdoing must exist if free will is to be maintained as a meaningful aspect of human nature. Free will is not free if humans can only do good—they would, in effect, become robots without any choice at all. Free will being an inherent human attribute, were it to be abrogated or were God to rescue mankind from every wicked choice—which would, in effect abolish free will—human beings would, by definition, cease to be human. For this reason, the demand that God should prevent evil in some way is an inadvertent wish that God should abolish humanity as the unique crown or advance guard of cosmic evolution. Consequently, this demand would

require God to remake the entire cosmic order and thus implicitly asserts that humans could create a better moral universe than God.

#### HUMAN NATURE AND CHARACTER

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "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 God" (*Promulgation* 427; emphasis added). In other words, attributes like race, nationality, social class, wealth, talent, family history and connections, as well as intelligence are not necessarily instrumental in having a good character. Only the struggle to understand the attributes of God, coupled with obedience to His commands—reciprocal undertakings on our part—can result in our spiritual ascent. Essential to the Bahá'í view of human nature is that faith in God is a requirement for good character. One reason for this is found in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that disbelief in God is an act of treachery because it demonstrates colossal ingratitude toward the Source of creation.<sup>51</sup> In

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<sup>51</sup> See chapter 114 of Bahá'u'lláh's *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Although this admonishment from Bahá'u'lláh may offend some readers, it is important to reflect on the fact that ingratitude means using others, which implies enormous disrespect, devaluation, and even contempt. A character with such

gratitude—otherwise known as "using others"—is usually recognized as a sign of a seriously flawed character. The importance of character is also evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of an ignorant child of good character over an educated child of bad character because the former is of benefit to humankind (*Selections* 135). The history of the twentieth century 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 is that it should be based on "reason and knowledge and true moderation" (59). It is noteworthy that reason is counted among the attributes of good character. Knowledge, of course, does not necessarily mean "book knowledge" but rather 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.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the character of each person has a three-fold structure: "the innate character, the inherited character, and the acquired character" (*Some Answered Questions* 57:2). Innate character seems to refer to intelligence and other

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attributes is a gateway for other wrongs. This does not mean that "believers" are necessarily free of these attributes, because contempt for God's creation is also a form of treachery.

natural capacities such as perceptiveness, sensitivity, willpower, determination, conscious awareness of self and others, as well as imagination—in other words, what are generally thought of as mental or intellectual capacities. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

As to the innate character, although the innate nature bestowed by God upon man is purely good, yet that character differs among men according to the degrees they occupy: All degrees are good, but some are more so than others. Thus every human being possesses intelligence and capacity, but intelligence, capacity, and aptitude differ from person to person. (*Some Answered Questions* 57:3)

These differences do not imply “a matter of good or evil—it is merely a difference of degree” (*Some Answered Questions* 57:4). In these bestowals, there are natural differences among mankind but “[a]ll degrees are good” (*Some Answered Questions* 57:3). No degree is ontologically flawed or unworthy insofar as each is created by God (*Some Answered Questions* 57:9). Our worthiness or unworthiness concerns what we do with the capacities we have been given and not the capacities themselves. Being innate, this aspect of character is not changeable in itself, although it is always possible to determine how much of these capacities we actualize.

The “inherited character” refers to physical “constitution,” which we receive from our ancestors (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 57:4). Like the innate character, the inherited character is predetermined for us, and it, too, is unchangeable, although we are able to make the best of what we have been given. This aspect of our character can be studied through medical examinations and the actuarial tables by which life insurance companies can foretell (with amazing accuracy) medical events and death.

The third aspect of character is the “acquired character which is gained through education” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 57:2). We must, however, remember that education is not limited to formal institutional schooling but also includes worldly experience as well as self-education. We acquire this character—also called “second nature”<sup>52</sup>—by means of our willingness to learn from our experiences and the choices we make. In other words, for better or worse, we “make” ourselves. Unlike the other two aspects of character, acquired character is changeable; that is, through our free choices we can choose what aspects of them to actualize and manifest and to what degree. It is quite possible for a person with a greatly gifted innate character to do very little or even “subvert” or “pervert” her gifts, just as a minimally gifted person can do a great deal with

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<sup>52</sup> See my earlier reference to Hegel’s classification.

what she has (*Some Answered Questions* 57:9).

The Writings state that even what we perceive to be negative qualities can be put to good use:

Thus, should a person show greed in acquiring science and knowledge, or in the exercise of compassion, high-mindedness, and justice, this would be most praiseworthy. And should he direct his anger and wrath against bloodthirsty tyrants who are ferocious beasts, this too would be praiseworthy. But should he display these qualities under other conditions, this would be deserving of blame. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 57:10)

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 extreme ambition to positive use, not by becoming avaricious, but by struggling to create a more just distribution of wealth. In short, by good applications, a potential negative can be sublimated into a positive. We are born pure—with no attribute that is negative in and of itself. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "Although all existent beings are in their very nature created in ranks or degrees, for capacities are various, nevertheless every individual is born holy and pure, and only thereafter may he become defiled" (*Selections* 190).

From the Bahá'í teachings about character, there are four things to

learn about human nature. First, the Writings inform us that human nature possesses radical freedom and responsibility. God intends for us to be free and responsible beings, and we can even be called to account for our belief or disbelief in God (*Gleanings* 55:1). Passing responsibility off to others is not acceptable. This subject invites much deeper reflection than can be provided here.

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—something that 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 practicing good will toward all?

