

A Study on Human Nature the Bahá'í Perspective

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Introduction

In describing the historical journey of Abdu'l-Bahá to the west, the Universal House of Justice (2001) tells us “*the gentleness with which the Master chose to introduce to His Western audiences the concepts of human nature and human society revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, concepts revolutionary in their implications and entirely outside His hearers' experience.*”¹

The House also depicts the current understanding of human nature as “*easy assumptions*” and “*these unexamined views communicated themselves to ever-widening audiences.*”²

The House feels that interpretation on man's true self has been distorted and when it is correctly viewed, “*will enable all people to set in motion constructive social forces which, because they are consistent with human nature, will encourage harmony and co-operation instead of war and conflict.*”³

Contrary to the view that human nature is war-like and an everlasting peace is therefore unattainable, with the establishment of the Bahá'í Community, “*embracing more than 2,100 ethnic, racial, and tribal group,*” the Bahá'is believe that “*its very existence challenges prevailing theories about human nature and the prospects for creating peaceful patterns of life.*”⁴

This study shall examine the development of “the easy assumptions about human nature”, it will then attempt to find “the revolutionary concepts revealed by Bahá’u’lláh that are entirely outside the experience of modern people” and its implications to man and society.

Materialistic Versions of Human Nature

In his book *The Psychology of Spirituality*, Danesh (1994) describes the basic concepts of the materialistic view of human nature held by philosophers since pre-Socrates times as that “existence and life are both accidents; that human beings are the chance product of the process of evolution; that matter is the basic constituent of the universe; and therefore human thoughts and feelings are by-products of human biological activities.”⁵

Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Satre, B.F. Skinner and Konrad Lorenz are among the many scientists and philosophers of modern times who propagate views of human nature within the materialistic framework.

One common thread among these philosophies is the rejection of the concept that the universe was created with a purpose. Darwin started a major revolution in the nineteenth century by putting forth the theory that the world is dynamic and evolving, rather than being a static system. Since variation is a random and non-directed process, Darwin’s theory therefore ruled out the existence of a creator. Furthermore since all living things had a common descent, man is merely a product of accidental variations, a refined ape and being the fittest, had survived the natural selection. Darwin’s theory of “natural selection” greatly influenced the development of modern society. It became a secular substitute for divine providence and man could look forward to progress and evolutionary

perfection. Advancement and progress took over as the meaning and purpose of life. However in order for individuals to accomplish advancement they had to struggle and compete, and only the strongest would win.

Marx⁶ equated the demand for happiness with the “abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people.” The reality of man starts not with his consciousness, but with “the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.” Man is different from animals by being able to produce not only for his own immediate needs, but also by his ability to “separate himself from his product.” Man’s reality and objective therefore lies in his work, so that he “can look at his image in a world he has created.”

Marxism called for a complete revolution to abolish and replace the capitalist economic system by a classless, decentralized society. This vision of the future whereby men would work for the common good, where everyone’s needs would be provided for, and greed as in the capitalist system would be eliminated won the devotion of people around the world. Yet after seventy years of experimentation with a classless society it proved to be a great disaster. Meanwhile many of the humane ideas, such as taxation and welfare, gradually assimilated into the capitalist society, enabling the system to seemingly be the best among all the existing systems.

Freud, like Darwin and Marx, introduced concepts that totally transformed the thinking of man and greatly influenced the functioning of society for years to come. Freud’s first concept of man is that every event can be traced to some causes. Nothing is accidental. A slip of the tongue, dreams, and abnormal behaviours can be explained and traced to the conscious or unconscious mental domain. The second concept divides the mental realm

into three entities: the *pre-conscious*, the *conscious* and the *unconscious*. There are events in the past that cannot be immediately recalled, but can be called to mind if necessary. Freud called this entity pre-conscious, while unconscious is the entity that holds those events in such a way that they cannot be called to mind under normal circumstances. He suggested that man's actions are generated mainly from the unconscious, the behaviour which man cannot explain sensibly even to himself. It could be implied from Freud's postulations that there are actions that are not within one's control and man does not exactly possess free will at his command.

Freud went further to introduce three structural systems within the human mind associated with the three entities: *super-ego*, *ego* and *id*. *Id* has the instinctive desires to express itself and *super-ego* acts as a father who sometimes allows the expressions and sometimes suppresses them, very much depending on the existing norms of the society. What has been suppressed in *id* is buried in the unconscious permanently and whatever is in the conscious constitutes the *ego*. The duty of balancing *id* and the real world outside is the function of *ego*.

