

The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature

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The Bahá'í philosophy of human nature, 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. At the beginning of *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, cognitive scientist and philosopher Steven Pinker asserts that Augustine's *The City of God*, and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. However [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

They may be embodied in myths and legends or expressed in philosophic treatises such as Plato's *Republic*, Marx's *The City of God*, and Augustine's *The City of God*, and Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*. However [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

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 ituality. 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 purpose of life in this world and the next, mankind's relationship to the pernatural or nonmaterial world, and

with a theory of human nature. (3; emphasis added) 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 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, Societies.

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expect from all humans, which can be considered natural for the kind of beings we are, which are acceptable, and which are not. therefore, that human nature is shaped by the environment and concludes, 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 nature or essence. Is what we call kind of "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, and 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 tabula that human nature is shaped by the environment and concludes, 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 experiences people have—was an idea promulgated most famously by B. F. Skinner and other behavioral psychologists. Perhaps one of the most striking results of Locke's "blank state" theory is the claim that sexual identity is not intrinsically constrained and determined by biology but is, a matter of preference because there is no particular human nature to limit our choices. Two globally influential modern philosophers reinforced Locke's

education provided by others. Locke's thinking. 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 rejected genetics and natural selection and claimed 3 Locke actually uses the term "white paper." This idea was already present in Aristotle (De Anima, 429b29–430a1). See other words, also Stoic philosophy and, in the eleventh century CE, Ibn Sina. genetics—a belief 4 See Rousseau's A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind. shaping. The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature receive or accept" (518–19). There is no "pre-made" human nature (or any other nature); there are only individuals and groups making themselves. Elsewhere,

rasa doctrine and this line of One was the atheist existentialist Paul Sartre, who elaborated his most famously in Being and Nothingness. In this work, he observes, have seen, for human reality, to choose oneself; nothing comes from the outside or from within which 5 In Soviet Russia, this to Lysenkoism, a belief that 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 belief echoed in today's denial of nature and the view that environment is the only relevant factor in its shaping.

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powerful and widespread es, as can be seen in current and legal battles over sexual identity and, on a larger

scale, in 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 all, economist 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 diametrically opposite to the one that somehow exists "apart" from us Socialism, and that we can rediscover and regain (76). He rejects the existence of any First, such essence or nature: "behind things Comte de [there is] not a timeless essential secret but the secret that they have no essence" (353). Sartre, Foucault, and Europe-

the history of the twentieth century. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an attempt at creating a new society by remaking human nature into "New Soviet Man" (Bauer et al. Communist efforts were based on two principles—that human nature is almost infinitely malleable and humans are entirely shaped by their natural, social, and, above all, economic environments. There is no pre-determined human nature to overcome. On 22 June 1941,⁷ the materialist and radical philosophy of human nature itself at war with its 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 a determining factor in history and that Aryans—white and mostly

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 ultimately un- definition of human ontology. Beliefs about human nature have 7 The official launch date of "Opera- 6 Unfortunately, Sartre's view is un- determined 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. 10 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 27.1-2 2017

an—are the superior race.⁸ taught that the stronger races were in a Darwinian struggle against numerically superior but weaker es whom it considered fit to survive or rule. The tion Barbarossa," the code name many's invasion of the Soviet 8 Comte de Gobineau's widely Essay on the Inequality of the the Aryans as the white race of Europe.

"survival of the fittest" was applied to national and international politics, so- endorsed cieties, cultures, and, of course, races.⁹ The im- 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 use- eventually challenged by yet a ent theory of human nature by politicized radical Islam.¹³ portance of philosophies of nature—and of the clashes them—is clearly visible in reports. In sharp contrast to Locke successors, many of the world's religions agree about the of an innate, divinely created

human fulness to the state. Individuals have sub- no rights against the state and the ontol- supposed welfare of the majority. On hand, we 7 December 1941,¹¹ a third theory of be; human nature emerged in the midst of with war—one that held that the individual its way" has intrinsic value and, therefore, in- other herent fundamental rights against the that ev- state and society in general. Although nature, but the liberal capitalist theory of human nature emerged victorious,¹² it was permanent achievement. He did not foresee the rise of 9 See Richard Weikart's From Darwin challenge to lib- to Hitler. It should be noted that in no way can one rationally blame Darwin for the theorists abuse of his findings by others. al-Banna, 10 It is important to understand that a and belief in the basic genetic determination advocates of human nature does not in itself make Muslim version anyone a National Socialist. That belief is the evo- a necessary, but far from sufficient, condi- attack on the tion for being a Nazi. isolation from all 11 This is the date of the surprise establish- Japanese military strike at the American his best naval base at Pearl Harbor. This attack is

nature. Some of these religions scribe to the belief that human ogy is dualistic—on the one are not what we could and should on the other hand, we can "merge the divine command, walk in (Guru Nanak qtd. in Gill). In words, these religions assert ery human has a perfectible Western liberal democracy as a radical political Islam as a eral democratic capitalism. 13 Two of the foundational of radical Islam are Hassan founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, the latter of whom for, among other things, a of Vladimir Lenin's doctrine of lutionary elite to lead the West. He also calls for non-Muslim learning and the ment of rigorous Sharia law. In known book, Milestones, he calls

for cease-
officially considered the turning point that less violent jihad against all
non-Muslims,
led to the entry of the United States into but especially against the West.
Samuel P.
World War II. Huntington's *The Clash of
Civilizations and
the Remaking of World Order* is an
in-depth study of this incipient
12 Francis Fukuyama's *The End of His- tory and the Last Man* sees the victory of
conflict.
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unlike their secular counterparts, they skeletal anatomy; by the
possession of a larynx, enabling speech; by
believe that achieving such perfection of a larynx, enabling speech; by
a fun- damentally similar physiology
requires the assistance of divine grace (e.g.,
and guidance by the Manifestations of blood types) that underlies all
medical studies and practice; by the
God: "Without training and guidance human life cycle; and by a brain with a
the soul could never progress beyond particu- larly human structure. While
the conditions of its lower nature, human nature is not limited to our
human which is ignorant and defective" ('Ab- existence, the body helps shape
physical du'l-Bahá, Promulgation 297). More- man nature vis-à-vis its
hu- limitations for action in the
over, human nature has free will—the world.
potentials and Further evidence for the
capacity to choose the way to perfec- of a pre-given universal human
material comes from anthropology.
tion or to reject it—and must there- of Anthropology (Emeritus) Donald
fore take responsibility for its choices. E. Brown's *Human Universals* has be-
existence come one of the central texts in
These attributes of human nature the growing field of universal human
nature
entail moral and spiritual obligations
Professor
rather than comfortable privileges.
It is important to note that belief
in the existence of an intrinsic human
the
nature is not confined to religions

and political ideologies. Evidence for a universal human nature, based on the observation of its physical aspects, is found in the studies of genetics,¹⁴ ge-
medicine, anatomy, physiology, and science, neuroscience. For example, humans are characterized by an identifiable Steven

Pinker provides a list of Brown's more

14 The ability for all human ethnic groups to intermarry and produce viable offspring also indicates the underlying universal

physical oneness of mankind. The Human Genome Project is perhaps best understood, not as the genetic determination of a

all thought, feeling and behavior but rather as the recognition of the physical basis

for Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on the "oneness of mankind." Details on the National Human Genome Research Project, can be found on its official website <https://www.genome.gov/10001772/all-about-the-human-genome-project-hgp/>

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study of human nature.¹⁷ Although it has undergone some relatively minor modifications, Maslow's list of a universal hierarchy of needs remains a reality.¹⁸

familiar part of psychology and educational psychology courses. Evidence

nature.¹⁵ The work of Pinker supports Brown's thesis. He explains "bridges between [human] biology and culture" with evidence from

netics, brain science, cognitive and evolutionary biology (31). In his book *The Blank Slate*,

more than two hundred universal human attributes (435–39), and

some of them—such as the ability to learn language—and explores and critiques the concepts underlying the rejection of universal human nature.¹⁶ Among

psychologists, Abraham Maslow is perhaps most influential in the

15 See also Donald E. Brown, *Universals, Human Nature, Human*

16 Chapters 6 through 11.

concepts and terms were originally theorized by Aristotle in *Physics*, *Anima*, and *Metaphysics* as a method of analyzing and understanding

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, analyzing and understanding reality are

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the
for a universal human nature is also
available in evolutionary psychology
as

which maintains that human nature
developed by evolutionary pressures
themselves"

to make humans what they are now.
For example, Robert Wright's *The
Moral Animal, Why We are the Way We*
these

are: *The New Science of Evolutionary
Psychology* examines not only the evo-
lutionary origins of selfishness but
as

also of altruism, and mankind's social
nature.

In this paper, we shall focus on the
philosophy of human nature as pre-
sented in the Bahá'í Writings. To do
this most effectively, we must equip
ourselves with the philosophic con-
cepts, terminology, and arguments
that are pervasively and consistently
'Abdu'l-Bahá

used throughout the Bahá'í Writings
to explain relevant key concepts.
a

fuller understanding of the Writings.

**THE PHILOSOPHICAL TERMINOLOGY
OF THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS**
make no sense.

Unlike the sacred texts of most other
that
religions, the Bahá'í Writings contain a
terminology
large number of passages that explic-
Bahá'í
itly develop philosophical arguments
and employ a specific set of philosoph-
Ian

ical concepts and terminology. These
*Substratum of
the Bahá'í Writings*" in *Lights of Irfan*

17 See Abraham Maslow, *Towards a
Toolbox.*"

Psychology of Being and William G. Huitt, Both are available at

purposes of philosophy: "Philosophy
consists in comprehending, so far

human power permits, the realities
of things as they are in

(Some Answered Questions 59:7).

The fact that Bahá'u'lláh and
'Abdu'l-Bahá extensively employ

terms, concepts, and even arguments
confirms them as valid tools for
interpreting the Bahá'í Writings

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

imply that familiarity with this
terminology can assist in obtaining

If these terms had no relevance in
this context, their introduction would

It should be noted, however,

the use of Aristotle's

does not necessarily restrict

18 For a detailed analysis, see

Kluge's "The Aristotelian

Vol. 4, 2003, and "Bahá'u'lláh's

<https://www.baha->

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.

iphilosophy.com/.