Third, character formation is the key to the construction of the new world order. If character is not changed—that is, if positive capacities are not actualized and other, potentially negative ones are manifested in new ways—then all attempts at a new order will fail. We will simply resurrect the old world order in new form, as happened with Russia in 1917 when it went from *czar* to *commissar* rule. Character reformation is one thing every individual can and must perform for himself or herself.

'Abdu'l-Bahá calls on Bahá'ís to "seek to excel the whole world in

moral character" (*Selections* 129). Good character, not intelligence or talent, is what makes people equal in the most important way.

Fourth, "[g]ood character must be taught" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 136). It does not simply develop by itself. Teaching good character is, essentially, the mission of the Manifestations. After all,

*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 apparent. (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán 240)*

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 because good character must be taught according to 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.

#### HUMANITY'S SOCIAL NATURE

The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that human nature is intrinsically social. 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, that there can be "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" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 93; emphasis added). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh proclaims, "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*" (*Epistle* 49). In other words, human nature requires others to complete itself. This has a metaphysical basis:

For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development, and growth. It is established through numerous proofs and arguments that every single thing has an effect and influence upon every other, either independently or through a causal chain. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 46:6)

'Abdu'l-Bahá's words—so reminiscent of Buddhism's concept of "dependent origination"—mean that all existent things, including human nature, are interdependent, not only for their existence, but also for 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” cases. (This was before the drug revolution in psychiatry.) I asked one of the nuns I had befriended, Sister Anna, what was the point of keeping such sad cases. Her answer illustrates the truth of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words. She said: “Every one of these hopeless lives is an opportunity for you and me to develop our humanity (*Menschlichkeit*).” In service to others, we develop and grow our humanity, our character, our spirituality. Without service to others, 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, the 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 Rotary. Individual rights are preserved by principles such as the independent investigation of truth, consultation, and the universal participation in the electoral process of the administrative order. These teachings counter the tendency to see individuals as nothing more than instruments of the state or some other collective. Individual value is not conferred just from the “outside.” However, at the same time, the Bahá’í Writings clearly oppose atomic individualism, which overemphasizes the rights of

individuals versus the rights and 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” (letter dated 19 May 1994 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States). Establishing “mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities” requires the recognition and harmonization of the legitimate interests and responsibilities of both individuals and collectives.

The importance of balancing individual and collective rights and responsibilities prevents us from interpreting the call to be “as one soul” as favoring collectivism in some way (*Gleanings* 122:1). In my 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, eliminating diversity in order to create both unity and uniformity. Such a concept runs against one of main themes of the Bahá’í Writings.

#### CONCLUSION

As we have observed, 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 its apex in a divinely guided relationship to God. In between are texts on the structure and constituent aspects of human nature, its innate capacities, its position and role in the universe, its destiny, and the inherent weaknesses to which is subject.

For individual Bahá'ís, this philosophy of human nature provides assurance that their beliefs on this subject are founded on a coherent, methodically developed, and logical philosophy of human nature. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, such intellectual reliability also strengthens the faith of the heart (*Promulgation* 231). Furthermore, by virtue of having a well-developed philosophy of human nature, the Bahá'í Faith is open to deep and far-reaching opportunities for dialogue with other religious and non-religious worldviews that also have a philosophy of human nature. Among these are Catholic Thomism; Marxism in both its humanist and Leninist forms; and theistic and atheistic existentialism. Moreover, precisely because of its logical coherence and structure, the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature is able to offer constructive evaluations and suggestions to the current troubles afflicting societies. Finally, the logically coherent nature of the Bahá'í worldview allows the Faith to defend itself intellectually against critiques from other systems of thought.

Second, vis-à-vis modern philosophies such as atheistic existentialism, postmodernism, and most forms of secular humanism and Marxism, the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature is essentialistic. In other words, it asserts that a single universal human nature exists—and has always existed—and that the concept of a “blank slate” does not apply to human nature, which is not malleable. All that can be changed are the potentials that are actualized and to what degree and in what form they are reached. The human capacity for aggression can be actualized in various forms—as a soldier, a dedicated researcher, or a fireman, for example—and can either be reasonable or reach immoderation. This variability of expression explains why trying to reshape human nature according to our wishes has led to such disasters in the twentieth century and continues to cause social confusion in ethics, law, psychology, anthropology, and education, among other fields.

Third—and this deserves special mention—the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature supports a belief in the unique status and intrinsic value of humankind in creation. It asserts that humans cannot be understood correctly by reductionist and materialist methodologies in medical, psychiatric, genetic, and psychological research and their concomitant philosophies; by worldviews that regard humans as merely another animal or without more value than any other animal; or by ideologies that seek to return

human life to ancestral conditions, when fewer uniquely human intrinsic capacities were actualized or could be actualized.

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 lead to a distorted understanding of human nature, which, in turn, creates the potential for confusion in mankind's personal and collective life. Indeed, it may be argued that widespread 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.<sup>53</sup> A positive future for humankind can only be built on a complete and appropriate philosophy of human nature.

Fourth, in regard to philosophical explanations, the Bahá'í Writings show a clear preference for Aristotelian concepts, terminology, and argumentation. These elements are consistently and pervasively used to explain the teachings on numerous subjects and make it hard not to conclude that this type of philosophizing is being suggested by Bahá'u'lláh and

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<sup>53</sup> If man is only an animal, subject—like all other animals—to the law of the survival of the fittest, then the Nazi “cult of the fittest” 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.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá as an especially productive way to study the Writings. Their example should encourage Bahá'í philosophers to follow in Their footsteps.

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