The third concept concerns the source of man's drives. Through his practice of psychoanalysis with his patients, Freud formulated that man is driven by two basic instincts: the Life instinct (Eros) and the Death instinct (Thanatos). The self-preservation and erotic instincts are Eros and instincts such as aggression, self-destruction and sadism are Thanatos. Freud completed his full theory of psychoanalysis with the fourth concept, which says that the adult character of a man is largely determined by his early childhood experiences, even though the experiences are mostly buried deep in the unconscious.

Looking back we could see how these scientific, sociological and psychological theories started out from Europe, were widely received in America and spread throughout all corners of the world. People were awed by the wonders of science and the freedom and progress promised by these new philosophies. The new Man is no longer a creation of God, he is now a higher form of animal, sharing the same animalistic instincts. He is by nature aggressive and greedy, and therefore he must always be on the guard to protect his own interests. Furthermore these 'natural' animalistic instincts are thought to have been suppressed by his *super-ego* and society such that many have become psychopaths. Therefore society is as guilty when these psychopaths commit crimes, as their actions are directed by the unconscious dynamic of their psyche, which are present due to the suppression from the environment.

The models advanced by Marx and Freud represent two approaches to modify or replace the authoritarian rulers of the nineteenth century societies. Freud stripped man of his free will and bestowed upon him freedom to express himself. With the passage of time extreme individualism is born to the society. Man is not totally responsible or accountable for his perverse doings, especially if he had a traumatic childhood experience. Danesh (1994) explained that this is how "many therapists help their clients absolve themselves of guilt and shame about their actions, and many destructive and violent forms of behaviour are justified and sanctioned on the basis of those perspectives on human nature." Freud's theory of *Id* has been so firmly accredited in science, according to Danesh, that treatment of mental patients are all rendered in material and physical forms of biological surgery, chemical drugs, and electrical shock to the brain.

Most communist countries managed to produce enough food to feed its population and took care of their needs, but they failed miserably in creating wealth towards better living standards. In claiming to have the absolute truth, communist ruling parties had no mercy on millions of their people who had opposed or seemed to have opposed the communist manifesto. The sacrifice of human beings for a set of ideology was one of the greatest tragedies and grievous mistakes mankind had suffered in the twentieth century.

Social Darwinians adopted and applied Darwin's theory to society that embraces competition as the model for all behaviour. In politics, sports, the legal system, business and education, all are based on antagonistic relationships. Conflict between parties is not resolved in a spirit of mediation and consultation; it is win or lose, survive or wither.

Friedrich Nietzsche summed up the material qualities of a "heroic individual", deriving from the theory of evolution:

"He (Nietzsche) maintained that if evolution is taken seriously as a norm, our traditional values will have to be turned completely upside down. In the fierce struggle for survival the useful qualities are not the Christian virtues but self-assertion and the will to power. If good is that which survives, strength is the ultimate virtue.

'What is good? All that heightens in man the feeling of power, the desire for power, power itself. What is bad? All that comes from weakness.' Humility, love, and pity are a morality fit for slaves. A hero's morality consists in courage, vitality, and ruthless egoism, if need be, in the struggle for supremacy. Heroic individuals must emancipate themselves from every moral scruple; they are above every law and through their autonomous wills must realize their own unique and creative individuality. Nietzsche looked forward to the coming Superman, discontinuous with

the past, who would be master of the future. He proposed a program of eugenics in which “inferior” strains will be eliminated so that there could come into being the race of heroes who will embody the Will to Power. Here evolution was used to justify ethical norms diametrically opposed to those of the Christian tradition.”⁷

Bahá’i View on Human Nature and Character

To the Bahá’is, the description of the reality of human nature is incomplete without acknowledging the existence of his soul. Man is soul and body, a soul with a physical body. Bahá’u’lláh wrote in the Hidden Words:

O MY SERVANT!

*Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.*⁸

The worth of a man is not the sheath (the body), but the sword (the soul). There are many whose life’s objective is to decorate the sheath with most perfect gemstones and neglect to care for the sword. In order to make resplendent our souls, we are told that our physical bodies have to overcome self and desire.

