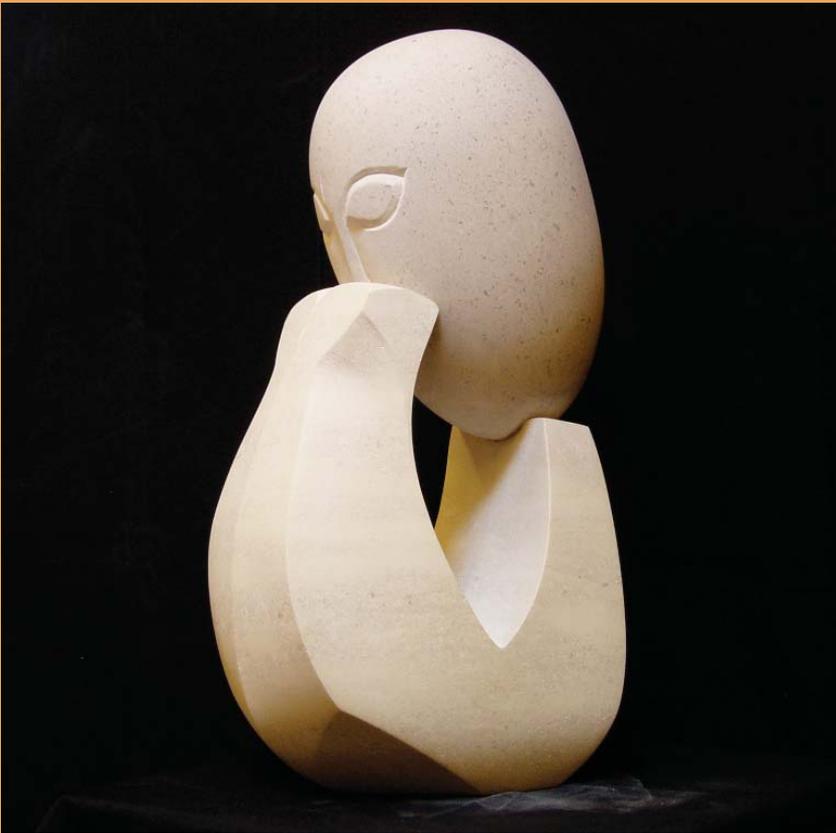


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French translation: Louise Mailhot and Juliette Goudreau

Spanish translation: Nuriyeh McLaren

Many articles published in the Journal of Bahá'í Studies allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit <http://bahai-studies.ca/the-journal-of-bahai-studies-submission-guidelines/>.

ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is “divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men.” The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is “to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith” (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the “Glory of God”—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured 40 years of imprisonment, torture and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His oldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

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From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

We are pleased to present in this issue two particularly in-depth articles, one on human nature and a second on the affective disorder of depression, both of which are artistically suggested by Keith Mellard's cover art sculpture *I Think I Am*, a clever play on the Cartesian proposition "*Cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am").

The first article, by highly regarded Bahá'í scholar and philosopher Ian Kluge, is an overview of the Bahá'í teachings' engagement with one of the most critical and challenging issues we confront in this life—the foundational reality of human existence. Having worked on this study for over a year, Kluge has devised in "The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature" a rather comprehensive analysis of the fundamental Bahá'í concept of human nature, its source, and its operation as a metaphysical essence. In particular, he focuses on how the human soul produces physical effects through its associative relationship with the physical apparatus that is the human brain and body.

The second article in this issue also involves a great deal of research and labor by psychologist Patricia McIlvrde

(formerly McGraw), author of *It's Not Your Fault: How Healing Relationships Change Your Brain and Can Help You Overcome a Painful Past*. Analyzing the virtual pandemic nature of affective illnesses—particularly depression and anxiety disorders—McIlvrde discusses in "Stigma, Depression, and the Soul" how these emotional and mental problems inhibit our ability to feel that we can be a useful part of the community, often largely because of the stigma attached to such debilitating afflictions, whether overtly or subtly, by family, friends, and other members of the community. This widespread attitude of discomfiture, avoidance, or even condescension by others is often accompanied by a judgmental stance that implies the sufferer is spiritually deficient or simply unwilling to exert sufficient willpower to overcome the challenges of life.

The obvious relationship between the two articles, then, is that the first piece gives the reader the opportunity to analyze how the essential reality of the individual—the human soul and its powers of rational thought, willpower, memory, and reflection—translates these capacities into physical action through the intermediary of the brain, and the second article shows how this process can be impeded by various mental disorders.¹ More to

1 Regarding this point, the reader would benefit from viewing the article "The Beauty of the Human Psyche: The Patterns of Virtues" by Rhett Diessner in our previous issue (vol. 26, no. 4). The *Journal* has also already published some

the point, McIlvride's piece explains the need for friends, caregivers, and the entire community to become better able to discern when someone is suffering from affective disorders so that intelligent assistance and comfort can be offered to support the healing process.

Without the information that both articles provide, our limited understanding of the nature of mental illness and of the appropriate methods for interacting with those affected by it all too often distance individuals thus afflicted, causing them to remove themselves from community activities for fear of being stigmatized as being unspiritual, weak, or simply "different." Furthermore, both discussions are critical to the community at large because each of us is striving to comprehend exactly how to navigate this physical stage of our existence in order best to prepare ourselves for the life that lies beyond this realm.

For while we may have some fundamental grasp of the concept of the soul and how the conscious mind communicates with the world through the intermediary of brain-body association, we find that there is a virtually endless supply of information in the

Bahá'í texts providing specific insights into the particulars of this relationship and, more precisely, how studying the relationship itself can help prepare us for the transition to the life to come. Therefore, if some impediment—whether a physical or mental illness—deters the normal process whereby we chart the course of our lives through daily reflection, determination, and action, then we would obviously benefit greatly from learning how to remove or otherwise deal with this hindrance.

Furthermore, both articles deal with areas of study that are on the cutting edge of religious philosophy and science. Where does consciousness reside? Is there such a thing as free will? Do millions of neurons construct some illusion whereby we feel we are in control when, in fact, all our actions may be the result of arbitrary neural activity? Is memory resident in the brain? If so, then even if our soul continues after the demise of the body, does that mean we lose our recollection of our earthly existence?

Similarly complex and challenging are the study and treatment of emotional and mental disorders. To what extent are these maladies the result of genetics, environment, nutrition, and relationships gone awry? The fields focused on the study of the brain-body relationship, such as psychology and psychiatry, are in their infancy as regards diagnosing, classifying, and treating depression, anxiety disorders, and other impediments to the pursuit of those goals prescribed in the Bahá'í teachings for our advancement.

very insightful articles on the subject of mental health. See, for example, Michael L. Penn's "Human Nature and Mental Health: A Bahá'í-inspired Perspective" (vol. 25, nos. 1–2) and Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian's "Depression: Biological, Psychosocial, and Spiritual Dimensions and Treatment" (vol. 25, no. 4).

Moreover, the widespread nature of these disorders is demonstrated by the fact that few among us do not have a friend or family member beset by these afflictions and have not observed the toll they take on both the sufferer and the caregivers.

These two articles by Kluge and McIlvride thus function as collaborative attempts to help us understand several extremely important axioms about the physical or embryonic stage of our existence. Both articles indicate that the intimacy of the associative connection between the soul and the body/brain is not trivial, nor does our knowledge of this relationship, however sophisticated, guard us against the suffering that is an inherent part of our mental and physical well-being. In the midst of depression, we can pray for the cessation of the darkness that seems to have enveloped our inmost life, and yet the assurance that this malady will have no long-term effect on our essential self does not alone ease our pain or bring about instantaneous relief.

Implicit in both articles is an attempt to understand human nature not only at the level of the individual, but also, importantly, at the level of community, because as human beings, we are inherently and inextricably social beings. In this sense, our individual and collective objectives are in concert because the entirety of our existence, whether in this realm or the next, is governed by what 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as the law of love, the organizing force of the universe. In the

physical realm, this law is symbolized by the mutual attraction of all matter. In the metaphysical realm and in our spiritual relationships, it can be discerned in the affection we have and are exhorted to develop for one another so that, in time, there will emerge a global community that will function like one soul in many bodies and foster a nurturing environment sufficiently infused into the global commonwealth that none need feel alone, unloved, or helpless.