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philosophical thinking to the third cen-
Writings.

they are used in the Bahá'í

tury BCE. Perhaps the best illustration
identity of

"Essence" refers to the

of this point is Werner Heisenberg's
the kind

a thing—that which makes it

use of "potential" in "the sense of
that

of thing it is and, conversely,

Aristotelian philosophy" in his discus-
other

which makes it different from

sions about quantum mechanics (Phys-
words, it re-

kinds of things. In other

ics and Philosophy 154). As indicated
well as to

fers to kinds or classes as

earlier, interest in and application of
kinds

differences among members of

Aristotle's versatile theory of human
to differ-

or classes; it does not refer

nature have undergone a serious re-
distinct-

ences in degree such as the

vival.¹⁹ Its ongoing usefulness can be
ice or

tions between water, steam, and

seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's logical proof of
and a short

those between a tall person

life after death as well as His solution
essence

one. Mankind has a particular

to the centuries-old mind-body prob-
from

that makes us different in kind

lem.²⁰ In light of these developments,
explains

animals, a distinction that

it is reasonable to expect that with the
acceptable in

why behaviors that are

guidance of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation,
accept-

animals are not necessarily

significant further developments will
shall

able or "moral" in humans. As

be possible.
are

be demonstrated below, essences

The Bahá'í Writings confirm sev-
change or

static insofar as they do not

en key Aristotelian concepts relevant
the

merge into one another—one of

to the subject of human nature: es-

reasons why 'Abdu'l-Bahá

rejects the
sence, potential, attribute, substance, evolved
form, fourfold causality, and teleology. These terms constitute the foundation Writings,
on which Aristotle bases his method axiom we
for analyzing and understanding real-statement
ity, and they apply to all phenomenal knowledge
beings, including mankind. We shall illumined and
examine these terms and show how created things"
and in His reference to "the inmost es-
19 See, for example, Tuomas E. Tah-ko's Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics accord-
or Daniel D. Novotný and Lukáš Novák's Bahá'í texts,
Neo-Aristotelian Perspectives in Metaphysics. possesses an
See also James Madden's Mind, Matter, and Nature and the ethical studies by G. E. M. Anscombe, Rosalind Hursthouse, and Some An-
Alasdair MacIntyre. Gleanings from
20 Both are found in chapter 66 of 15:1. For a
Some Answered Questions. Kluge's "The
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theory that humankind has
from ancestral apes.
According to the Bahá'í
all things have an essence, an
can discern in Bahá'u'lláh's
that "the light of divine
and heavenly grace hath
inspired the essence of all
sence of all things"
30; emphasis added). In short,
ing to the authoritative
everything in creation
"essence."²¹
21 See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá's
swered Questions, 95:3, and
the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,
complete list of essences see

So it is that humans possess an es- light. The inner essence of man
sence, as demonstrated, for example, in is unknown and unfathomed but
Bahá'u'lláh's statement, "Consider the it is known and characterized
by
rational faculty with which God hath its attributes. Thus everything
is
endowed the essence of man" (Glean- known and characterized by its
ings 83:1). Even nature has an essence attributes and not by its
essence...
as indicated by Bahá'u'lláh's references the reality of the Divinity,

too,
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: God's—has two kinds of attributes: essential or 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 essential or fundamental, the other 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 accidental essence as God, though He can reflect or abrogate manifest the divine qualities inherent in that Divine Essence of the Creator. (See chapter 53 of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Some Answered Questions.)

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 "reality" is an important how the latter term is used at times in the Writings. Second, it is the Manifestations Who provide us with knowledge of the divine and on the basis of this insight reason about God. Every essence—except necessary and accidental or non-necessary.²³ This distinction underlies doctrine of progressive revelation: the divine law has two distinct aspects or functions: one the essential or fundamental, the other the material or accidental . . . 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

²³ God cannot have accidental attributes because it makes no sense a divine attribute is not

necessary.

and superseded according to the need-exigency and requirement of each succeeding age. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, attribute, Promulgation 97; emphasis added) death of the soul (the substance or Essential attributes are necessary for a hair thing to be what it is, and they cannot be changed, whereas accidental attributes are optional and/or temporary. that For example, being human requires a "rational soul," which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá Unless 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: substance. This meaning of "substance" Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by Unity itself, and that the spirit is the accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, reality however, is that the rational soul which is the substance through which Thus, accidental attribute temporarily ed for living in the phenomenal world. The death of an accidental such as the body, does not imply the sence) any more than adult-onset loss diminishes our humanity. To understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's laration, we must bear in mind Aristotle also uses the word "substance" to refer to "essence." indicated otherwise, the latter ly alludes to the makeup of a whereas the former usually refers its ontology as being independent dependent. However, it must be remembered that every substance an essence and every essence is a as "essence" is noted by the translator of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Tablet on the of Existence," who states, "The term 'substance' (jawhar) is roughly alent to essence (mahíyya) and (haqíqa), which refer to 'that by a thing is what it is'" (note 2).

the body subsists. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the a substance—the spirit—remains. both an (Some Answered Questions 66:2) of human beings.

The wording of the new translation of Some Answered Questions makes the Aristotelian connection clear insofar as it explicitly identifies "substance" as "is that which "subsists by itself"—that Himself " is, independently—and "accident" as "substance" that which depends on the substance. inde-

'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is straightforward: the soul is the substance (essence) of mankind, and the body is an

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uniqueness of the Manifestations in Their relationship to God—emanating from God's essence and sharing individual in His absolute independence—which Wag- provides a rational basis for accepting "essence" what the Manifestations say as God's convey- Word. Furthermore, a substance is a separate or distinct individual that "essence- "operates according to its own logos" verbal or final cause and for that reason is discussion; also a source of motion and change

when 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the human spirit or "rational soul" as substance, He is describing it as independent reality and the essence of

With these two uses in mind, we will find it easier to Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the spiritual aspect of the Manifestations born of the substance of God (Gleanings 27:4). Here, emphasizes both God's absolute independence as well as His divine from which Manifestations This demonstrates the ontological of thing, and general and universal terms have no corresponding For example, there are only dogs, like Barko, Queenie, and ger, and what we call their or "class" is merely a term of nience to lump together apparently similar things. Their alleged es" and "kinds" are nothing but conveniences to facilitate they do not really exist as such.

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, '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, Answered Questions 64:1)—that classes of extant realities each possess distinct essential natures, and that these categories are not man-made constructs. This Bahá'í concept 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.

Nominalist philosophers deny that essences are ontologically real. In their view, only individual entities are or qualities, indicating,

therefore, that

real, and, therefore, classes of things, essences are real because "[a] non-ex-

essences that allegedly identify a kind istent thing, it is agreed, cannot be

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seen by signs" (Paris Talks 90). In ad- ways,

dition, He teaches that mankind's dis- actualize

tinguishing feature, the rational soul, unforesee-

"encompasses all things and, as far unique

as human capacity permits, discovers levels—a

their realities and becomes aware of "duck-kind,"

properties and effects" (Some Answered that of my

Questions 55:5). If the essence—that which distinguishes one kind of thing change

from another—is not ontologically into a tree

real, it would not be able to act, as Ques-

noted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example: "In unique

order to write a man must exist—one and the

who does not exist cannot write" (Paris exten-

Talks 92). Furthermore, His argument that the

about "the essential reality underlying come

any given phenomenon" makes it clear [of

that in Bahá'í ontology, all things have potential in

an essence, whose attributes appear in emphasis

the phenomenal world (Promulgation "ex-

421; emphasis added). A final example

of a thing to change in certain

which is to say to reveal or

previously hidden and often

able attributes. Potentials are

to each kind of thing at two

collective level, such as

and an individual level, like

pet ducks, Jack and Jill.

Potentials allow a pupa to

into a butterfly or a seed

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered

tions 51:4). Human nature is a

combination of potentialities

Bahá'í Writings discuss them

sively. 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out

various aspects of a tree do not

from nowhere: "All these virtues

the tree] were hidden and

the seed" (Promulgation 90;

added). The leaves and branches

isted potentially, albeit

invisibly, in the showing the reality of essences is the Answered teaching that mankind's essence does not change during the evolutionary process: "the development of man was always human in type and biological even de- 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 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" (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Questions 60:5).

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"latent and potential in the world of nature" (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation 310; emphasis added). The same is true of a chair, the earth as a whole: "the terrestrial seed" (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Questions 51:4; emphasis added). short, there is more to reality what we can immediately see or discover empirically. This is monstrable in science. No amount of physical analysis of hydrogen ygen atoms can detect their to form water or predict the of water itself, such as its when frozen. These potentials were (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 16:3). However, potentials exist because "[a] non-existent thing, it is not be seen by signs" and 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).

final cause. So this chair has who is a carpenter, a matter of wood, a form which is that of and a purpose which is to

serve as a 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. It is also and only required the right time and conditions to become actualized. In man-made humankind as well, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, it pertains "our Creator . . . has deposited . . . certain latent and potential virtues. Through education and culture these virtues . . . will become apparent in the human realm (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

seat" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Questions 80:3).²⁵ The final chair's purpose, without which is no point in having a (design), a material cause to actualize the design, and efficient cause to do the work.²⁶ important that 'Abdu'l-Bahá limit fourfold causality to objects; rather, He explains, to "the existence of. . . (Some Answered Questions 80:3). The final cause influences the the efficient cause by facts it can have. Iron when watered but will not daisies. The final cause is the nature of the water—which only lets take place. This limiting the final cause in action. things have a final cause, purpose, a reason for their existence.

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 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).

This includes humankind and verse itself: "If man did universe would be without 25 See Aristotle's Physics and Metaphysics (5.1.1013ab). 26 Fourfold causality harmonizing science and deals with material and whereas religion deals with above all, final causes. As Aristotle indicate, all four for the existence of every it be man-made or natural.

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the good of the soul.²⁷ It also education policy in such areas as curriculum development because questions of spiritual education cannot be circumvented or ignored. Likewise, recognizing the primacy of the in our political constitutions will affect our personal and collective scale of values and rights, which in turn societal decisions at every level and turn. If, for example, large numbers

27 It is interesting to reflect on the only the good of the body, but also meaning of "harm reduction" in light of our spiritual nature.