Every soul has the capacity to recognize the signs of his Creator and thereby His existence. It would have been most unjust for the Creator to have created man and not endowed him with the capacity to know Him. Many come to know Him through the proclamation of His Prophets, which is one of the His mighty signs.

The second capacity that man possesses is love. Love is an attraction to both inner and outer beauty. Man is curious and long to be loved the moment he is born. Because of his love for knowledge and truth, he is always on a journey of search even though he is unaware of this fact. The soul rejoices when he finally finds his home, the source of his origin. His love towards God grows as his understanding of the mystery of life expands. He begins to feel differently and discovers in every being some degree of inner beauty of His handiwork. His perspective of life in this world turns a new chapter and he begins to exert a positive influence on those around him.

The third capacity the soul is endowed with is the capacity to will. In this arena the soul struggles the most for the things he desires are very often things that are either not right for him or are not in the right order.

When the three capacities are in harmony, the soul is on his way to self-discovery. He knows the right from wrong and will the body to follow the right path, not out of his own selfish reasons, but for the love of God. In the *Seven Valleys*, Bahá'u'lláh says of the wayfarer who arrives in the *Valley of Unity*, he “*seeth in himself neither name nor fame nor rank, but findeth his praise in praising God.*”⁹

This simple illustration on the nature of human capacities is the Bahá'i response to the age-old quest for inner peace. A man who has completely no knowledge of right and wrong is quite at peace with himself, since he does not need any will power for his actions. All that he needs is to have a little love for his own self and for what he does. He can then live his life without much internal conflicts and unhappiness, although progress

is extremely slow. The story of Adam and Eve reflects the same idea: they were in paradise before they bit the apple of knowledge. Once they knew the difference between good and evil, they were cast out of paradise.

This does not mean that knowledge is bad. It means it is very difficult for a man to enter paradise (harmony within himself), because it is difficult to firstly to know the truth from falsehood, secondly to desire the truth and finally to choose to follow the truth with appropriate actions..

Innate Nature, Inherited Nature and Acquired Character

In the Bahá'í teachings each child is conferred a distinct nature and character. The innate nature and character of a child is pure, whereas the nature that he inherits from his parents can be good or not so good. If the mother is weak it is likely that the child inherits her weakness.

By nature and through inheritance a child could be calm, joyful and strong. But if he were to be brought up in an environment that is abusive, violent and deprived of proper nourishment, he would most likely acquire those traits and become less of his natural self. On the other hand, a child could be fierce, rude and weak, but through proper education and care, he could become just, honest and healthy. The acquired nature and character of a child can weaken and diminish (see figure 2) or fortify and encompass his innate qualities (see figure 3) depending on the kind of education a child receives. It becomes apparent that moral education is of paramount importance.

One might wish to ask how a fierce and rude nature, if they are innate and not inherited, be pure as I have mentioned. Abdu’I-Baha explains:

*“In creation there is no evil; all is good. Certain qualities and natures innate in some men and apparently blameworthy are not so in reality. For example, from the beginning of his life you can see in a nursing child the signs of greed, of anger and of temper. Then, it may be said, good and evil are innate in the reality of man, and this is contrary to the pure goodness of nature and creation. The answer to this is that greed, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous and just, it is most praise-worthy if he exercises his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, it is very praiseworthy. But if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy.”*¹⁰

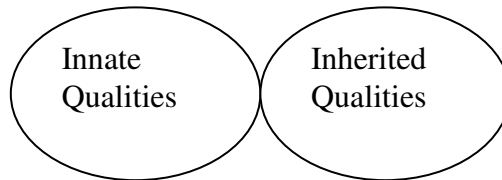


Figure 1 Nature and Character Bestowed upon a Newborn Child

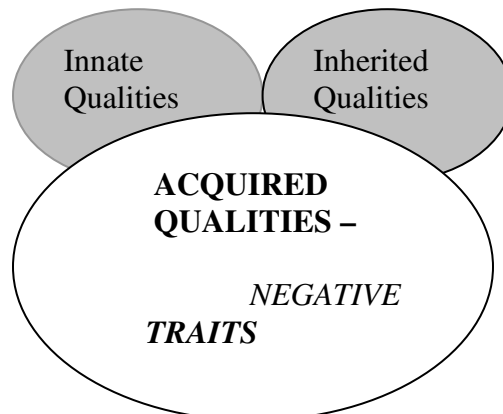


Figure 2 The Acquired Nature and Character that Weaken and Diminish the Innate and Inherited Qualities