Finally, we include two poems, both dealing with the examination of spiritual beliefs and the effort to understand and apply those beliefs in two distinct contexts. "Shahada," by Caitlin Johnson Castelaz, depicts the thoughts of a student in a classroom learning about Islam. "The Fragrance of a Poem" is a very powerful glimpse by Mahvash Sabet of the daily life she experiences as a prisoner in Gohardasht Prison in Iran. We have also included a photograph of a second sculpture by Keith Mallard, *Warrior*, which seems extremely apropos of the article by McIlvride that follows it.

Shahada¹

CAITLIN JOHNSON CASTELAZ

Inside our textbooks
there is a calligraphed verse
that reads:

lá iláha illá alláh

which is either a belief,
or a threat, or some elegant
music for the tongue to play.

My professor teaches
an opinion about it
that he's eager I share
and I do,
with the bartered certitude of a soldier
or a scolded child.

I pick up the pencil
either to trace the arabesque
or to snap the lead
or to hold an instrument
that after years of use and misuse
will wear down to nothing.
And I repeat what I know.

1 The Muslim profession of faith: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."

The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature

IAN KLUGE

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,¹ personal and collective psychopathology,² 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

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).³ 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.⁴ Marxism also holds

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.⁵ 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

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).⁶

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

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 1941,⁷ 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.⁸ 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

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.⁹ Third, it believed that human nature was genetically determined and that superior gene pools should not be “polluted” by mixing themselves with inferior ones.¹⁰ 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 1941,¹¹ 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,¹² it was

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.¹³ 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

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,¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Among psychologists, Abraham Maslow is perhaps most influential in the scientific

¹⁴ 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/>

¹⁵ See also Donald E. Brown, “Human Universals, Human Nature, Human Culture.”

¹⁶ Chapters 6 through 11.

study of human nature.¹⁷ 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

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.¹⁸ 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

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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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

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."²¹

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).²²

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

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

²² 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.²³ 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*

²³ 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.²⁴ Potential refers to the capacity

²⁴ 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

('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).²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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*

²⁵ See Aristotle's *Physics* (2.7.198ab) and *Metaphysics* (5.1.1013ab).

²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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

27 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.²⁸ People find it easier to offer

²⁸ 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

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”²⁹—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.³⁰ Human-

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

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.³¹ 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

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.³² 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*.³³

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

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

³³ "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.³⁴ 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

³⁴ 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 it³⁵;

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

(5) "innate and acquired" capacity³⁶: human nature as created by God (first nature) and what humans choose to do with the divine endowments (second nature).³⁷

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,"

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).³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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

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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹ 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

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"?⁴² 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.⁴³ Therefore, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at some point a non-physical interve-

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,⁴⁴ 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,⁴⁵ 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*

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 Feyerabend⁴⁶ 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

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.⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸ 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

48 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).⁴⁹

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

49 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).⁵⁰ 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

⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ In

⁵¹ 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

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”⁵²—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

52 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.⁵³ 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

⁵³ 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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Warrior

KEITH MELLARD

Warrior is approximately 13.5" in height. The head is made from a stone that, I was told, is from Japan. The base is Carrara marble; the pin is phosphor bronze. Its original title was to be *Soldier*, until my wife suggested that he was a man damaged by life's battles, but still smiling—hence he became *Warrior*.

I think the source of the subject was suggested by the stone, which is a nice way to derive a piece. Being an old fashioned unreconstructed sculptor, I work in all the usual sculptural materials, though I enjoy carving stone best.

Depression, Stigma, and the Soul

PATRICIA A. MCILVRIDE

O my Lord, my Beloved, my Desire!
Befriend me in my loneliness and ac-
company me in my exile. Remove my
sorrow . . . Verily, Thou art the Gra-
cious, the Generous.

—‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í Prayers*

Abstract

Major depression is a global health crisis; it is complex and confusing, and the majority of people who need help do not receive it. The stigma attached to depression and other mental illnesses is one of the greatest barriers to effective treatment. Embedded as it is in history, culture, and even in the medical model, stigma has poisoned the public’s perception of those who suffer from mental illness. Public stigma also creates “self-stigma,” thereby causing disconnections in relationships and, sometimes, a despair that can lead to self-destructive feelings or suicide. New recovery models including those offered by interpersonal neurobiology are challenging the medical model in the treatment of mental illness. By defining the mind as transcendent and both embodied and relational, new avenues of healing become possible. Health is realized when those with mental health challenges create their own recovery plans and draw on the healing power of the soul within loving and educated communities that support them with friendship, not judgment.

Resumé

La dépression majeure est une crise sanitaire mondiale. Elle est complexe et source de confusion, et la majorité des personnes qui en souffrent ne reçoivent pas l’aide dont elles ont besoin. La stigmatisation liée à la dépression et aux autres maladies mentales constitue le principal frein à une prise en charge efficace. Cette stigmatisation, qui est au cœur de l’histoire, de la culture – voire du modèle médical, empoisonne la perception du public envers les personnes ayant une maladie mentale. Cette stigmatisation publique amène les personnes qui vivent une dépression à se stigmatiser elles mêmes, nuit à leurs rapports avec les autres et entraîne, parfois, un sentiment de désespoir pouvant conduire à des idées autodestructrices ou au suicide. De nouvelles approches en matière de rétablissement, notamment celles offertes en neurobiologie interpersonnelle, remettent en question le modèle médical utilisé pour le traitement de la maladie mentale. En définissant l’esprit comme étant transcendant et à la fois incarné et relationnel, de nouveaux modes de rétablissement deviennent possibles. Les personnes aux prises avec des problèmes de santé mentale parviennent à la santé lorsqu’elles créent leur propre plan de rétablissement et font appel au pouvoir guérisseur de l’âme et qu’elles bénéficient de milieux aimants et éclairés qui les soutiennent en maintenant avec elles des liens d’amitié exempts de jugement.

Resumen

La depresión mayor es una crisis global de salud; es complejo, crea confusión y la mayoría de las personas que necesitan ayuda no la reciben. El estigma atado a la depresión y otras enfermedades mentales es una de las barreras más grandes para

el tratamiento efectivo. Estando arraigado en la historia, la cultura y hasta en el modelo médico, el estigma ha envenenado la percepción del público acerca de aquellos quienes sufren de enfermedad mental. El estigma público también crea “auto-estigma”, causando así desconexiones en las relaciones y, a veces, un desespere que puede llevar a sentimientos auto-destructivos y de suicidio. Nuevos modelos de recuperación incluyendo aquellos ofrecidos por la neurobiología interpersonal están desafiando el modelo médico en el tratamiento de la enfermedad mental. Al definir la mente como trascendente y tanto encarnado como relacional, nuevas avenidas de sanación se hacen posibles. La salud es realizada cuando aquellos con desafíos de salud mental crean sus propios planes de recuperación y toman del poder sanador del alma, dentro de comunidades amorosas y educadas que los apoyan con amistad y no juzgándolos.

INTRODUCTION

I have been a psychologist for most of my life. A number of years ago, a man I will call George came to see me and told me a story that was shocking but not unusual. George was thirty-two years old and had a good career, a wife, and a one-year-old child. He said that he had been suffering from major depression most of his life, but about a month before our visit he had finally lost hope of ever recovering. Although religious, he believed God would understand that the world would be better off without him. He was in such severe and unbearable emotional pain that he decided to take his own life. To

this end, he began to carry through a plan he had been contemplating for many years—since adolescence, in fact. He bought a large supply of over-the-counter painkillers, sleeping pills, and other drugs, and he resolved to take them all at once.

When he got home, he sat down to write a goodbye note to his family, but at that moment, his wife returned early from work and interrupted his plan. She took him to the emergency room. He told the doctor his story, adding that those negative feelings from a few hours earlier had lessened while he had been sitting in the waiting room. He said that he loved his family and wanted to go home. The doctor took blood tests; did a chest X-ray; examined his heart, lungs, eyes, ears, nose, and throat; and pronounced, “OK, you can go home. There is really nothing wrong with you. The problem is all in your head!”