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and stimulated the development of heavenly virtues. (Promulgation 89; emphasis added) is why anthropologists and historians have not found a culture at any stage of development without spiritual and religious beliefs and practices. While Belief or disbelief in immortality affects how we deal with social issues transcendence, 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 they 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 Marxist-Leninism. are the importance of prayer, the revelation of God's names in human nature ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 26), "Bolshevism and—since God is not a material doctrine; it is

there may be individual exceptions this innate desire for there are no collective or societal ceptions to it. Even militantly revolutions and regimes can be said do no more than replace one kind of religiosity with another—though eventually and invariably fail in 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 failed at least in part because it not satisfy the intrinsic human nation to transcendence. The same failure was experienced eventually militantly atheistic Presenting a list of similarities tween Marxism and Christianity, Bertrand Russell notes that is not merely a political

ing—mankind's nature having been also a religion, with elaborate dogmas and inspired scriptures" (8). Without 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, over the course of progressive Revelation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation 7). anything that can, if only briefly, make us forget the iron limits of material existence.²⁸ People find it easier to offer spiritual essence explains the "spiritual longing[s]" felt, in varying degrees, by virtually all human beings and cultures ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 73). ²⁸ See, for example, Ghadirian In Search of Nirvana for an analysis of the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol as chemical substitutes for

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"[t]hat willing suspension of disbelief nature that there is only one human for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" to the supernatural in films, and places, regardless of the vast diversity of individuals and diverse novels, television series, and comic cultures. In regards to the universality of human nature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also books rather than to God (Coleridge nature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also 2). Forms of divination such as tarot instance, man is distinguished from cards, crystals, and rune stones may the animal by his degree, or fill our inclination to transcendence. dom. This comprehensive distinction includes all the posterity of Finally, in a more general way, the

Adam
human inclination to transcendence and constitutes one great
household or human family, which may be
is also evident in the large numbers considered the fundamental or
con- siders the fundamental or
of individuals who describe them- unity of mankind" (Promulgation
physical 190).
selves as "spiritual" as distinct from Elsewhere He affirms, "The
190). foremost
"religious" in an institutional sense. degree of comprehension in the
foremost world
In different ways, these people feel of nature is that of the rational
world that there is more to existence than
soul. This power and comprehension is
the material world and that our bodily shared in common by all men,
existence does not represent the sum whether
total of our lives. These expressions they be heedless or aware,
wayward or faithful" (Some Answered
of the spiritual aspirations may all be Questions 58:3). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly
summarized by the bon mot that when identifies "the rational
identi- fies "the rational
you push God out of the door, He according to Him, distinguishes
soul"²⁹—which, ac- cording to Him, distinguishes
comes back in through the window. humans
humans from animals—as a possession of
Because humanity's inherent spiritual all
all humans, even if they are not
longings are based on our nature as conscious
conscious of it or deny its existence.³⁰
spiritual beings, they are impossible to
Human- suppress. They will always be present
suppress. They will always be present
to challenge the atheistic and material- 29 See Kluge, "Reason and the
Bahá'í Writings" in Lights of 'Irfán
Bahá'í 14, 2013, and
istic mind-set. According to the Bahá'í Writings, "Philosophy and the Bahá'í
14, 2013, and Faith." "Rea-
According to the Bahá'í Writings, son," "reasonable," and
Faith." "Rea- human nature is not just spiritual Bahá'í Writings refer to (1)
human nature is not just spiritual soning from premise to
"rational" in the but also universal, as evident in 'Ab-
Bahá'í Writings refer to (1)
inferential rea- du'l-Bahá's statement about the essen-
soning from premise to
conclusion, either

tially spiritual nature being true for "all explicitly or implicitly; (2) appropriate or fitting to the subject matter men alike" (Paris Talks 72); elsewhere being exam-ined; (3) in harmony with logical He states that "God created us all of thinking though arrived at by intuition one race" (Paris Talks 148). And if all and other ways of knowing. humans are part of one race, it follows 30 Denying human rationality is, logi- transcendental experiences. cally speaking, a lost cause since denying

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ity's rational capacity not only rein- are merely accidental rather than es- sential attributes of human forces the universality of rationality nature. in mankind, but it also establishes the Indeed, racism is reduced to a logical basis for world unification insofar as it category mistake, an unsophisticated confusion between what is can bring people together through the permanent and meaningful and what is ephemeral and insignificant. Third, it Compared to the essential oneness provides an objective foundation for a of mankind, the racial, cultural, and universal code of ethics by considering individual differences are accidental— morality on an objective rather than a which is to say, contingent products personal and culturally subjective of time, place, and circumstances— basis, thus undermining the concepts of whereas human nature is permanent ethical and cultural relativism. The ethical and universal. The existence of such enormous diversity within humankind principles implicitly embedded in our divinely created nature are emphasizes the need for a universal and binding for all. universal human nature, without which it would be impossible to establish the unifica- Another fundamental aspect of hu-

tion of mankind, where "[a]ll men Bahá'í will adhere to one religion, will have permanent; it one common faith, will be blended into may one race, and become a single people" are ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions but the 12:7). does The oneness and universality of na- humanity's nature as created by God time, are essential to the Bahá'í philosophy circum- of human nature for at least three that "the major reasons. First, they establish and the foundation for the eventual unifi- essence cation of mankind in a federal global (Some commonwealth. Without such a fun- posi- damental oneness and universality, regards to it is difficult to envision humankind achieving such unity. Second, it ne- gates the ontological basis for racism pro- insofar as the characteristics used to affect differentiate ethnic groups or races development of man was always human in type reason requires us to employ it in order to For establish our point. The argument against reason is a self-refuting proposition. first a The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature mere germ or worm. Gradually as

man nature, according to the Writings, is that it is does not change over time. There be changes in the potentials that manifested at different times, human essence as created by God not change. In other words, human ture has unity and coherence in in space or location, and in stance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms originality of the human species, of the independence of the of man are clear and evident" Answered Questions 47:11). This tion is maintained even in human evolution: This anatomical evolution or gression does not alter or the statement that the and biological in progression. the human embryo when exam- ined microscopically is at Revelations (Promised Day 108). If

it develops it shows certain divisions . . . But at all times . . . it was because human in potentiality . . . Through-More-out this progression there has been a transference of type, a conservation of species or kind. (Promulgation 358; emphasis added) be achieved on the basis of some durable 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 one of 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 from with this power it can bring forth from the individual whatever perfections

human nature were changeable, there could be no "eternal verities" they would not be applicable. over, if human nature were not constant, it would be difficult to how humanity could ever be united, because unification can only common ground. There are at least two other reasons for rejecting concept of human nature as able. One is theological: the of essential malleability the human spirit or essence is perfect creation by God. explicitly contradicts such says, "I have perfected in every you My creation," thus both humans and creation as a have been created perfect 75:1). The second, practical for rejecting the changeability of human nature is to protect humans themselves and their limited standing of themselves and their

spir- and capacities are deposited within
 need to him" (Selections 132; emphasis added).
 man-made
 In my understanding, this means that
 knowl- while education can improve the way
 di- the potentials of "the inner essence"
 changes by express themselves, it cannot change
 that essence. Of course, the immutability
 of The immutability of human na-
 ture is important for at least a few
 cannot reasons. First, the doctrine of pro-
 precisely gressive revelation and the unification
 revelation. of humankind require it. As Shoghi
 ensure Effendi points out, God, through His
 actu- Manifestations, "restates the eternal
 not verities" over the course of successive
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perspective, that can best be done by
 arrangement" composition and
 looking at guidance from the Manifes- ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation 181).
 tations of previous Divine Dispensa- The divine origin of mankind
 has at least three significant
 tions—and in our time, at Bahá'u'lláh, es. First, human beings are loved
 consequenc- the Manifestation of God for this age. by
 by God, Who created them freely. He
 A study of the Bahá'í Writings would did not have to create them; He
 leave no doubt that theories of racial could have omitted them from creation,
 could superiority, the absolute equalization or
 or He could have created them for mo-
 of wealth, and the complete submis- tives other than love.³¹
 sion of the individual to the state are

Recognizing

untenable because they cannot be har-
hu-

monized with the essentially spiritual
nature of human reality.

toward

and understanding of the importance

HUMANITY'S ORIGIN, PLACE,
AND ROLE IN CREATION

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, we will then

In order to understand human nature,
as

it is necessary to consider its origins,
children of

place, and role in the cosmic order.

see no

Mankind's existence is the result of a
Talks

conscious, intentional, and willful act
hu-

of God, and more than that, it is the
value is

result of an act motivated by divine
to deval-

love. Through Bahá'u'lláh, God says,
subjective

"O son of man! I loved thy creation,
degraded by

hence I created thee" (Hidden Words,
be

Arabic no. 4). Human nature is the
against

object and product of intentional or
because

willful action by God, Who, motivated
by love for humanity, brought it into

a

existence as a particular kind of being.

Mankind is not a chance creation

is it

that may or may not have come into

Man

existence depending on serendipitous

chemical reactions; rather, like the rest
for

of the phenomenal world, it is part of
as

this divine love as the origin of

man nature has momentous positive
consequences for our attitude

of ourselves and others. Indeed, it
would revolutionize them altogether.

"[I]ook upon the whole human race

members of one family, all

God; and, in so doing, [we] will

difference between them" (Paris

171). Second, the divine origin of

man nature also means that its

intrinsic, that it is not subject

uation due to prejudices or

preferences. Nor can it be

outward circumstances. It can only

disgraced by our own actions

our essential nature. Third,

human nature is divinely made, we

observe once again that it is not

construct dependent on personal or
collective human perception, nor

subject to "re-design" by humans.

31 An ancient Babylonian myth,

example, gives the creation of man

a plan, and as will be shown below, it motivated by the gods' drunken desire to
is a necessary part of the universe. In amuse themselves; they make clay models
other words, "it is evident that it is the of humans—including all kinds of dis-
creation of God, and is not a fortuitous tortured ones—for their pleasure.
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is not man-made, and neglecting this distinguishes it from all other things
fact has led to disastrous results in the and gives humankind a special posi-
twentieth century. tion on the scale of being.³² In
short,

Although human nature, like all human nature is ontologically and
other phenomenal things, is created cosmically "privileged." This does
not,
by God's will, it is especially favored of course, entitle humans to abuse
the
or privileged by God. In the words rest of creation but rather imposes
a
of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "There is no doubt special duty to look after the
world in
then, that of all created beings man the spirit of noblesse oblige.³³
is the nearest to the nature of God, Contrary to contemporary
scientif-
and therefore receives a greater gift of ic opinion, the Bahá'í Writings
assert
the Divine Bounty" (Paris Talks 26). that there is a fundamental
difference

Bahá'u'lláh states: between human nature and the
nature
of other life forms and that this is a
Whatever is in the heavens and difference in kind and not in degree.
A
whatever is on the earth is a direct difference in kind is one that cannot
be
evidence of the revelation within reduced to a common factor. A rock
and
it of the attributes and names a seagull are different in kind; each
has
of God . . . To a supreme degree is essential attributes that the other
does
this true of man, who, among all not and cannot have. All essential
dif-
created things, hath been invested ferences are differences in
kind—pine-

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 essential attributes and names of God to a see 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

apples versus ponies, surgeons versus sturgeons, wizards versus washboards. On the other hand, in a difference of degree, there is at least one attribute that makes it possible to see one thing or condition as a degree or variation of another. For example, three states of water—liquid water, steam, and ice—are different in degree but alike in their essential of molecular structure. Knowledge