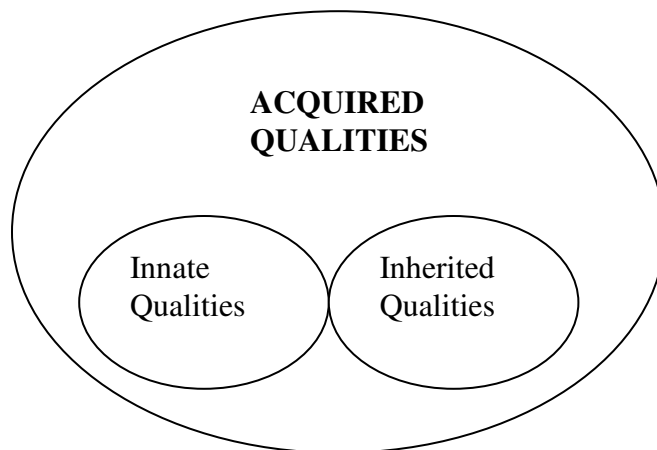


Figure 3 The Acquired Nature and Character that Fortify and Encompass the Innate and Inherited Qualities

The Spiritual Reality

The materialistic understanding of human nature assumes that man is part of nature, and not unlike the animals, man goes around his business instinctively. Man by nature is aggressive, self-centred, and uncompromising. The goal in life is to make as much money as possible and enjoy life to the utmost.

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that man is not entirely a part of nature. Although he depends on nature for his survival, he has the power to overcome and change nature to his advantage. It is not difficult to observe that man is driven by his innate survival and sexual instincts in order to survive and procreate. His ability to create his own destiny, to

explore the universe and discover the mysterious works of creation, however, shows that he is more than just an instinctive higher form of animal. The Bahá'is believe that man has a spiritual nature and the motivation to accomplish things beyond his own interests originates from his spiritual nature.

To elaborate on the spiritual reality of man, it would be appropriate to dwell a little on the concepts of soul expounded by Bahá'u'lláh. The Bahá'í Writings contain numerous passages on the topic and many Bahá'í writers have contributed in this area. For the purpose of this paper a few salient points shall suffice.

The soul is a non-material entity, it cannot be measured or understood by material means. It is not confined by time, space and gravity. It first comes into being at the moment of conception, it has no pre-existence and lives on eternally after the physical body dies.

When the soul passes on to the world beyond, it brings with it the powers of memory, knowledge, understanding and imagination, the powers that the soul develops through its connection with the body while living in the physical world.

The soul does not reside inside the body. Its connection with the body is like the sun and the mirror. In a sense the sun is "in" the mirror, yet it is not. *'... the human spirit does not enter into the physical body, nay, rather, it has some 'attachment' (to it). This 'attachment' is like that of the mirror and the sun.'*¹¹

There are then some interesting postulates that can be deduced from the descriptions of the soul given in the Writings. I shall attempt to make one postulate on dreams.

When a man is in his sleep, the body is in the state of rest. This is the time allocated to the soul to exercise its “muscles” without the help of the body. In its own world of existence, the soul seems able to be in many places at the same time, converse with people of different time frame, sometimes sorting out matters relating to the physical world, and at other times, plainly doing things which are out of this world. We do not understand the meaning of these images, so we say we are in the dream world, which in fact is the reality of the world for the soul. The reason why the storyline in dreams is often disconnected and senseless is because the soul is still in its infancy, and is still trying to ‘walk’. Yet there are times when a place visited in dreams mysteriously turned out to be real, or an event that happened in the dream became a reality in the physical world many years later.

While scientists are still trying to locate the source of dreams to a specific location in the human brain, it might be a lot more fruitful if they were to investigate the effects of the soul on the phenomena of dreams.

Conclusion

The general outlook on human nature is primarily based on the animal traits of man. It tells only a partial truth to its reality. Taking to the extremes the concept is detrimental to permanent peaceful coexistence of human society, which is the next stage of man’s social evolution.

However, if we regard man as having a soul, then the purpose of existence of man is made clear. We can choose to maintain that man is nothing more than an intelligent animal, and be oblivious of the mysterious aspects of man. Or we can be uncertain about the essence of the soul, and yet comprehend perfectly the reality of man.

References

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