The world is full of people like George—men and women, children and teens, who suffer from major depression. According to the latest information from the World Health Organization, depression is the leading cause of ill health and disability worldwide. According to their estimates, more than 300 million people are now living with depression, an increase of more than 18 percent between 2005 and 2015. Despite the fact that depression is treatable, nearly half of the people who suffer from it do not get the help they need and the figure is much lower in poorer, less developed countries (WHO n.p.).

“Depression: A Global Public Health Concern” reported results of the World Mental Health Survey, which was conducted in seventeen countries and found that on average, about one in twenty people report having had an episode of depression in the previous year (Marcus et al. 6). About one million people take their own lives each year. For every person who commits suicide, twenty more make an attempt (Marcus et al. 6).

The burden of depression is 50 percent higher for females worldwide across all income levels. One or two new mothers out of every ten will suffer from depression after childbirth. Depression limits the mother’s ability to care for her child and therefore can seriously impact the child’s growth and development (Marcus et al. 6).

According to data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), although more women than men are depressed, men are less likely to get help and more likely to commit suicide (1). Suicide was the tenth leading cause of death in the United States for all ages in 2014, and men took their own lives at nearly four times the rate of women, representing almost 78 percent of all suicides (1).

Depression typically starts at a young age, and depressed children and teens often go untreated. Lack of treatment has led to increasing suicide rates among the young. Suicide was the second leading cause of death in the age groups 10–14, 15–24, and 25–35 in 2014 (CDC 2).

Depression and other major mental illnesses affect not only those who suffer from them, but also their families, friends, coworkers, and community members. Often both the sufferers and those who care for them are at a loss about what to do. Even when urged to get help, many with mental health problems seem to resist. Why? And what can be done to remedy this problem?

The goal of this discussion is four-fold: first, to describe major depression; second, to explain the history and dynamics of the stigma attached to major depression and other mental illnesses; third, to show that stigmatizing others or oneself as being “mentally ill” can be a deterrent to treatment and implies (contrary to the Bahá’í teachings) that such illnesses impede the progress of the soul; and fourth, to show how the concept of “accompaniment” can be a major contributing factor to healing when it is informed by a scientifically sound and empathic understanding of the illness.

CONFUSION ABOUT DEPRESSION

The word depression itself is very confusing. Webster’s Dictionary gives twenty different definitions for the word; only three of them refer to mood issues. Depression, among other things, can be an area of low atmospheric pressure, a downturn in the economy, or low-lying land (“Depression”).

Even when referring to an emotional state, in English-speaking countries

the word depression is often used in at least two ways: (1) to describe things, events, or circumstances in the present or in the past that cause a generally negative emotional state, and (2) to denote the presence of a major mental illness—as in clinical depression (also known as major depression) or unipolar mood disorder.¹

In George's example, the doctor who told him that his problems were "all in his head" was engaging in this confusion. George had a major mental illness (major depression) and needed immediate comprehensive treatment. Because the doctor could not see it with his own eyes or measure it by common medical tests, he decided that the problem was not real. In making this fundamental error, he was blaming George for his illness and putting the onus on him to get over his problems by himself. This error could have cost George his life, but, luckily, George sought treatment elsewhere on his own. The emergency room where he had been seen was also contacted, and this incident was reported. On follow-up, it was found that the erring physician had been reprimanded and sent for further education about mental illness.

If a trained physician can make such a mistake, imagine how much more likely it is that friends, family members, and associates of those who have major

depression would do the same. In a sense, it is understandable: the words *depressed* and *depressing* are often used in everyday speech to mean "unhappy" or "disappointing" or to signify other negative emotional states. For instance, a real estate salesman might drive through a "depressing" neighborhood. Teenagers without a date to the prom might say they are "depressed" because they will miss the event. A woman who loses an election to the school board might say she is "depressed" about it. In all these circumstances, a person is experiencing a passing state of negative emotion. Such occasional sadness is a normal aspect of everyday life.

When one is experiencing this kind of everyday sadness or lowered mood, advice to ignore the problem, get busy with other things, or "look on the bright side" may actually be helpful. However, saying the same to a person who is suffering from major depression or other major mental illnesses inflicts a kind of cruelty upon them. It trivializes the seriousness of the illness and adds to it a sense of guilt, shame, isolation, and hopelessness. It is like saying to a person with a broken leg, "You should be more careful" or "It is nothing. Just hop," or saying to a person having a heart attack, "No need to see a doctor. You are probably just out of shape. You need to get more exercise."

DIAGNOSING DEPRESSION

The definitions of mental illnesses are published by the American Psychiatric Association in various editions of

1 Bipolar mood disorder also includes periods of major depression as well as periods of extremely elevated or agitated mood.

the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The latest edition of this volume is DSM-5, published in 2013. The first, DSM-I, was published in 1952. The World Health Organization has its own coding system, published in the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* (ICD). ICD-10 is the current version. This system is used most often for billing purposes.

DSM-5 is a large book that gives detailed explanations of the symptoms of the illnesses and summarizes what is known and not known about their course. Through the various revisions of DSM, different diagnoses have been added or removed. For instance, “neurosis” appears in DSM-I and II but was eliminated from DSM-III and later editions.

Psychiatric diagnosis can be challenging because it relies on self-report and similar symptoms can apply to more than one diagnostic category. Often, more than one diagnosis is appropriate. For instance, substance abuse disorders are often concurrent with depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses.

While the symptoms of mental illnesses can be grouped together and given labels, their causes are often complicated or unknown. Only the trauma-related disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder have specific and identifiable causes—that is, the trauma itself.

Scientists now use a “biopsychosocial” model to understand mental illness, meaning that complex interactions among biological, psychological,

and social factors determine the onset and course of illnesses. Biological factors like genetic predispositions and inherited vulnerabilities are key factors. Psychological contributors include developmental experiences, personality, intelligence, beliefs, attitudes, and other variables. Social factors are, for example, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family relationships, school, work-related variables, community relationships, and religious affiliation.

Despite this complex interplay, biology alone can play a determining role. For instance, in our example, George reported virtually no problems with his childhood, work, relationships, or family life. He had a pleasing personality, low stress, and what appeared to others to be a successful life. Yet he had been chronically depressed all his life. For one whose first-degree relatives have major depressive disorder, the lifetime risk of developing the disorder is two to four times greater than for those without this risk factor. In his “Overview of the Genetics of Major Depressive Disorder,” Falk W. Lohoff reports a recent review of twin studies that estimates heritability at 37 percent, “with a substantial component of unique individual environmental risk but little shared environmental risk” (540).

HOW EXPERIENCES OF DEPRESSION DIFFER

Given that the word *depression* can indicate “just a bad day” or a major mental illness, how can an observer tell the difference? The answer is, you cannot.

There are many reasons for this. Depression symptoms differ from person to person and may vary from day to day. Those who suffer from it often hide or minimize their symptoms, or they may not even know they are depressed.

Depression is almost impossible to describe and even harder to comprehend unless it has been experienced first-hand. Nevertheless, I asked friends, family members, and former clients to help me try to describe what it is like to be depressed (names have been changed and descriptions edited for confidentiality).

A middle-aged man named Ken described it this way: "When you are depressed, life is a struggle, a burden, like carrying a one hundred-pound weight on your back all day every day. It is hard to get out of bed in the morning. Sometimes, I eat and eat and eat just to try to get some energy, but then, sometimes, I have no appetite at all. Over the years, I have gained and lost weight like crazy. The same with sleep. Sometimes I want to sleep for days and can hardly move, then other days I'm so agitated, I toss and turn all night. I can't say I am sad. It feels more like a numb nothingness that makes me feel profoundly ashamed and guilty. I know I have no reason to feel this way, but knowing it doesn't change anything. My thoughts seem to have no power over my emotions."

A teenager named Josiah said it is "like trying to drive your car when the engine is dead. I tell someone, 'I am not going anywhere; I can hardly

move,' and they say, 'Did you put the key in the ignition? Did you check the gas? How old is the battery?' And it makes me mad because the problem is none of the normal things you think about. There isn't a cause that makes any sense. There isn't a solution either because nothing in your life explains how unbearable you feel."