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32 The categorization of being, according to the Bahá'í goes from mineral, to plant, to finally to man. 33 "Nobility obliges"; or, in the evangelist's words, "unto whomsoever is given, of him shall be much (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,

human kind, namely the intellectual characteristic, which discovereth realities of things and universal principles" Selections 61). Mankind achieves such comprehension by means of the absolutely unique human activities that have no counterpart in the world: "All sciences, knowledge,

arts,
from plants and minerals: wonders, institutions, discoveries
and
enterprises come from the exercised
The human spirit, which intelligence of the rational soul"
('Ab-
distinguishes man from the animal, du'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions
is the rational soul, and these two 58:3). This list is easily unpacked,
terms—the human spirit and containing such activities as
writing
the rational soul—designate one operas, establishing public
schools,
and the same thing. This spirit, engaging in philosophical debates,
cre-
which in the terminology of the ating legal systems with codified
laws
philosophers is called the rational and rights, as well as inventing
modes
soul, encompasses all things and, of democratic governance.
as far as human capacity permits, Not only do the Bahá'í Writings
discovers the realities and establish the uniqueness of human
becomes aware of the properties nature, but they also teach that
and effects, the characteristics humankind occupies a distinct place
in
and conditions of earthly things. the structure of the physical cosmos.
('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "The splendour
of
Questions 55:5) all the divine perfections is
manifest
in the reality of man, and it is for this
Because the "rational soul" is the es- reason that he is the vicegerent
and
sential attribute of human nature that apostle of God. If man did not
exist,
no other creature has or can have, the the universe would be without
result,
difference between mankind and other for the purpose of existence is the
beings is a difference in kind. This dis- revelation of the divine
perfections"
tinction is shown in several ways. One (Some Answered Questions 50:4).
is that humankind includes and com- Human nature is not only made in
the
prehends the lower forms of existence image of God; it is also the
capstone
such as mineral, plant, and animal and, or crown of creation, without which
in addition, has reason: "In the hu- the phenomenal universe would be
man world the characteristics of the incomplete. It represents the

necessary

mineral, vegetable and animal worlds are found and in addition that of the degree of perfection that gives the universe a goal and purpose (note the

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teleological thinking) just as the fruit is man

the reason for the existence of the tree and is ruler over nature's sphere

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions is province. Nature is inert, man

is 50:5). In other words, human nature progressive. Nature has no consciousness, man is endowed with it. Nature is without volition and

Bahá states, "We cannot say, then, that acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is in-

(Some Answered Questions 50:6). mysteries capable of discovering

Human nature also occupies a unique place in the cosmic order in other ways: or realities whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not

in touch with the realm of God,

In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God, man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues, nature

thereof. For instance, all minerals, plants and animals are captives of nature . . . Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices, nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts. Altogether it is

yet free in his mind and soul, and that man is more noble and superior;

hath the mastery over nature. that in him there is an ideal

power surpassing nature. He has

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet 9) conscious-

ness, volition, memory, intelligent In other words, mankind's essentially power, divine attributes and virtues

spiritual nature transcends or surpasses of which nature is completely

de- prived, bereft and minus;

es physical creation; therefore, humans

therefore have "mastery over nature." As noted earlier, this is not, of course, a license to abuse the natural world, in which (Promulgation 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 powers in which human nature is essentially distinct from the rest of creation:

man is higher and nobler by of the ideal and heavenly force and manifest in him. 178; emphasis added) Human nature is also unique it is the microcosm of the mic creation: The human kingdom is replete with the perfections of all the kingdoms below it with the addition of peculiar to man alone. Man is, fore, superior to all the creatures

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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 . . .

unto that for which thou wast created" (Arabic no. 22). In effect, this 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 do otherwise is to squander these we are not here to rest on our conferred laurels but to strive self-actualization of our higher capac-

the greater world, the macro-
 as
 cosm, is latent and miniaturized in
 the lesser world, or microcosm,
 of man. This constitutes the uni-
 car-
 versality or perfection of virtues
 civ-
 potential in mankind. Therefore,
 it is said that man has been cre-
 beasts
 ated in the image and likeness of
 God. (Promulgation 69; emphasis
 dig-
 added)

nity are forbearance, mercy,
 compassion and loving-kindness
 Human nature, in other words, sum-
 kin-
 marizes in miniature, "latent" form
 (Bahá'u'lláh,
 within itself the principles, the "mys-
 teries," and the "virtues" of the entire
 phenomenal world.³⁴ This inherent
 to act
 nobility of human nature is not just
 be-
 a matter of building human self-con-
 such
 fidence; it is, more importantly, a mat-
 ter of ethics, insofar as humans are
 origin,
 expected to live up to their noble na-
 evolu-
 ture as an ethical duty. In the Hidden
 limita-
 Words, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts, "O son of
 One of
 spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet
 mystics to
 thou hast abased thyself. Rise then
 with
 God—is not supported by the Bahá'í
 34 Bahá'u'lláh makes a similar claim:
 Because
 "For in him are potentially revealed all the
 attributes and names of God to a degree
 be-

ities and the progress of humanity
 a whole:
 All men have been created to
 ry forward an ever-advancing
 ilization. The Almighty beareth
 Me witness: To act like the
 of the field is unworthy of man.
 Those virtues that befit his
 towards all the peoples and
 dreds of the earth.
 Gleanings 109:2)
 Bahá'u'lláh enjoins humankind
 in accordance with its divinely
 stowed nature, thereby making
 behavior an ethical imperative.
 However, human nature's
 place, and role in the cosmic
 tion also impose important
 tions on mankind's capacities.
 these—the claims by some
 have become ontologically "one"
 philosophy of human nature.

mankind is a creation of God and
 is, therefore, dependent on Him;

that no other created being hath excelled from God; or surpassed" (Gleanings 90:1). direct

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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 its 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.

cause it is different in kind and because there is "no tie of direct

heading of higher and lower natures.

The rest of this paper will

this point. The five sets of dual

pects are as follows:

(1) (species) essence and

essential attributes: a horse and

a mammal;

(2) (species) essence and

accidental attributes: a horse and

chestnut coloring;

(3) potential and actuality: a

and the actual tree that grows from

it³⁵;

(4) our higher spiritual and

animal nature; the rational soul

the body;

(5) "innate and acquired"

human nature as created by God

nature) and what humans choose to

with the divine endowments (second

nature).³⁷

Regarding the fifth set of

'Abdu'l-Bahá says that while our

nate capacity"—or "first nature,"

is sometimes called—"is purely

good,"

DUALITIES IN HUMAN NATURE

is

potentially latent and hidden in the little

In my view, the Bahá'í concept of and culti-

human nature is distinguished by ('Abdu'l-Bahá,

five sets of ontological dualities that establish the general structure of hu- Ques-

man nature. All the other features of human nature have their place within term for

this framework and can be related to it creat-

directly or indirectly. For example, the teachings about change, physical and nature' is his

spiritual evolution, progressive revela- nature as

tion, and even the afterlife are part of ("Nor-

the rubric of potential and actuality. Nature—

Teachings about morality fit under the 30 The Journal of Bahá'í Studies 27.1-2 2017

our "acquired capacity" or "second na- understanding

ture," which is the result of choices we becomes

make, explains, among other things, errors in

"the cause of evil" (Some Answered leader-

Questions 57:9).³⁸ While the "natural and

capacity" (first nature) is essentially example,

spiritual, it does not exclude the body highlights

as an accidental attribute that partic- the effects

ipates in the goodness of God's cre- psycho-

ation. It is "accidental" because, while

35 "But the whole of the great tree

seed. When this seed is planted

vated, the tree is revealed"

Promulgation 69).

36 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered

tions 57:9.

37 "'First nature' is Hegel's

nature including human nature as

ed by God and/or untouched by human activity in any way. 'Second

term for nature including human

affected by mankind and society"

mativity and Subjectivity: First

Second Nature—Mind").

complete and distorted

of mankind. Consequently, it

impossible to avoid serious

governance, administration,

ship, law, economics, medicine,

education. In economics, for

the subject of marketing

this issue in that it ignores

of consumerism on people's

logical and spiritual

well-being, both necessary in the phenomenal realm, with 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. These dualities do not undermine the unity of human nature because they are the very constituents of human nature itself. If any of these 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. 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 nature. Thus, these dualities and their seeming contradictions are dialectical; that is, they create a process that unifies the opposites in the

process

explaining the existence of evil in this itself, thereby helping to constitute

world despite the fact that the phenomenal human nature. In addition, these dual-

world, as created by God, is perfect. ities have a functional and teleological

39 See section 2 of this paper, "The unity inasmuch as they work toward Philosophical Terminology of the Bahá'í their common goal of sustaining hu-

Writings," for specific evidence. man nature and delineating its present

The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature 31

objectives as well as its final goal of and contradiction be seen as in man.

cosmic development ('Abdu'l-Bahá, (Some Answered Questions 64:6-7;

Some Answered Questions ch. 49). emphasis added)

The dialectical nature of some of the essential dualities of human nature causes man to be in a state of In other words, human nature finds itself in an ontological borderland

tension between actuality and potentiality, between different levels of

tial: to wit, between what one is and between matter and spirit, between what one could be; between what one the animal "captive to matter" and is and what one should be; between our the angel free in the spiritual realms;

higher and lower nature; and between between perfection and imperfection

"innate capacities" and "acquired ca- ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 38).

Pre- capacities" (first and second nature). In cisely because of this ambiguous on-

addition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies another ontological position,

Manifestations are

er aspect of this intrinsic tension; it is needed to guide humanity's physical,

due to humanity's ontological position intellectual, and moral development.

in creation:

Finally, in this statement,

'Abdu'l-Bahá

re-emphasizes humanity's distinctive

Man is the ultimate degree of nature as a processual being

constitut-

materiality and the beginning of ed by the previously examined duali-

spirituality; he is at the end of ontological imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the further-conflict more 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 human the animal. Thus, should the di- there are vine powers, which are identical for with perfection, overcome in man do the satanic powers, he becomes as the noblest of all creatures, but 1993; should the converse take place, man- he becomes the vilest of all beings. That is why he is the end those of imperfection and the beginning of perfection . . . In no other God— species in the world of existence can ('Ab- such difference, distinction, contrast However,

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some people develop qualities that are other unsuited or inappropriate to human nature. The full importance of possessing and the intrinsic goal of actualizing the he potentials bestowed by God becomes and

ties as well as its unique position.

This ongoing constitutive 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 nature is teleological; that is, certain qualities intended by God 'human nature', and qualities which not accord with these are described 'unnatural'" (letter dated 5 July emphasis added). In other words, kind has an innate goal or purpose, which is to actualize and develop potentials that are in harmony with its "first nature" as created by their "spiritual susceptibilities" (du'l-Bahá, Promulgation 7).

as revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. In words, the right choices are those based on the recognition that "[m] an is, in reality, a spiritual being, only when he lives in the spirit is truly happy. This spiritual longing

clearer when reflecting that this goal is a universal ethical imperative that is valid regardless of time, place, and involves historical circumstance. Here, too, it is evident that bringing mankind's our animal aspects under spiritual control is 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: But what if there is a conflict between 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) perception to be real. Unlike Sartre's From a Bahá'í perspective, the ethically right choices are those that "naturalize" our divinely created first nature or "natural capacities" what

perception belongs to all men alike" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 73). Making ethically correct choices recognizing our own spiritual nature and spiritual longings and fitting choices to our true identity, which the only part of us that will endure after physical death. At this point, significance of metaphysics for ethics and human development becomes clear. If humans do not recognize their spiritual nature, it becomes 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 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

is good for the state; or utilitarian ethics, which are based on whatever the substances majority decides is good, the Bahá'í Writings teach that ultimately God, matter 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 Ideal- showing that it is not constituted by body and 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 is ma- work together and supports the teachings on immortality and mankind's In the essentially spiritual nature. Finally, it is also important to understand the Bahá'í solution to the mind-body prob-

is to explain how these distinct and incompatible can interact as constituents of a unified human organism. How can matter interact with non-matter? There is a long history of proposed 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 an arm, God causes the arm to

The second solution to the mind-body problem is monism—whether materialistic or idealistic. Both reject mind-body dualism altogether. Ideal- istic monists assert that both mind and the brain are mental in nature.⁴¹ For materialists, the mind and the brain is part of the body) are the same, which is why this view is called "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 therefore, the chief rival of

all forms

lem because it will inevitably face criticism from Bahá'í

cism from mind-brain identity theory. solution. Whereas the Bahá'í Writ-

There are basically two views on ings offer a third alternative, namely

mind-body duality. The first view is that the whole mind-body problem is

dualism, which was revived by René chimerical, an illusion caused by Des-

Descartes, who claimed that human cartes' faulty analysis in identifying

nature is comprised of two substances: an extended and unconscious sub- 40 Unpromising as this theory seems

stance that forms the body (including at first glance, it remains an option be-

the brain) and a non-extended, con- cause of the serious difficulties attending

scious, and thinking substance that its chief rival, identity theory.

forms the soul or mind (Meditations no. 41 Hegel is an example in the West;

6). The challenge of Cartesian dualism Buddhism is also monist in this sense.

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both the non-extended spirit and the and be human without the accidental extended body as distinct substances body. For this reason, spirit and body

and thus as separate, independent, and are not necessarily and eternally con-

intrinsically incompatible. nected, and the spirit will eventually

'Abdu'l-Bahá points out Descartes' be able to exist without the body.

error while presenting His argument Because the human spirit, or ratio-

for the immortality of the soul: nal soul, is a substance and the body

is an attribute, there is no interaction

Some hold that the body is the problem between them any more than substance and that it subsists by there is an interaction problem be- itself, and that the spirit is the ac- tween a ripe tomato and its redness.

cident which subsists through the "Redness" is an attribute that ripe substance of the body. The truth, tomatoes exhibit at certain stages of however, is that the rational soul is their existence in the material world.

the substance through which the It might be said that the essence of

body subsists. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—actu-
the spirit—remains. (Some Answered Questions 66:2) world. How can there be an interaction problem between a substance or
In summary, the solution to the Cartesian dilemma is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's potentials?
identification of the human spirit, or is
rational soul, as a substance and the material body, including the brain, as "accident." As a substance, the human tenable.
spirit exists independently and is able makes
to possess attributes. By "exists independently" I mean that every individual rational soul is distinct from every
between
other and does not depend on them
To
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 re-
star on his forehead. However, "black" and "starred forehead" themselves cannot be distinct substances because with
they cannot exist independently as of
things in their own right. In the case of humans, the rational soul can exist analogy,
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the sun and the mirror have an accidental relationship: the mirror is in no com-
way necessary for the existence of the

the tomato expresses and manifests itself by means of redness as it
alizes certain potentials in the
essence, its inherent potentials,
the actualization of these
It would be like saying that there
an interaction problem between the seed and the tree growing from it.
Such a claim is not logically
Bahá'í scholar John S. Hatcher
a similar point when, in regards to things and their activities, he
"there is no interface problem
things and their activities" (174).
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
the body is even as the connection
this lamp with a mirror" (Some Answered Questions 66:3). In this
with meaning as "I smell a rat"?⁴²
ing a physical device—whether a
puter, an MRI, an EEG, or a physical

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 or sense is an attribute of the sun, just Physical as the body is an attribute insofar as of the body's actions are expressions of is the rational soul. In other words, the themselves. relationship between the sun and its mirror image replicates the relationship between the human spirit and the pro-body. Again, there is no interaction brain problem because no such problem marks can exist between a substance and its and, attribute. consequently, provides no answer. In '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 . . . im-accounted as naught" (Some Answered Questions 69:4). In themselves, there physical sound waves have no emotions or meaning, yet somehow they become very meaningful to listeners even though no amount of scientific is analysis can detect such meaning. The that same problem is even more acute for 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, squiggly lines on a printout. analysis cannot reveal the meaning of these "ciphers" because the meaning not in the physical marks 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 that also can only scan literal merely initiates an infinite regress and, consequently, provides no answer. In principle, therefore, meaning cannot be comprehended by physical from this it follows that the comprehension of meaning requires the intervention of a non-physical process and/or entity. To solve this a non-physical intervenor must be implicitly or explicitly imported to identity theory viable, otherwise 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 difficult to avoid the conclusion at some point a non-physical

interve-

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

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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

prehesion of meaning.

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import any non-physical intervenors to understand meaning. The human spirit or rational soul takes on that

to understand meaning. The human spirit or rational soul takes on that

spirit or rational soul takes on that

42 Even if we decipher the

script, we are still faced with the

of understanding the translation.

43 In my experience, attempts to claim the contrary inevitably "slip

a non-physical intervenor in order

achieve understanding.

aspects of our experiences such

being six years old, viewing

Van Gogh's "Sunflowers," or reading

Thomas Mann's Death in Venice. They

make up the whole of our

experienced "life-world," which is

why they are so incredibly

to humans. Much of human life is

driven by the quest for certain

or subjective experiences, as seen

the pursuit of beauty, friendship,

poetry, stories, pleasure, music,

humor, justice, truth,

meaning, among other things.

Why do qualia and subjective

rience pose difficulties for

identity theory? In the first

like meaning, qualia are not

things—there is no way to gather

or
role. measure someone's subjective
experi-
The second major problem for ences. None of the criteria of
scientific
identity theory mentioned by 'Abdu'l- evidence—physicality,
measurability, objective and external
Bahá concerns issue of qualia. He observability,
says, "[C]onsider how the vibrations and falsifiability, among
others—can
of the air, which are an accident among be applied to qualia and subjective
ex-
accidents and which are accounted perience. Physical measuring
devices
as naught, attract and exhilarate the only provide knowledge of things as
spirit of man and move him to the can be "acquired through the
senses"
utmost: They cause him to laugh and ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered
Questions 16:2)—which excludes qualia and
to weep, and can even induce him to jective experiences. Consequently,
sub-
throw himself in harm's way" (Some are not appropriate targets of
they
Answered Questions 69:4). The term
scientific
"qualia" refers to the subjective ic study. Furthermore, because
qualia
qualitative experiences of our own and subjective experiences are not
conscious states of mind. These states physical, their actions and
interactions
of mind include each person's unique cannot be explained in terms of
phys-
experiences of sensations (such as ical cause and effect. The
non-physical
"blue," "cold," or "sad"), real and/or nature of qualia creates a
conundrum
imaginative experiences, and events. for brain-mind identity theory: How
Qualia consist of the "what it is like" can a physical organ like the brain
mental states,⁴⁴ that is, the qualitative accommodate a class of non-physical
44 See Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?"
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qualia and subjective experiences? suggest the existence of qualia.
All
This is self-contradictory. How, for they record is electrical and
biochem-

example, can there be aspects of brain ical brain activities. Given the
enor- ically important role played by
function that cannot be measured? It
qual- mously important role played by
is difficult to avoid the conclusion that ia and subject experience in
mankind's existence, this disconnect suggests
the existence of qualia and subjective existence, this disconnect suggests
a serious shortcoming in purely
experience is incompatible with brain- physical
physical explorations and explanation of
mind identity theory. brain
By contrast, the Bahá'í sub- function. If brain and mind are
truly one and the same, a disconnect of
stance-attribute solution "locates" this
this non-material "things" like meaning, magnitude should not occur, and the
qualia, and subjective experience "in" fact that it does suggests a flaw
in iden- tity theory. A materialist theory
the "rational soul" because they are that
that "intelligible realities" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, cannot avoid invoking the
existence of non-physical features cannot help
Some Answered Questions 16:3). But but
just as the deliberations of the ratio- undermine itself. Furthermore, it
has no way of studying in themselves
nal soul are expressed or manifested the
in the physical world through the ac- qualia and subjective experiences
that play such a decisive role in the
cidental attribute of the body-brain, lives of
so are meaning, qualia, and subjective all individuals and, therefore, is
not an adequate theory to explain the
experiences. In other words, in the ma- brain relationship.
mind-
terial world, physical sounds or visual
marks are necessary but not sufficient
conditions for the communication of
meaning or the explanation of objec-
tive experiences and qualia. THE RATIONAL HUMAN NATURE
The essential rationality of human
fMRIs and EEG machines do not nature is one of the key features of
solve the difficulties of identity theo- Bahá'í philosophy and, in our
time, one of the most philosophically
ry. While they provide real-time cor- con-

relations with qualia and subjective experiences, in themselves they are postmodernism, not subjective experiences and are not what a person is experiencing; neither easily do they provide any clues as to what is being qualitatively and subjectively experienced. The fMRI may tell us methods about which parts of the brain are thinking.

engaged—but these are not the qualia or subjective experiences themselves. "in the

Indeed, no amount of analysis of fMRI images and EEG printouts can
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'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

rational; the knowledge and thinking are equally valid. Therefore, reason must not be privileged and humans should not fear being "tempted to seek refuge in myth, that

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, is

from a postmodernist perspective, (or

troversial. This teaching is

the entire project of

which views rationalism as a Western cultural invention (a charge

disproven, as we will soon observe) and rejects all notions of

reason and logic above other

of acquiring knowledge and

According to Richard Wolin, a

cialist in intellectual history,

lexicon of deconstruction [a post-modern method of textual analysis]

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

cifically, it is essentially

human spirit and the rational soul are one and the same and constitute the definitive attribute of human nature. Rationality is the differentia

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,

a spiritual reality, not physical

"privileging reason" is viewed as an attempt to dominate and denigrate other "ways of knowing." Objections notwithstanding, the Bahá'í Writings are

promulgate the concept that human nature is fundamentally rational insofar as the human spirit and the rational soul are identical. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares:

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 an-

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, dis-

covers their realities and becomes

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Answered Questions 55:5). Without a reasoning

rational soul or reasoning powers, humans would lack their essential, defining attribute, which is to say, without reason we would not be human.

insofar

Furthermore, the rational soul and the capacity of reason are universal among mankind: "The first condition of perception in the world of nature are

is the perception of the rational soul.

nature

In this perception and in this power value

all men are sharers, whether they be ne-

and therefore do not negate the value

and the universal possession of

material). Therefore the animal is deprived of reason, and it (reason) is specialized to mankind. The animal perceiveth realities which

perceptible to the senses, but man perceiveth intellectual realities (or things perceptible to reason).

Consequently, it hath become evident that reason is a spiritual

(Tablets 208)

It is apparent that the rational soul and reason are identified with one

other 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

('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 73).