Cyrus, a young African-American man, described depression as a "fundamental confusion between pleasure and pain." He said that when he is depressed, nothing that used to bring pleasure is even remotely of interest. In addition, he explained, "The feeling of not being like anyone else is huge. You feel like you don't deserve anything either. You feel so different, so apart from everyone, and so unable to begin to explain it even to yourself. There is no choice except to be alone and hide."

Li, an elderly Asian woman who has had recurring bouts of depression all her life, explained that when she feels "normal," she can't even remember what it felt like to be depressed: "It feels like that depressed person was someone else." But when the cloud of depression begins to rise, it beckons to her, calls her, as if to home. Although vaguely recognizable as a state of pain and despair, it also feels familiar and therefore strangely attractive. As the condition gets worse, she sinks into it and away from her previously healthy life. She becomes lost in the darkness of her low mood and increasingly unable to function. At her lowest point, she may have only a vague, faint

remembrance of her formerly healthy self.

Doris described depression as “a black cloud invading your mind, overwhelming your thoughts and senses, the mental equivalent of being naked in the cold—no blanket, no warm fire. And at the same time there is a knife stuck in you and you can’t escape it because it feels like it is you, and the only escape is to destroy yourself. Your survival instinct is overridden by the enormity of the pain and the inescapable nature of it. It feels like oppression coming from an unknown place.” She added poignantly, “The worst form of oppression is when your own mind turns against you.”

THE MANY MASKS OF DEPRESSION

A recent Twitter conversation ([#mydepressionlookslike](#)) gives a glimpse into the many faces of depression.² Many tweets express the painful loneliness and isolation of depression, the need to hide the illness, and the feeling that no one really understands. Examples include, “I’m absolutely fine, literally, you wouldn’t know anything was wrong by looking at me & that’s the dangerous part”; “smiles, cookies, tears in the bathroom, running, laughter, screaming into a pillow”; “kindness to others but not myself”; “being told ‘I’m too bubbly and happy to be depressed’ which only reminds me of the facade I portray every day”; “being always asked ‘what’s wrong’ but

not knowing how to even answer that question”; “just trying to survive, and make it through another day”; “weakness, black men can’t be depressed”; “wishing that more people would understand that you’re not choosing to be like this, you’re not just lazy.” The tweets go on and on, reflecting the fact that depression is a complex, highly individualized experience. Between persons, symptoms can look quite different, and within any individual person who is depressed, symptoms can fluctuate greatly from day to day or week to week.

Depression can wear the mask of other problems. It can seem like laziness, lack of motivation, or procrastination. It can feel like being “burn out” or having a “mid-life crisis.” Because depression can cause fatigue, aches, pains, and a feeling of being slow, heavy, and ready to give up on life, it can be misinterpreted as a sign of aging. Problems with concentration or memory may suggest early dementia. Common physical symptoms like low energy and problems with sleep and appetite could suggest a medical problem, while less common symptoms like cardiac arrhythmias, loss of libido, loss of hearing, decrease in body temperature, sweating, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, sensations of cold, etc., are frequently misdiagnosed as medical, rather than psychiatric, problems.

Depression can masquerade as anxiety, and because these conditions often occur together, many people think that their depression is “just stress.” Anxiety can express itself as nervousness,

² See <http://twitter.com/hashtag/mydepressionlookslike/>.

restlessness, tension, feelings of impending danger, panic, doom, and worry. It can include physical symptoms like heart palpitations, sweating, and rapid breathing. Anxiety attacks, also known as panic attacks, can mimic the feelings of a heart attack.

Chronic feelings of depression and anxiety sometimes lead to addictive behaviors meant to mask or reduce internal distress. Over time, addictive behaviors become problems in and of themselves. Addictions include not only drug and alcohol abuse, but also things like obsessive over-work, eating disorders, excessive exercise, Internet addiction, sex addiction, gambling, and other obsessive behaviors.

Despite the complexity and overwhelming difficulty of living with major depression and other mental illnesses, people manage to do it. In fact, many famous and successful people have suffered from major depression including Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill (Solomon, 367). Writers Ernest Hemmingway, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Stephen King, and J.K. Rowling have openly admitted to battling low moods, while entertainers like Billy Joel and Ray Charles expressed their inner struggles through music. Prince Harry of Great Britain has recently opened up about his chronic depression caused by unresolved grief over the death of his mother, Princess Diana, when he was only twelve years old. He now speaks candidly about his difficulties, including delaying treatment because of the stigma of mental illness, and is urging open conversations about these topics.

He is not alone. Stigma has been identified by experts as the single leading cause of treatment avoidance. The following story will illustrate how prejudices and false ideas work to needlessly prolong the suffering of those who need professional help.

HOW STIGMA PREVENTS TREATMENT

Juanita came for counseling at the insistence of her parents. She had recently become engaged and had asked her parents for permission to marry as Bahá'í law enjoins. They had refused, insisting that she see a counselor before they would agree to discuss it again.

Juanita, by now in her mid-thirties, had experienced a lifetime of struggle with depressive symptoms including low mood, crying spells, problems with decision-making, procrastination, and feelings of insecurity. However, she did not believe that she was depressed. She was fine—after all, she was getting married!

After doing some work with me, Juanita began to realize that she was using her relationship with her prospective husband as an “anti-depressant.” When she was around him, she felt less sad and more like herself. In her mind, the relationship “proved she was normal” and not “a crazy woman.” Admitting the need for treatment, she explained, would lead to a downward spiral that would cause her to “end up in the loony bin.” She believed that “fighting” her illness meant avoiding treatment, while admitting her need

for help was tantamount to “giving in.” She also believed that if she took anti-depressant medication she would get “hooked on drugs” and would have to take them for the rest of her life. She said she did “not want to get her happiness from a pill.” These are common fears and misconceptions that are erroneous.

Getting help decreases the severity of the illness and increases the likelihood that when it passes, it will not recur. Often it is not necessary to take anti-depressant medications on a continuous basis. Anti-depressant medications are not addictive, and taking them allows the body’s normal mood to return. Using medication to fight depression is only one choice among many within a person’s individualized wellness plan. The “loony bin” is a pejorative term for a mental hospital. Most people who need treatment for depression do not need to be hospitalized as part of their treatment. Only if depression goes untreated and gets so severe that the person becomes a danger to himself or herself or others (like George in the above example) might it be necessary to go to a hospital for a short time.

Juanita’s barriers to treatment included not only misinformation about her illness, but also all the prejudices and false beliefs she had internalized from her family and culture. She explained that according to her family, people are supposed to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” and “quit whining and complaining and feeling sorry for themselves,” and

that they believed seeking help for depression was a sign of a poor character, weakness, and not relying enough on God. Juanita thought that if she prayed properly, God would take away her depression. It followed that if He didn’t, it meant that she wasn’t praying right or hard enough.

Juanita not only believed her own prejudices about getting help; she thought that others did as well: she felt that if she told her fiancé about her depression, he would not want her because she would be “defective merchandise.” And being labeled “a nut case” would ruin her chances of marriage. “No one would ever want me,” she said.

As Juanita and I talked more, she began to realize that she was not being honest with herself or with her fiancé. She was racing toward marriage, trying to outrun her depression before, in her words, “it took over and ruined my chances of living a good and normal life forever.”

Juanita’s statement is the essence of stigma—the prejudiced idea that there are two groups of people in the world, the “normal” and the “not normal,” those who have mental illnesses and those who don’t. It is an “us vs. them” way of thinking in which admitting mental health problems creates an inescapable mark of inferiority that separates one from mainstream society.

At the beginning of our work together, Juanita could not associate the idea of “a good, normal life” with “a mental illness like depression.” It was either one or the other. This is not

true, but such beliefs have a long history and are deeply rooted in many cultures around the world.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF STIGMA

Early Egyptian, Indian, Greek, and Roman writings attribute mental illness to the displeasure of the gods or possession by evil spirits. The sufferer was blamed for the illness and treated as a pariah, an outcast deserving exorcism, torture, or even death. This view prevailed despite efforts by Hippocrates around 400 BC to attribute mental illness to brain pathology.

Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, the notion that humane treatment for those with mental health problems would be curative began to take hold, but fears and misinformation from earlier times remained. Effective treatments were lacking, and those with mental health problems continued to be institutionalized with criminals, the poor, and those with other chronic illnesses.

From the mid-1900s to the present time, medical experts developed more and better treatments for major depression—most notably, a whole range of psychotropic medications and evidence-based psychotherapies. In the United States, some efforts were made to address mental illness through government measures. However, such initiatives suffered from poor funding and lack of follow-through.

Meanwhile, the American medical insurance industry has been allowed to capitalize on the stigma surrounding

mental health by creating two separate insurance systems, one for “medical” problems and one for “mental” problems. The separation permits the allocation of inferior coverage for mental health treatment and leaves many who need help unable to obtain it.

STIGMA—PREVALENT, POTENT, PERNICIOUS

Sociologist Erving Goffman is usually credited with the first systematic exploration of stigma. In his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, he describes it as the social phenomenon of being rejected by a peer group on the basis of an attribute the group finds unacceptable (6–7). Goffman lists three categories of stigmatized people: (1) those with “abominations of the body”—now known as physical disabilities; (2) those with “blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will,” among which he included mental disorders, addiction, alcoholism, suicide attempts, imprisonment, homosexuality, unemployment, and radical political behavior; and (3) those with the “tribal stigma” of race, nationality, and religion (6–7). The follow-up to Goffman’s work over succeeding decades became bogged down with controversies about the labeling process itself and whether or not it caused stigma. That issue was never resolved, and as interest in the topic waned, the notion that stigma was declining took hold. Meanwhile, mental health became a human rights issue.

From the 1970s onward, battles within the legal system focused on fair housing, equal employment opportunities, and adequate medical and psychiatric care for those who need it. The Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law³ has been working in this area for many years. An exhaustive treatment of this topic is outside the scope of this paper, but a few landmark cases from its website are noteworthy. For instance, in the 1970s, *Wyatt v. Stickney* established the constitutional right to treatment for people with mental disabilities committed to state institutions, and *O'Connor v. Donaldson* established the right to freedom from custodial confinement for non-dangerous persons. The Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 made it illegal to deny access to housing based on physical or mental disability. In 1990, the far-reaching Americans with Disabilities Act rendered discrimination based on mental or physical disability illegal, just as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 had outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin ("Our History").

At the turn of the millennium, when serious attention from the social sciences returned to the issue, the stigma associated with mental illness was found to be prevalent, potent, and pernicious. In 1999, the first ever Surgeon General's Report on

Mental Health reviewed the literature on mental health treatment and found that stigma was "the primary barrier to treatment and recovery" (Office of the Surgeon General et al. viii). The report notes that the general public still believed Goffman's premise that mental disorders are the result of "moral failings or limited will power" (viii). It also over-optimistically predicts that "[w]hen people understand that mental disorders . . . are legitimate illnesses that are responsive to specific treatments, much of the negative stereotyping may dissipate" (viii). It thus calls for mental illness to be defined as a physical dysfunction, a "disease like any other" (viii).

Following the Surgeon General's report, what were supposed to be "anti-stigma" campaigns were launched to convince people that mental illness was a brain dysfunction. For instance, in the United States, the National Alliance on Mental Illness launched the "Campaign to End Discrimination," which emphasized the neurobiological bases of mental illness and the need for pharmaceutical treatments. Within the following decade, in countries in North America and around the world, similar widespread and expensive campaigns emphasized the brain disease model.

Research indicates that in many ways, rather than reducing stigma, these campaigns made it worse. A study compared data from the 2006 National Stigma Study-Replication to the 1996 MacArthur Mental Health Study. In both studies, the same vignettes were

3 Based in Washington, DC, the Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law is an organization that provides legal advocacy for people with mental disabilities.

presented to respondents, who were asked to imagine themselves interacting with a person with a mental health diagnosis. The report concluded, "No significant decrease was reported in any indicator of stigma, and levels remained high" (Pescosolido et al. 1324). A majority of the public continued to express an unwillingness to work closely or socialize with persons diagnosed with mental illness or have them marry into their family. And while believing mental illness to be a neurological problem was correlated with believing treatment is necessary, it was also correlated with believing the problem to be irremediable. More alarmingly, many people in the 2006 survey spontaneously volunteered the information that they associated mental illness with an increased risk of violence.

THE PERCEPTION OF VIOLENCE RISK

Research has shown that the vast majority of those with mental illness are not dangerous. Having a mental illness is not a predictor of violence within the general population. In fact, mentally ill people are more often the victims of crime than its perpetrators (Torrey 1–5).

"But," you might ask, "what about all the media reports on mass shootings? Aren't all these committed by mentally ill people?" The answer is complicated.

For many years, the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, has worked to increase mental health treatment and

decrease stigma around the world. Its efforts have been focused on the importance of the media in the fight against stigma. Research has shown that the public perception that people with mental illnesses are dangerous has been fueled by media reports of hugely dramatic and destructive acts of violence committed by a very small number of people who are not getting adequate treatment. While such acts are statistically rare, they powerfully create and sustain negative public attitudes. The Carter Center has been working to educate the media about their responsibility to provide balanced coverage of the issue of mental health challenges. It provides scholarships to journalists who work on projects that emphasize the success of people with these illnesses: the resilience, the significant achievements, and the everyday happy lives of people in mental health treatment.

In terms of violence risk in the general population, having a mental illness can raise the risk of committing a violent act if the illness is very severe, causing a break with reality, and if the illness is not being properly treated. Even then, the increased risk of someone committing a violent act like homicide compared to someone in the general population is believed to be "about 2% or less" (Torrey 1). However, the criminal justice system has amassed a large number of cases involving these severely ill individuals because the lack of available psychiatric hospitals has left many homeless and without treatment or sufficient resources to survive.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-STIGMA

Social psychologist Patrick Corrigan is one of the most well-known experts in the field of mental health stigma.⁴ He explains that it is important to acknowledge that stigma is not a figment of the imagination of those who suffer from these illnesses. “The problem of stigma,” he and mental health services researcher Nev Jones write, “does not lie within the individual with the mark, but rather in the stigmatizing communities in which the individuals find themselves” (Jones and Corrigan 9). Corrigan’s work shows that negative community attitudes (public stigma) can be internalized by the sufferer and become “self-stigma.” The story of Juanita is a good example; her story shows how internalized prejudicial beliefs distorted her thinking and presented a major barrier to her seeking treatment.

Corrigan, Benjamin G. Druss, and Deborah A. Perlick distinguish between three main types of stigma: public, structural, and self-stigma. Public stigma refers to the attitudes of the general public that are outlined above. Structural stigma occurs when

the prejudices against those with mental health problems become reflected in the government and community infrastructures. The ongoing legal battles and biases in the healthcare delivery system discussed above are examples of structural stigma. Self-stigma occurs when the prejudicial attitudes of the public sector are co-opted by individuals with mental health challenges like depression.

As Corrigan, Jonathan E. Larson, and Nicolas Rüsch explain, self-stigma develops through three separate but related processes: stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (75). The first component, stereotyping, can be relatively benign. *Webster’s Dictionary* defines stereotyping as a process of unfairly believing “that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same” (“Stereotype”). Social groups share stereotypes as part of their common culture, and these assumptions are often reinforced in the arts and media. It is easy to think of some of them: “the suit,” a conservative banker who dresses impeccably; “the class clown,” a middle-school boy who is disruptive but funny; “the soccer mom” with her minivan and workout gear.

Corrigan, Larson, and Rüsch contend that while stereotyping itself is somewhat inevitable and not necessarily damaging, it can be dangerous when it opens the door to the second and third aspects of the stigmatization process, prejudice and discrimination. When stereotypes become fixed negative beliefs about a group, they are

4 Corrigan identifies himself as a survivor, researcher, and advocate. His website (<http://www.stigmaandempowerment.org/>) provides tools and resources to empower those with mental health challenges. Recently, he was appointed editor in chief of *Stigma and Health*, a newly created journal of the American Psychological Association.

called “prejudices.” When large segments of society begin to share those prejudices and act upon them, discrimination is the result (81).