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people may use humanity's

capacities to strive for

A prima facie example is the Cold

policy of mutual assured destruction. Reason was perverted

as extremely rational and logically devised technology was applied to

irrational goal—mutual

However, such mis-developments

accidental in regards to human

and therefore do not negate the

and the universal possession of

the ra-
 glectful or vigilant, believers or deniers" tional soul.
 ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Ques- The rational soul and its
 logical
 tions 58:3; emphasis added). Willingly powers are not only necessary for
 or not, consciously or not, all indi- discoveries in the phenomenal
 world;
 viduals and collectives possess these they are also essential to
 understand- ing religious and spiritual
 rational powers given by God. Pos- ing religious and spiritual
 truths. Bahá'u'lláh declares "religion
 sessing these powers is not a matter is in complete harmony with science and
 of choice. However, because humans have free will, they may choose to reason," and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's
 states that "[r]eligion must stand the
 ignore, deny, or misuse their powers analysis of reason" and specifically
 of reason. For example, philosophers criticizes several Christian religious
 such as Friedrich Nietzsche and his teachings as "irrational and clearly
 postmodernist supporters like Fou- mistaken" because of their
 cault and Paul Feyerabend⁴⁶ reject the self-contradictory na- ture (Promulgation 232;
 validity of reason and its "privileged 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 29:9). If
 position" over other ways of knowing. the traditional understanding of the
 Other individuals simply neglect rea- Trinity were true, 'Abdu'l-Bahá
 Trin- asserts, but find it irrelevant to their dominant
 son; they do not necessarily oppose it interest in pleasure, wealth accumula- [t]he foundations of the
 religion tion, advantage, or social success. In of God would rest upon an
 illog- ical proposition which no mind
 still others, their "innate capacities are completely subverted" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, could ever conceive, and how
 Some Answered Questions 57:9). These could the mind be required to
 be- lieve a thing which it cannot con- ceive? Such a thing could not be
 46 See Feyerabend's Farewell to Reason grasped by human reason—how
 and Against Method for arguments against much less be clothed in an

intel-

"needs" of society.

40

ligible form—but would remain

sheer fancy. (Some Answered Questions 27:9)

con-

cept of human nature also recognizes

In other words, even religious interpretations must be amenable to reason and logic to be understood and believed. It is, for example, inferential

possible to believe in square circles or that Napoleon won the Battle of Waterloo because no logical thought

of can derive such a conclusion from the spir-

evidence in hand. More specifically tran-

in regard to religion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá experiences—do

critiques the Christian interpretation of Christ's resurrection and replaces deliberation

it with a rational interpretation, of For

which He says, "it is in no way contradicted by science but rather affirmed by both science and reason " (Some deliberation

Answered Questions 23:7). Elsewhere, irra-

'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates the impor-

conflict tance of applying reason to religion by discounting the literal interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve.

He says, "If the outward meaning of un-

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 Were

possibly have proceeded from such

rationality of human nature is confined to the intellect. The Bahá'í

other ways of knowing and reflecting than by intellect alone. The process of intellectual reasoning requires sequential steps of logical

reasoning that can be explained and analyzed verbally and are, therefore, discursive. In contrast, other ways

knowing—for example, intuition,

itual susceptibilities, and even

scendent or mystical

not work in this inferential manner, nor can their processes of

be verbally explained or analyzed.

this reason, they are non-discursive.

However—and this is essential—a non-discursive process of

is not necessarily non-rational or

irrational, so there is no inevitable

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

assisted reason cannot acquire. How-

ever, this knowledge is complementary to and compatible with reason and the concept of the rational soul.

it not, such knowledge would contra-

a person" (Some Answered Questions 30:4). The clear implication is that an individual who does not believe in the unity of the human spirit, would be incomprehensible, and

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).

and 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 mistake to conclude that the inherent distinction among mankind is through The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature 41

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:

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

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

cannot become acquainted with the divine mysteries and the heavenly realities.

hast cleansed the channel of thy spiritual sense from the pollution

It is like a mirror which, although clear, bright and polished, is still in need

of

of this worldly life, then wilt thou breathe in the sweet scents of holiness that blow from the blissful bowers of that heavenly land. (Some Answered Questions 55:5; emphasis added)

mysteries"

lections 185)

(Some Answered Questions 55:5; emphasis added)

sis added). One way of understanding
 In other words, there are "invisible
 secrets
 realms" whose existence is beyond the
 trans-ra-
 intellect's comprehension and can only
 knowledge
 be known by non-discursive means of
 acquire.
 transcendent or mystical experiences
 pas-
 once we have detached ourselves from
 cannot
 the world. Such knowledge may also
 un-
 come through the heart (of course in-
 words,
 tended in its metaphorical sense) and
 sufficient.
 intuition, thus suggesting that some
 knowledge may be obtainable only
 through "other ways of knowing."
 if
 However, it must be emphasized that
 fracture
 this conclusion does not mean that
 faith"
 such knowledge is necessarily and in-
 works
 herently irrational because if it were,
 displace
 humans could not understand and
 realities, rea-
 apply it in the phenomenal world. An
 example of remaining excessively at-
 the
 tached to this physical plane and being
 can

provide. Here is a mundane example
 to which most people can relate: No
 non-discur-
 amount of rational analysis or reflec-
 of
 tion can provide complete knowledge
 ex-

this teaching is that the divine
 are not just rational but also
 tional; that is, they provide
 that unassisted reason cannot
 It is important to note that this
 sage does not say that reason
 discover divine mysteries but that
 assisted reason cannot. In other
 reason is necessary but not
 However, this knowledge is comple-
 mentary to and compatible with rea-
 son and the "rational soul" because
 it were not, there would be a
 in human nature. The "spirit of
 assists the rational soul, that is,
 with it but does not deny or
 it. In regard to heavenly
 son must be supplemented by direct
 and non-discursive experience of
 truth that only the spirit of faith

Although intuitions and tran-
 scendental experiences are
 sive ways of knowing, they are part
 human nature. The fact that such

and understanding of a kiss. Only the non-discursive actual experience can do that, and once indeed, that is obtained and the experience is were, it there, we will know—in non-discursive terms—why reason may be necessary but is still insufficient. 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 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) the trans-rational. They are logically correlated and both part of a coherent Inner perception—that is, direct sight, logical progression. Of course, the direct 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 abilities are sufficiently developed. As eyes. The direct experience is identified with feelings in this passage, once again suggesting that feelings are the medium of this kind of direct, and if spiritual feelings come to pre-dominant, the immortality of the spir-cursive knowledge. However, there is no intrinsic conflict between the two (Some Answered Questions 60:7). ways of knowing. In other words, the

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rational soul or human spirit remains serious self-contradictions in their philosophy of human nature. Even a unity. if The interdependence and conse- the process of attaining knowledge is quent complementarity of the "ratio- non-discursive the results must still nal soul," the heart, and other ways of make sense, that is, explicable in terms we can understand and be knowing are manifest in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's applicable to this world. If the results do not, they will simply be irrational—something [i]f religious belief and doctrine which the Writings clearly reject. The self-evident conclusion is that is at variance with reason, it pro- discursive and non-discursive, both the and trans-rational results ceeds from the limited mind of rational and trans-rational results complement each other in the quest for it is unworthy of belief and not and intellectual evolution. spiritual deserving of attention; the heart and intellectual evolution. finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can man believe that which he knows to be op- posed to reason? Is this possible?

THE CONCEPT OF REASON
IN THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS

Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is briefly, in harmony with it. (Promulgation 231; emphasis added) discussion, we will consider three main aspects of

In a similar vein, He states, "among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that Bahá'í Writ- religion must be in conformity with rationality science and reason, so that it may influence the hearts of men" (Selections 299. Emphasis added.). Precisely because the "reason is the first faculty of man" that is, the prime distinguishing attribute of the human soul, and because logically the human spirit and the rational soul are one, the heart and other ways of faith knowing are included in mankind's rational nature. Promulgation 326). The same association is found

If human nature were subject to a conflict between the "rational soul" or logical, and other ways of knowing, the Bahá'í apprehends Writings as a whole would have a intelligible

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and perceptible" (Tablets 115; emphasis added). That is to say, this faculty existence on

To deepen our understanding of the rational soul and human nature, it necessary to examine, at least the Bahá'í concept of reason more closely. To avoid a lengthy reason. In the first place, the ings associate reason and with logic as, for example, in following statement: "In divine we must not depend entirely upon heritage of tradition and former man experience; nay, rather, we exercise reason, analyze and examine the facts presented so confidence will be inspired and attained" ('Abdu'l-Bahá,

the universe was a free, that bestows the gift of

is constitutionally part of the human deduce the spirit. This association of reason and without rationality with logical thought is also long-evident in the assertion that "[i]f religion were contrary to logical reason be then it would cease to be a religion and contradict be merely a tradition" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, attributes of Paris Talks 144).

Furthermore, the "rational soul" can use logical reason to understand insist spiritual and religious issues within not to the epistemological limits of human according nature. For example, reason can prove of the the existence of God, although it can-reason not discover God's essential nature: (Promul-

"The existence of the Divine Being hath been clearly established, on the reason and basis of logical proofs, but the reality non-contradiction of the Godhead is beyond the grasp of that a the mind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections 46). denial God's existence is provable by reason, sense, but His "reality" or essence is not. same However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes even further, saying, "The intellectual proofs insistence of Divinity are based upon observation self-con-

all things. Reason can also "immortality of the spirit" as it, the divinely given "spiritual longings" would have no object and be vain. Indeed, such longings would be deceptive, and that would be the loving and merciful 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 to be reasoned out and tested to the established logical modes of intellect, what is the use of the which God has given man?" (Promulgation 63; emphasis added).

The second attribute of logic is the principle of 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-con-

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. If 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 reasoning.

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'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).

tradictory truth cannot possibly exist because it simultaneously makes 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 is one, although its be very different" (Promulgation Paris Talks 128; emphasis added). contradictions appear, it is to look deeper because differences in the expressions of not necessarily imply logical contradictions in the underlying traditional interpretations based plicable and irrational beliefs, the foundations of the religion 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 but would remain sheer fancy.