It is important to understand how this counterintuitive and often unconscious process of self-stigmatization works because self-stigma can combine with the symptoms of depression to create a sense of hopelessness and treatment avoidance that can lead to suicide. Corrigan, Larson, and Rüsche call this the “why try” effect (75).

In the following hypothetical example, Carl will self-stereotype himself as a “geek” and stereotype his coworkers as “artsy types.” Then, based on these prejudices, he will imagine a sequence of events that will lead him to discriminate against himself.

Carl, is a gifted programmer who moved from a San Francisco technical firm to a New York City advertising and media firm. Six months into his new job, the creative arts department staff invited him to a party. He wanted to go because he felt lonely. He had been having difficulty making friends in New York. In California, he and his friends had hiked together on weekends and played video games at lunch. These New York “urban artsy types,” as he called his coworkers, didn’t share his interests in computers and the outdoors. He began to notice that they often referred to him as “our new geek” or, sometimes, “the nerd.” He had never been called that before and wasn’t sure how to react.

At first Carl tried to convince

himself it was a just a joke. But the label stuck, and as time went on, he began to adopt it, even introducing himself to other people as “the new geek in tech support.”

The day before the party, Carl began to imagine himself being there. He thought, “I am a bit shy and serious. I wear T-shirts and a hoodie all the time. Sometimes when people tell a joke, I don’t get it.” In his mind’s eye, he imagined himself as “the geek” sitting alone at the party, feeling sad and ashamed because he doesn’t fit in, so he eventually decided not to go. On Monday morning, a coworker said to him, “Hey Carl, we missed you last Saturday night! What were you doing?” Carl looked down at the floor and mumbled, “I played video games” as he walked away. The coworker, feeling snubbed, thought, “I guess you really are a nerd.”

Carl’s self-stigma blocked his view of reality. He didn’t know that when his coworkers met him, they immediately liked him. They were fans of the television show *The Big Bang Theory*, in which a “nerd” hero creates comedy out of his extreme intelligence and lack of social skills. Carl’s coworkers were comparing him to their hero when they used that label. For them it was a benign stereotype. But Carl didn’t know that. Instead of going to the party and testing his theory of being an outcast, he stigmatized himself and stayed home, thereby effectively creating the reality of being an outcast through his own actions.

LABEL AVOIDANCE AND THE
“WHY TRY” EFFECT

The self-stigma that kept Juanita from getting mental health treatment is in some ways similar to Carl’s self-stigma. Juanita labeled a depressed person like herself “a nut case” and saw herself as “less than” someone who does not need mental health treatment (prejudice). She then acted on her beliefs when she avoided treatment (discrimination). Juanita was engaging in what Jones and Corrigan call “label avoidance,” which he defines as “refusing to get help for mental illness in order to avoid the label of being mentally ill” (19).

However, Juanita’s self-stigmatization is different from Carl’s in two important ways: first, Carl was simply feeling a bit sad about missing his friends, but Juanita was suffering from a serious mental illness, major depression; second, while Carl’s coworkers actually liked him, a large portion of the general public holds negative views about people with mental health issues.

Juanita had to choose between getting treatment and potentially losing the supportive network of her fiancé, friends, and family, and refusing treatment to keep her social network. Can she be blamed for choosing to maintain her relationships? Is it fair to ask a person suffering from feelings of hopelessness and self-loathing to fight public opinion that decades of social science research, public relations, and government programs have failed to impact?

This is the reality for people with major depression. They are squeezed between the pain of their own illness and the scourge of public opinion, forced to choose between the rages of their own internal suffering and the loss of their sustaining ties. And as a society, we are asking them to face this unsolvable dilemma at the very time they feel most vulnerable and least able to cope, at a time when all the symptoms described at the beginning of this article are in full force. Is it any wonder that many find themselves boxed into a no-win, no-way-out conundrum that leads many to feel death is the only solution?

MIND, SOUL, AND RELATIONSHIPS

The above discussion reflects the complexity of depression and stigma. Depression and other mental illnesses are private, and they are public. They are widespread throughout the world yet uniquely expressed within each individual. They are embedded in relationships yet deeply personal and intrapsychic. Genetics play a roll, but they only partially explain the complex, life-threatening challenges of depression and other major mental illnesses. Decades of research and public campaigns have failed to eradicate stigma, and the widespread phenomenon of untreated mental illness goes on. In fact, the problem seems to be getting worse. What can be done?

The soul is a timeless concept. Bahá’ís believe in the soul, as do the followers of most of the world’s

major religions dating back to ancient times. Aristotle, Socrates, and many other ancient philosophers spoke of the soul. Indigenous and Native peoples also affirm the existence of our link to the Great Spirit that provides guidance during this lifetime and the next.

However, introducing the concept of a “soul” into a discussion of problems that have variously been defined as the province of medicine, psychiatry, sociology, law, and public health may seem incongruous, even contrived. But consider for a moment: perhaps the intractability of stigma is related to the framework within which it has been addressed. Perhaps the approaches reviewed above contributed to stigma by labeling and categorizing human beings rather than seeing them as unique, complex, multifaceted, and transcendent. Perhaps when dimensions like wholeness, interconnection, soul, and spirit are eliminated and replaced with static categories and negative labels, stigma is the result.

Starting with the Enlightenment, Western research and practice in most fields of science removed any considerations of the spiritual nature of mankind. As technology and science rapidly advanced, the dominant paradigm became materialistic and mechanistic. From this perspective, the only things that exist are those that can be observed and measured. That is why the doctor in the emergency room told George his problems were not real after his lab tests proved to be negative.

Mechanistic ideologies see humans

as machines whose separate parts add up to the whole. The example of a broken clock is often used as an example. If the clock isn't working, take apart the pieces one by one, find the broken piece, fix it, then put the clock back together. According to this logic, if the problem is depression, label the depressed group “not normal,” separate it from the “normal” group, analyze the parts that appear to be “broken”—concrete, physical, measurable things, such as chemical imbalances—then fix those with equally concrete, physical, measurable things like medications.

Notice the actions involved in this approach that contribute to stigma: labeling, separating, defining as broken, assuming an outside expert is needed to fix the brokenness, and ignoring all the unquantifiable aspects such as social relationships, inner psychic thought processes, spirit, and soul. Although slightly exaggerated for the sake of making the point, this is essentially the biomedical model of health. It prides itself on being hard science because it shows cause and effect as linear, fixed, and measurable. Within this model, there is no room for the least measurable, least quantifiable, most ineffable aspect of a human being, the soul. Could it be that without a framework that includes the transcendent, the problem of stigma and the puzzle of recovery from mental health issues cannot be solved?

Daniel Siegel is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine and the founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research

Center at UCLA. In his popular work *Mindsight*, he tells the story of his own struggle with trying to help people within the boundaries imposed by the medical model. It nearly drove him out of the field. He took time off from his training, and when he returned, he was determined to take a different stance. The result is his lifework, called “interpersonal neurobiology,” which is taught through his books, lectures, and the Mind Sight Institute (www.mindsightinstitute.com).

Mindsight begins with the question, “What is the mind?” A basic question, it would seem, in a field named “mental health.” But, he says, no one really knows. He polled over eighty thousand experts about whether or not they had ever attended a course or lecture defining the mind or mental health: “The responses were easy to count. In numerous countries on four different continents, in lecture halls around our globe, the same statistic has emerged again and again: Only 2 to 5 percent of people in this field had ever been given even a single lecture that defined the very foundation of their specialty—the mind” (51). Siegel set out to do just that, and his work is noteworthy in many ways.