<p>'Abdu'l-Bahá's approach to rationally resolving contradictions is exemplified in His explication of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which He is regards as irrational in its traditional interpretation: "The reality of the Divinity... admits of no division and a sub-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 problematic and undesirable in our thinking sense, processes, even on spiritual matters. His insistence on logical consistency—which requires the elimination of contradictions—is evident in His Nagarjuna declaration that were we to accept principle</p>	<p>(Some Answered Questions 27:9; emphasis added)</p> <p>Another example of classical logic 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument regarding the immortality of the human soul, which is that a thing cannot be stance and an attribute at the time. Logical consistency, whether it be propositional agreement and/or complementarity or neutrality, an essential principle in the Writings. The third attribute of reason logic is universality. In other the principle of is universally applied by all beings and, indeed, all living My pet ducks, Jack and Jill, know Dozer, my neighbor's big yappy either outside the front gate or the front gate and cannot be both the same time and in the same and they make their decision to outside for a stroll accordingly. humans who deny the principle of non-contradiction—such as na and Hegel—still obey this</p>
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in their daily lives. They know that either they have eaten lunch or have not eaten lunch but not both in the that same sense at the same time. Thus, Answered this principle is universal—at least in because we actual practice—and that makes it an essential attribute of human nature or the the rational soul. Because all humans the have at least the capacity for reasoning, it can be one of the foundation stones of the unification of mankind soul because deliberations will be based foundation on the common ground of discursive reasoning. Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements aligning reason with noted—albeit the essence of humankind have far-reaching implications, especially for though the goal of unifying humankind into articulated one global commonwealth. Because rationality is a universal characteristic treating of human nature, it applies to people not across cultures, historical epochs, and example, geographical locations. Superficial appearances notwithstanding, there reasonableness is a core of rationality within all foundation of cultures, although the vicissitudes of revelation.

matrix of the world," which means that we have always possessed the distinguishing attribute of man, is, the rational soul (Some Questions 49:8). Precisely recognize that our ancestors were rational, we are able to interpret artifacts they left behind. Because rational soul is the common feature joining all human beings into one species, both the possession of a and its rational nature are stones of the unified global world order that Bahá'u'lláh came to establish. Finally, it should be it briefly—that reason has other, related uses in the Writings, none that contradict the ideas related above. One meaning of reason is "appropriateness," that is, one kind of thing as befits it and as if it were another—for not treating a human being like an animal.⁴⁷ The concept of as appropriateness is the the doctrine of progressive

historical circumstances may shape, laws or even distort, the development to of these cultures in various ways. framed, Its universality makes rationality a to connecting principle that transcends fact differences among all cultures and is, peo- therefore, a basis for positive global dialogue and the unified world order there- of Bahá'u'lláh. Even our evolutionary particular ancestors are included in the circle of reason. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that too dif- "man remained a distinct essence— rational that is, the human species—from the 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Paris beginning of his formation in the The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "All religious conform to reason, and are suited the people for whom they are and for the age in which they are be obeyed" (Paris Talks 141). The that revelations are "suited to the ple for whom they are framed" means that they are appropriate—and, fore, reasonable—for that 47 Their essential natures are ferent because the latter has no soul. See p. 122 of Talks. 47

time and those specific circumstances. intrinsically Comparing religious cycles to the life roles cycle of a tree, He further elaborates the by stating that "[i]t is not reason- from able that man should hold to the old free- tree, claiming that its life forces are responsi- undiminished" (Promulgation 142). Each of Moreover, if a thought or action is appropriate and reasonable, it is also just. This principle underlies the fol- Bahá'í lowing assertion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Indeed,

intentionality, mankind's privileged place in creation, the of the body and the rational soul, universality of free will, freedom nature, the foundations of ethical dom, individual and social bility, and the origin of evil. these shall be examined in turn. The existence of individual free will is an essential feature of the philosophy of human nature.

"Know that justice consists in rendering to each his due (Some Answered toward Questions 79:1). The third sense of evolution reason, or being reasonable, refers to humans having a purpose. Actions that have no their purpose are simply arbitrary and random and therefore are not informed or ethics shaped by reason. This is one of the ethical 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 accidentally for a purpose: "the purpose of creation . . . is the knowledge of Him Who is with 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 work of Manifestations in guiding individuals and societies their spiritual and material would be completely futile if were unable to choose to alter ways of thinking, beliefs, and actions. Indeed, without free will, per se are not possible because behavior has at least two characteristics: it must be conscious and intentional. No ethical act—whether good or bad—can be performed or inadvertently (without knowledge or forethought). That is to say, without choice and without intention 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 ethically if, due to a sudden unconscious 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

additional aspects of human nature. there was It touches on mankind's essentially in-spiritual nature, consciousness and say a

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teething baby acts immorally by biting down on a finger put in its mouth. An event may be bad or even evil, but the free lack of conscious choice and intention it has make it inappropriate to call the event morally bad or evil. choice, Free will—and humans' existence cause" or as ethical beings—are based on the choice or human spirit, or rational soul, which to be is not subject to the physical laws of which cause and effect. The human spirit is He not part of any natural causal chain re- that, according to materialists, deter- is, all mines our ethical choices and makes Answered them predictable in a scientific way. human In Free Will, materialist neurophilos- take opher Sam Harris asks, "How can we orig- be 'free' as conscious agents if every- 481). thing that we consciously intend is caused by events in our brain that we do not intend and of which we are en- created tirely unaware?" (25). As an advocate or

is not necessarily ethical: if

no use of free will, no choice and tention were involved. Nor do we

rejection of determinism has three consequences for our understanding of human nature. First, an act of will is uncaused, which is to say, no antecedent causes that determine the rational soul's intention, or action. The soul is a "first "originative causality" of a act (Adler 481). This requires it intrinsically active or dynamic, is affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when states that "nothing that exists mains in a state of repose—that things are in motion" (Some Questions 63:1). In short, the spirit is active in nature and can the initiative and "spontaneously inate a series of events" (Adler 481). Second, although human beings have been endowed universally with free will in their first nature as by God, the decisions as to whether

of mind-brain identity theory, he is not to actualize free will, and to what extent and in what way, remain with left with no logical conclusion but that the individual. These decisions and free will as an illusory exemption from cause and effect is impossible and that their consequences constitute our sec- ond nature, which results from what our "feeling of freedom arises from our moment-to-moment ignorance of we do with God's initial gift. Although the prior causes of our thoughts and actions" (32). In short, for Sam Harris, in the external world there may be many obstacles to the exercise of free will is a delusion. will—physical, political, cultural, and social—as we will see, the Bahá'í Writ- ings make it clear that moral Harris's conclusion would result from choices are always available and, inquiring whether or not he freely therefore, hu- mankind has radical responsibility chose to write his book. If he did not, for the courses of action it pursues. then perhaps he should not receive any royalties. But in all seriousness, com- Third, the capacity for choice and mon sense dictates that we do have some degree of free will, though we which action makes mankind intrinsically superior to the natural world, which may not, in this life, ever know the full extent of that freedom. Therefore, our is governed by the law of cause and effect. Nature leaves no room for

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choice and intention. Causality nec- essential aspects of human nature. 'Ab- du'l-Bahá notes that nature has no essarily predetermines particular will or volition, which means that it outcomes and makes no exceptions in lacks intentionality, the ability to its operations. Innocent babies drown choose certain outcomes over others, and on beaches as much as war criminals the and torturers do.⁴⁸ In short, nature is capacity to act toward their attain- amoral; ethical categories such as con- ment. The other qualities mentioned scious choice, intention, and ethical here by 'Abdu'l-Bahá are all attributes responsibility do not apply to it. of consciousness, without which

there

From this it follows logically that can be no free will: "all other beings, free will is the foundation of our existence whether of the mineral, the vegetable

existence as ethical beings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá or the animal world, cannot deviate from

points out: the laws of nature, nay, all are the slaves

thereof. Man, however, though in body

All the sciences, arts and discoveries were mysteries of nature, and his mind the captive of nature is yet free in

and soul, and hath the mastery over na-

according to natural law these mysteries should remain latent, ture" (Tablet 10; emphasis added).⁴⁹ The body, which is an accidental

at-hidden; but man has proceeded to tribute of the human spirit or rational

break this law, free himself from this soul, is part of the cause-and-effect rule and bring them forth into the process of nature and in that way is realm of the visible. Therefore, "captive" when it comes to physical he is the ruler and commander of conditions like sleep, sickness, and nature. Man has intelligence; nature eventually death. However, mind and has not. Man has volition; nature soul—that is, essential constituents has none. Man has memory; nature of mankind—are not subject to physical is without it. Man has the reasoning ical causality: "Certain matters are faculty; nature is deprived. Man has subject to the free will of man, such the perceptive faculty; nature cannot as acting with justice and fairness, or

perceive. It is therefore proved and injustice and iniquity—in other words,

evident that man is nobler than nature. (Promulgation 17; emphasis . . [H]e is free in the choice of good

or added) evil actions, and it is of his own accord

Each of the ways in which human- 49 Self-sacrificing instincts in animals

kind is superior to nature concerns are not conscious and intentional ethical

mental or spiritual gifts, which are choices. The two must not be confused or

conflated because they are not the same

48 Dr. Josef Mengele, the notorious kind of things. Therefore, such instincts

"Angel of Death" at Auschwitz, drowned cannot be seen as a "pre-figuring"

or "an-
on a beach in Brazil in 1979. ticipation" of ethical activities in
humans.

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that he performs them" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, towards all the peoples and
kindreds
Some Answered Questions 70:3; empha- of the earth" (Gleanings 109:2).
For
sis added). In other words, the Bahá'í this reason, the Writings
contradict
Writings maintain that all humans attempts to justify certain
behaviors
possess radical freedom by virtue of as "only natural" in the animal
sense.
being human and having a spiritual The proper (in the sense of
appro-
essence. priate, befitting) use of free
will is to
The existence of free will is not actualize individuals' higher
capacities
dependent on external circumstances, and spiritual susceptibilities
because
whether natural or man-made. On this the failure to meet this
obligation re-
issue, the Bahá'í Writings may be said sults in deficiency in the
development
to concur with Sartre, who asserts that of their second nature.
we are "condemned to be free" whether The existence of free will
also leads
we want to be or not (156).⁵⁰ There is no to an emphasis on individual
respon-
sibility. Humans are expected to
way to escape our "fate" of being free, sibility. Humans are expected to
take
responsibility for their actions
although we can, of course, deceive responsibility for their actions
and to
ourselves and claim that others—or refrain from seeking excuses or
jus-
various external circumstances—took tifications for their
intentionally bad
actions. God's rejection of the
our freedom away. There is no denying actions. God's rejection of the
disbe-
liever's attempt to blame others
that some choices are extraordinarily liever's attempt to blame others
for
difficult, but from a Bahá'í perspective his disbelief in God
demonstrates the
importance of responsibility in
we can rely on God's justice, mercy, importance of responsibility in