In Siegel’s model, the mind is not a material thing but rather an integral part of the interplay among three aspects within what he calls the “triangle of well-being”—mind, brain, and relationships. “The mind,” he says, “is a relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information” (11). His model emphasizes

the relational aspect of individuals and the theory, skills, and benefits of personal growth and changes in states of mind. He suggests that through self-awareness we can become mindful of our own internal subjective states and how these directly shape our physiological and psychological health. He explains that through this awareness, we can change the organization and structure of our own brains. He calls this awareness “mindsight” and describes it as a process that “enable[s] us to sense and shape energy and information flow” (55). Higher states of consciousness lead to transcendence, in which people simultaneously see themselves as unique individuals and part of the entirety of humanity, the whole of creation (52). “Mindsight,” Siegel explains, “takes away the superficial boundaries that separate us and enables us to see that we are each part of an interconnected flow, a wider whole. By viewing mind, brain, and relationships as fundamentally three dimensions of one reality—of aspects of energy and information flow—we see our human experience with truly new eyes” (58).

He emphasizes that self-reflection is at the heart of mindsight. He reports that when people become more internally integrated and insightful about themselves, “[t]heir identity expands; they become aware that they are part of a much larger whole. In various research explorations of happiness and wisdom, this sense of interconnection seems to be at the heart of living a life of meaning and purpose” (76).

Siegel's definition of mental health is "integration." He says, "With integration, we see ourselves with an expanded identity. When we embrace the reality of this interconnection, being considerate and concerned with the larger world becomes a fundamental shift in our way of living" (260). Siegel uses brain science to argue that the "mind" can change the brain and therefore behavior. "The mind uses the brain to create itself," he says (261).

Compare this description of the integrated mind with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the rational soul in *Some Answered Questions*:

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings. (55:5)

While Siegel's definition of the mind and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's definition of the soul are not completely identical, they are compatible. The soul as described here is dynamic, a process and not a static or material "thing." It "discovers the realities of things" (55:5). The soul includes understanding and gaining insight about "peculiarities

and effects" (55:5), just as Siegel asserts that "mindsight" allows one to monitor and modify the flow of information internally. Siegel says that the mind cannot be separated from relationships with others. The process of the soul is concerned with relationships too, with "the qualities and properties of beings" (55:5). Both definitions emphasize growth, discovery, and the acquisition of knowledge. Both affirm a human spirit that connects us all together in an integrative whole. Both allow for complexity and connections among seemingly disparate parts. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "Reflect upon the inner realities of the universe, the secret wisdoms involved, the enigmas, the inter-relationships, the rules that govern all. For every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever" (*Selections* 137). Furthermore, in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, "Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise, it is superstition. God has created man in order that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth. Therefore, scientific knowledge and religious belief must be conformable to the analysis of this divine faculty in man" (96).

The preceding discussion shows that love is good science and that the powerful reality of the human soul and spirit defines human beings regardless of the barriers that may at times dim their lights.

“CONSIDER THE LIGHT OF THE LAMP”

That movement toward the spiritual and transcendent is necessary to address mental health was also affirmed by Shoghi Effendi in a letter to an individual believer dated 12 April 1948. He reflects:

It is very hard to be subject to any illness, particularly a mental one. However, we must always remember these illnesses have nothing to do with our spirit or our inner relation to God. It is a great pity that as yet so little is really known of the mind, its workings and the illnesses that afflict it; no doubt, as the world becomes more spiritually minded and scientists understand the true nature of man, more humane and permanent cures for mental diseases will be found. The Guardian, much as his heart goes out to you in your fear and suffering, cannot tell you whether electric shock treatments should or should not be used, as this is a purely medical question, and there is no reference to such details in our Scriptures. The best scientists must pass upon such methods, not laymen. You must always remember, no matter how much you or your others may be afflicted with mental troubles and the crushing environment of these state institutions, that your spirit is healthy, near to our Beloved, and will in the next world enjoy a happy and normal state

of soul. Let us hope in the meantime scientists will find better and permanent cures for the mentally afflicted. But in this world such illness is truly a heavy burden to bear! (qtd. in *Selections from Bahá'í Writings* 948)

In this letter, Shoghi Effendi celebrates the power of the soul, emphasizes its inherent health, and describes illness as a “hindrance” between the soul and the body, a point also underscored by Bahá'u'lláh:

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. (*Gleanings* 153)

Siegel's work suggests that when a person is experiencing maladies that affect the mind, relationships, or “soul to soul” connections, can wield a powerful force. Within loving relationships, the positive energy flow helps

buttress those who are experiencing mental health challenges. Conversely, stigma and related negativity like judgment, criticism, or relationship “cut-off” can cause irreparable damage. The Bahá'í community, with its emphasis on love, community building, and reliance on the spirit, is uniquely suited to respond to the needs of those who suffer from mental illness.

ACCOMPANIMENT AND RECOVERY

Accompaniment is a concept that has recently become a lodestone of community building efforts within the Bahá'í Faith. To accompany someone is to stand next to that person and “be there,” supporting him or her with understanding and empathy. Accompaniment is neither giving advice nor abandonment. It is non-judgmental supportive friendship, a soul-to-soul relationship in which each learns from the other.

O children of men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence

of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Persian no. 69)

The Bahá'í Writings are very explicit in regard to what a relationship would look like when walking “even as one soul.” This beautiful and moving passage sets a new standard of friendship for all of us. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that

the Cause of the Ancient Beauty is the very essence of love, the very channel of oneness, existing only that all may become the waves of one sea, and bright stars of the same endless sky, and pearls within the shell of singleness, and gleaming jewels quarried from the mines of unity; that they may become servants one to another, adore one another, bless one another, praise one another; that each one may loose his tongue and extol the rest without exception, each one voice his gratitude to all the rest; that all should lift up their eyes to the horizon of glory, and remember that they are linked to the Holy Threshold; that they should see nothing but good in one another, hear nothing but praise of one another, and speak no word of one another save only to praise. (*Selections* 193)

'Abdu'l-Bahá has given a clear answer to the question, "How do you accompany a person with mental health challenges?" Extol without exception. Serve, bless, praise; see the good only. Express gratitude and love, even to the point of "adoring" one another.

If you are the one who is depressed or suffering from another mental health challenge, you may find it helpful to substitute "one another" in the passage above with the word "yourself" as you progress toward achieving recovery. In spite of the veil you may feel between your conscious self and your spirit, strive to love yourself, praise yourself, see the good in yourself, and be grateful to yourself for bearing up under your heavy burden. Try not to put yourself down, even though depression may be twisting your thoughts to the negative. Be kind to yourself. And at the same time, realize that it is no one's problem to solve but yours. That means recovery from major depression and other mental illnesses may be more or less a full-time job, and it may be one you will do for the rest of your life.

Taking responsibility for the illness is step number one. This does not mean believing that you caused the problem or that it is your fault. It means understanding and valuing your uniqueness while realizing that only you can create the recovery plan that will be right for you.

RECOVERY

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

(SAMHSA) is a large government organization in the United States that oversees a variety of mental health programs, research efforts, and policy recommendations. Recently, it released a new set of policy guidelines regarding mental health treatment that rejects the old medical model and embraces an individualized, self-determined, holistic approach. Recovery is defined as a process that encompasses an individual's whole life "including mind, body, spirit, and community" ("Recovery"). The guidelines state that "there are many different pathways to recovery and each individual determines his or her own way" (del Vecchio).

Recovery is defined as "a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential" ("Recovery"). The guidelines emphasize that recovery is real. No matter how severe and long-standing a mental illness may be, it is possible to create a plan that allows for a full and meaningful life. By taking charge of one's own illness and assembling medical help, counseling, skill training, nutrition, exercise, mind-body practices like yoga and meditation, and other curative practices, individuals become healthy and empowered.

Of course, various situations can make recovery more complex. A history of physical and/or psychological trauma requires specialized trauma-focused services by persons with training in these areas. A trauma history

can greatly complicate the already complex issue of recovery. Likewise, when addictive behaviors are part of the picture, they too require specialized treatment. Self-help groups aid recovery and emphasize that personal change is a life-long process of discovery that benefits from group support.

The recovery process is ever changing and may include setbacks and learning experiences that are painful. This is normal and should not be associated with failure or lack of effort or willpower. Setbacks are opportunities for growth. Small initial steps are often the most difficult, and when they do not result in the immediate alleviation of symptoms, many individuals lose hope and stop the process. It is important not to give up but to continue forward, adding more pieces to the recovery plan until the symptoms are under control and life is livable.