the
and understanding, grounded in His Writings: "the faith of no man
can be conditioned by anyone except
omniscient knowledge, as a source of himself "
hope and comfort. (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 55:1).
Nor may
Furthermore, the capacity of hu- humans blame God for making them
man beings to transcend nature in the way they are in terms of
innate and inherited character.
making moral decisions leads to anoth- and inherited character.
'Abdu'l-Bahá makes that point with a
er fundamental aspect of Bahá'í ethics: Bible-based
the obligation to live in a way that is discussion about the mineral not
hav- ing any right to complain to God
appropriate to our nature as human for
beings and not to fall to the animal not having been given vegetable
per- fections. Each state of being
level. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us that in its own degree and "must
is perfect "[t]o act like the beasts of the field is
strive unworthy of man. Those virtues that after the perfections of [its]
own degree" ('Abdu'l-Bahá,
befit his dignity are forbearance, mer- Promulgation
Promulgation 249). Being responsible for one's
cy, compassion and loving-kindness own
intentional actions—that is, perfecting
50 Although, from a Bahá'í standpoint, one's own degree of being—is all
that
free will is not seen as a chastisement but one has the power to do.
as one of God's gifts to mankind. In addition, responsibility
for
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appropriate use of free will does not never have been absent from human
end at the personal level. As 'Abdu'l- nature, for "[w]e cannot say...
that
Bahá informs us: "Each human there was a time when man was
not"
creature has individual endowment, ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered
Questions
power and responsibility in the creative 50:4). Free will exists as a
potential in

plan of God. Therefore, depend upon present 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 nature brings with it the capacity to do to make the correct ethical choices in evil if we so desire. According to the their own lives (Promulgation 292). In Writings, evil—not be to be confused other words, we must be aware that with unconscious and unintentional we not only create our own second natural disasters or accidents—finds nature with our choices but also bear some responsibility for the spiritual good progress of mankind: "All men thing is have been created to carry forward Glean- an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 109:2). In wrongdoing short, our responsibilities in using main- free will stretch beyond ourselves. human It is noteworthy that 'Abdu'l-Bahá humans exhorts us to use our "own reason and ef- judgment" in regard to ethical choices. choice In his two-volume study, *The Idea of Freedom*, Mortimer Adler outlines humankind regardless of their level of moral and intellectual opment. In short, free will is cally and, therefore, universally ent in human nature and serves as a basis for the unification of The existence of free will in its source in humanity: "Every thing is of God, and every evil from yourselves" (Bahá'u'lláh, ings 77:1). Despite our wishes to contrary, the capacity for must exist if free will is to be tained as a meaningful aspect of nature. Free will is not free if can only do good—they would, in fect, become robots without any at all. Free will being an inherent man attribute, were it to be

abrogated

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

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

also evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's praise of an HUMAN NATURE AND CHARACTER over an educated child of bad 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 crite-

or were God to rescue mankind from every wicked choice—which would, effect abolish free will—human would, by definition, cease to be man. For this reason, the demand God should prevent evil in some is an inadvertent wish that God abolish humanity as the unique or advance guard of cosmic. Consequently, this demand would

gratitude—otherwise known as "using others"—is usually a sign of a seriously flawed

The importance of character is ignorant child of good character

cause the former is of benefit mankind (Selections 135). The history of the twentieth century is with examples of how much damage intelligent and educated persons bad character can do.

In The Secret of Divine 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out another

words, attributes like race, nationality, character, social class, wealth, talent, family history and connections, as well as intelligence are not necessarily instrumental in having a good character. Only the attributes struggle to understand the attributes Knowledge, 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 the acquired character" (Some Answered Questions 57:2). Innate character seems to refer to intelligence and other attributes is a gateway for

rion for recognizing good which is that it should be based "reason and knowledge and true eration" (59). It is noteworthy reason is counted among the butes of good character. of course, does not necessarily "book knowledge" but rather edge of God's presence in the Reason is necessary to think using our knowledge of God and world. Irrationality is not with good character. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, character of each person has a fold structure: "the innate ter, the inherited character, and

This does not mean that necessarily free of these cause contempt for God's creation is also

changeable;

thy insofar as each is created by God that is, through our free choices
we

(Some Answered Questions 57:9). Our can choose what aspects of them to
worthiness or unworthiness concerns actualize and manifest and to what
de-

what we do with the capacities we gree. It is quite possible for a
person

have been given and not the capacities with a greatly gifted innate
character

themselves. Being innate, this aspect to do very little or even "subvert"
or

of character is not changeable in itself, "pervert" her gifts, just as a
minimally

although it is always possible to deter- gifted person can do a great deal
with

mine how much of these capacities we
actualize.

52 See my earlier reference to

Hegel's

classification.

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what she has (Some Answered Questions learn about human nature. First, the
57:9). Writings inform us that human nature

The Writings state that even what possesses radical freedom and respon-
we perceive to be negative qualities sibility. God intends for us to be
free

can be put to good use: and responsible beings, and we can
Thus, should a person show even be called to account for our
belief

greed in acquiring science and or disbelief in God (Gleanings 55:1).
knowledge, or in the exercise of Passing responsibility off to others
compassion, high-mindedness, is not acceptable. This subject
invites

and justice, this would be most much deeper reflection than can be
praiseworthy. And should he di- provided here.

rect his anger and wrath against Second, difficult as it may be for
bloodthirsty tyrants who are fe- some to accept, God has not bestowed
rocious beasts, this too would be intellectual and other capacities

equal- ly upon all. There is no injustice in
praiseworthy. But should he dis- this

play these qualities under other fact because innate character by
itself

conditions, this would be deserv- does not bestow worthiness of charac-
ing of blame. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Some ter—something that must be earned.
Answered Questions 57:10) We must not confuse equality of val-

uation with sameness of endowments.

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 manifested in

attribute that is negative in and of itself. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "Although

resur-

all existent beings are in their very form,

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

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moral character" (Selections 129). Good

oth-

character, not intelligence or talent, is obvious

what makes people equal in the most important way.

the

Fourth, "[g]ood character must be taught" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections 136).

or

It does not simply develop by itself.

poor,

Teaching good character is, essential-

humanity.

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

are not actualized and other, potentially negative ones are

new ways—then all attempts at a

order will fail. We will simply

rect the old world order in new

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

"seek to excel the whole world in

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without positive interactions with

er human beings. At the most

level, this means, that there can

solitaries and no hermits among

Bahá'ís. Man must work with his

fellows.

Everyone should have some trade,

art or profession, be he rich or

and with this he must serve

ly, the mission of the Manifestations. This service is acceptable as the high-est form of worship"

After all, ('Abdu'l-Bahá, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in London 93; emphasis is not the object of every Revelation to added). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh pro-effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself by both outwardly and inwardly, with that shall affect both its inner life (Epistle and external conditions? For if re-the character of mankind be not This changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent. (Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-togeth-Íqán 240) er like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are The success of the Manifestations is built on the fact that character can and forma- 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 a foundation, just as different plants Some grow out of the same soil. Answered Questions 46:6)

HUMANITY'S SOCIAL NATURE 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words—so reminiscent of Buddhism's concept of "dependent origination"—mean that all The Bahá'í Writings make it clear that existent things, including human nature, are human nature is intrinsically social. interdependent, not only for their We cannot actualize and manifest our

ex-

full intellectual and spiritual capacities existence, but also for their "development

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and growth." A story from my youth individuals versus the rights and good illustrates this fact. In 1968, I worked of society. The need for this balance is as an orderly in a German Catholic recognized in the following statement charity mental institution for "hopeless" cases. (This was before the drug authority by the Universal House of Justice: "The successful exercise of revolution in psychiatry.) I asked one in the Bahá'í community implies the of the nuns I had befriended, Sister recognition of separate but mutually Anna, what was the point of keeping reinforcing rights and responsibilities between the institutions and the such sad cases. Her answer illustrates friends in general, a recognition that in the truth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words. She turn said: "Every one of these hopeless lives welcomes the need for cooperation between these two interactive forces of is an opportunity for you and me to develop our humanity (Menschlichkeit)." society" (letter dated 19 May 1994 to In service to others, we develop and the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States). Establishing "mutually reinforcing rights and spirituality. Without service to others, responsibilities" requires the recognition and our inner growth will be stunted. harmonization of the legitimate interests and responsibilities of both individuals and collectives. 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 individually and collectively rights and responsibilities prevents us from logically inconsistent to permit any interpreting the call to be "as one soul" as imbalance between the rights and favoring

sponsibilities 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 the individual. Such a concept runs against one of the 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 it is subject. For individual Bahá'ís, this

Second, vis-à-vis modern philosophies such as atheistic 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

philosophy of human nature provides assurance that their beliefs on this subject are founded on a coherent, in methodically developed, and logical dedicat- philosophy of human nature. As exam- 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, such or intellectual reliability also strengthens variability the faith of the heart (Promulgation of expression explains why trying to 231). Furthermore, by virtue of reshape human nature according to having a well-developed philosophy of our wishes has led to such disasters in human nature, the Bahá'í Faith is open the twentieth century and continues to deep and far-reaching opportunities to cause social confusion in ethics, law, for dialogue with other religious and psychology, anthropology, and educa- non-religious worldviews that also tion, among other fields. have a philosophy of human nature. Third—and this deserves special Among these are Catholic Thomism; mention—the Bahá'í philosophy of Marxism in both its humanist and human nature supports a belief in the Leninist forms; and theistic and atheistic existentialism. Moreover, of precisely because of its logical that coherence and structure, the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature is able materialist to offer constructive evaluations and psychiatric, 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

and to what degree and in what form they are reached. The human capaci- ty for aggression can be actualized various forms—as a soldier, a ed researcher, or a fireman, for ple—and can either be reasonable reach immoderation. This

unique status and intrinsic value humankind in creation. It asserts that humans cannot be understood cor- rectly by reductionist and methodologies in medical, 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;

from other systems of thought.
return

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or by ideologies that seek to

human life to ancestral conditions,
produc-
when fewer uniquely human intrinsic
Their
capacities were actualized or could be
Bahá'í phi-
actualized.
footsteps.

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 po-
tential for confusion in mankind's per-
London.
sonal and collective life. Indeed, it may
Trust.

be argued that widespread belief in a
reduced, distorted, and devalued un-
Tablet on the
derstanding of mankind contributed
Provi-
to two of the greatest moral disasters
[https://ba-](https://bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_)
in history—the Nazi and Soviet death-
hai-library.com/abdulbaha_
camp systems.⁵³ A positive future for
humankind can only be built on a com-
Tablet to Dr.
plete and appropriate philosophy of
and the
human nature.

Ronald,
Fourth, in regard to philosophi-
cal explanations, the Bahá'í Writings
Addresses Giv-
show a clear preference for Aristo-
1911.
telian concepts, terminology, and
Trust,
argumentation. These elements are
consistently and pervasively used to

'Abdu'l-Bahá as an especially
tive way to study the Writings.
example should encourage
losophers to follow in Their

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 explain the teachings on numerous
 by 'Ab-
 subjects and make it hard not to con-
 Visit to
 clude that this type of philosophizing
 Canada
 is being suggested by Bahá'u'lláh and
 Howard
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 53 If man is only an animal, sub-
 ject—like all other animals—to the law of
 the Writings of
 the survival of the fittest, then the Nazi
 by the
 "cult of the fittest" and mass murder of
 the
 "competing species" can be "justified." The
 Justice,
 Marxist doctrine of class warfare, i.e.,
 committee at
 exterminating the class enemies and the
 Centre and
 denial of intrinsic individual value, "justi-
 World
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