The new guidelines highlight that recovery is a way of life and the “experts” are those with the “lived experience” of healing. In the following story, Samila suffers from major mental illnesses and stigma. When her internal distress becomes too much to bear, she is faced with a choice. Her story shows how the supportive responses of others in her life enabled her to survive and begin her journey of healing while discovering the spiritual purpose of her life.

WAVES OF ACCEPTANCE

Samila (whose name has been changed for anonymity) is a woman in her

mid-thirties whom I met at a Bahá'í conference on healing. She was a speaker who shared her recovery plan with the group. Despite having been diagnosed with major depression, anxiety with panic attacks, eating disorders, and borderline personality disorder, she reported that she is living a full and meaningful life. Samila has created a comprehensive array of resources and practices that she calls her “wellness plan.” It includes regular visits with a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and registered dietitian; physical exercise; interpersonal skill training using Dialectical Behavior Therapy; an active spiritual life; and participation in Bahá'í community activities. Samila created the plan herself. She explained, “We have to find the way ourselves because no one else is going to do it for us.”

Samila agreed to share her story during a telephone conversation in August 2016:

You are already fighting a battle every single day against your own brain, but it's worse to fight the stigma that you have put on yourself and that other people have put on you. I just remember the years and years I went without help because I was so afraid of being seen as damaged. I hid it. I didn't get the help I needed. I beat myself up for decades and just hurt myself so much mentally and emotionally. Those were circumstances that were largely set up for me by my parents, but

that was the only attitude they had ever known. You didn't talk about it. You certainly didn't acknowledge it. You moved forward. You distracted yourself. You just continued on as if nothing is really wrong. You can't say, "Something is wrong" because it's not your foot that hurts. It's your brain that hurts. People can't fathom that. It is a scary unknown beast. Everybody goes silent when you talk about it.

For over thirty years I lived with shame and fear and felt angry and bitter because these were the circumstances I was given. I thought, 'Why did I have to get this kind of life?'

When I had my breakdown a few years ago, it was the first time I contemplated suicide. I realized the things I was doing in my life made it impossible to live. I could not continue playing this game I had not signed up for. There were rules that had been imposed upon me, and I had no choice in them. I realized hey, if these are the rules and they mean I can't live anymore, I can't survive. I was never hospitalized. I was in my office at work when I had this realization. Later that day I was able to see my therapist. She made me sign a contract that I would not take my own life. I promised I'd go and stay with my parents and tell them the truth. That was the first time I ever told my parents I had these kinds of thoughts. It was

terrifying. My mom sat by me and hugged me and cried and was just there for me.

It is three years now that I have been talking about my mental health. I am owning my mental illness and talking openly about it. I still get scared, but now it's my way of saving myself.

I used to say, "Why did I get this as my lot in life?" And the answer I got back from God was, "This is your purpose. You have been given this challenge so you could use it for some good." If I talk about this, maybe it will at least reduce some of the stigma, at least in my corner of the world.

Now I go toward the love—those who reach out to me and say either, "I struggle too," or they say, "I think you are so great and courageous," and others say, "I want to be there for people like you too." Whatever makes me feel seen and heard gives me hope, as the waves of acceptance flow out.

CONCLUSION

The goal of the preceding discussion has been to show that the application of the Bahá'í teaching of the unity of mankind is urgently needed in the field of mental health.

Depression is now the leading cause of disability worldwide and despite the fact that highly effective treatments are available, the majority of those who suffer do not get the help

they need. The stigma of mental illness is the greatest barrier to treatment. Stigma is a societal problem; a problem of attitude, of ignorance, and denial. It labels and blames those who suffer and greatly enhances their distress at the time when they most need love and support. It creates societal barriers that go unchallenged despite their glaring inequities and negative consequences.

Conversely, when communities recognize and welcome those who have mental health challenges like depression, they begin to create the framework within which the sufferers can heal while the community benefits from their presence.

As the many stories and examples illustrated, depression expresses itself uniquely within individuals and each healing journey is different. But all human beings benefit when the reality of the soul and the potency of supportive relationships are acknowledged. Interpersonal neurobiology shows how the mind depends on relationships for health and how transcendence itself is linked to the reality of love as it unfolds within each of our lives. Healthy individuals have a responsibility to examine their attitudes about mental health challenges, educate themselves, and take an active role in combating stigma through loving compassion towards those who suffer.

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Fragrances of a Poem

MAHVASH SABET (from Gohardasht Prison in Iran)

translated by JOHN HATCHER and AMROLLAH HEMMAT

to my mother who eternally receives all my love

Sitting silent
Beside a lone pomegranate tree,
I bear the burdens
of all these captive women.

In every corner
amid broken shadows
within these stone walls
huddled women speak in whispers.

On one side
young girls are
barely able to walk
in the anguish of their pain.

Under the shelter
a chubby sparrow briefly sits
to sing in quavering song
ferried on a breeze, sweet, but forlorn.

A few women hang clothes
on web-like strings
sagging with the weight
of a ponderous load.

Autumn has come.
The lone tree is fruitless,
its limbs leaveless.

Kind Faraibá sits,
caresses the face,
strokes the hair

of an elderly one,
weak, bereft,
her pure breath screaming,
“Aged, scourged,
am I not Innocence itself?”

I soon drown
in tears of another,
so tired, frail;

I drown in the blood
Flowing from the
veins of a weary young girl;
I drown in her sobs.

Wordless after torture,
approaching death,
she raises a finger
to signal her defeat,
and I myself become
as dead.

Later I drown
in jubilant shouts—
one woman has been
saved from the gallows!

In the morning
awakening to shrill screams,
sickened by the tumult
of grief from another
battered soul,

I diffuse the fragrances
of my poems over
the cold, stale bread;
I paint the color of light
over jaundiced faces,
sickly, dark, stunned.

I bestow hope of waves
upon a languid pond,
destitute of tumult
and cheer.

Caged,
my feathered wings bound,
in my mind
I bestow on the sparrow
the hope of soaring
to summit heights.

As each woman
becomes deathly silent
under the boot of
of obscene injustice,
in time I, too,
must faint away.

Beneath the single pomegranate,
so slender, fruitless,
I am silent again,
trying to bear
on my heart's strings
the unbearable weight
of these captive souls.

Biographical Notes

CAITLIN JOHNSON CASTELAZ was raised in Kansas City and resides in New York City, where she works as a writer and editor. Her poems have appeared in *Chiron Review*, *Coal City Review*, and others. She is the founding editor of *Vahid*, an annual Bahá'í-inspired literary magazine now in its third year. Serving as an editor at NineteenMonths.com, she runs "95 Words," an online poetry project that challenges writers to compose short works inspired by their reading of sacred texts.

IAN KLUGE is a poet, playwright and independent philosophy scholar who specializes in the philosophical study of the Bahá'í Writings. He has numerous publications and has taught for BIHE and the Wilmette Institute.

PATRICIA MCILVRIDE, Ph.D. is an author and clinical forensic psychologist in upstate New York. She provides psychotherapy and expert witness testimony regarding the impact of relationships on development and behavior throughout the lifespan. She has a life-long interest in the interface between psychology and religion.

KEITH MELLARD is a renowned sculptor who lives in Aberdeen, United Kingdom, where he works in clay, cast bronze, steel, wood, and stone. Over

the past twenty years he has focused on carving stone, which he describes as providing a "satisfying sensual music." He describes the overall objective of his art as "giving shape to feelings," a goal he has achieved with remarkable consistency. More about his work and thoughts at <http://www.keithmellard.com/>.

MAHVASH SABET was a teacher and school principal who was dismissed from public education for being a Bahá'í. She then became director of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education and subsequently secretary for the Yaran, seven individuals designated as Friends of the Bahá'í Faith to assist the Bahá'í community in Iran after Bahá'í administration was outlawed by the government. Imprisoned by the Revolutionary Court since August 7, 2010, together with the other six Yaran, she has written poems based on her experience in prison. *Prison Poems*, a collection of these poems adapted from the original Persian by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, was published in 2013. The piece included in this issue, "The Fragrance of a Poem," appears in that work but the version here is a translation by John S. Hatcher and Amrollah Hemmat.