

Is Human Nature Good or Evil?

We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in numbers, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: The last of his freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

Viktor Frankl

The theological portrayal of human nature has been predominantly negative. Instead of reminding us of the supreme honor of being made in God's image, of being the essence of beauty and perfection, many theologians focus on our sinful nature and remind us of our rebellious past when Adam and Eve reached for the forbidden fruit. As Dr. David Elkind, a noted child psychologist observes, "The Puritans constructed an image of the child tainted with original sin. 'Your child,' wrote James Janeway, 'is never too young to go to hell.'"¹

"A pastor was talking to an enthusiastic, but ignorant member of his flock. 'My friend, I assume you believe in total depravity?' the preacher asked. The man answered, 'Yes, sir, and what

a worthy doctrine it would be, if only folks would live up to it.'"

The reason for ignoring the good and focusing on the bad is this: If people were good, it is assumed, then they would not need Christ's salvation. This thinking is totally unfounded. When we say that human beings are made perfect, we mean *potentially* perfect. Just like a photograph, God's image imprinted on their souls needs to be developed. Without His help, the splendid and exalted image breaks down and disappears. The perfect seed always needs a cultivator, otherwise it rots. Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is concealed within every human being. That perfect kingdom always needs a King. Without the King, only chaos can prevail.

Christ said that a good fruit can come only from a good tree and a bad fruit only from a bad tree. Since God is good, everything that comes from Him—the creation—also must be good.

Among all created beings we are the only ones made in God's image. We are the only ones with souls that reflect His Soul. Can a perfect Being have an evil image? Can any honor compare with being like the Essence of all Beauty and Perfection? Can we ever be grateful enough for receiving such an unspeakably magnificent gift? In spite of this, we find so many people completely unaware of the great honor and glory of being human. Many suffer from a low self-esteem. They have

the power to connect their souls to the Source of all joys and pleasures, yet they remain deprived and depressed. Theirs are the most sublime riches and gifts of God's kingdom, yet they live in poverty. Christ said that "the kingdom of heaven is within you." Can anything good and beautiful be lacking in "the kingdom of heaven"? The best of everything that the mind can conceive dwells within us. We are, indeed, made perfect.

When God created us, He was pleased with His work and He called it good (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Then where does the bad come from? God fashioned us first as a blank film, and then exposed it to His image. But He left the task of developing the film to us. The bad always comes from a lack of development, and that is perhaps the main message in the story of Adam and Eve. That story does not point to an existing innate evil in human beings. Rather, it symbolizes a sublime gift given to human beings: freedom of choice. If that gift were removed, we would become mere animals.

Only when we expose ourselves to the light of the knowledge of God, as manifested in His great Messengers, can we reveal our souls' inner beauty and perfection. When we deny His Messengers and reject His knowledge, we remain in an unsightly and negative state.

Today we are constantly exposed to bad news—war, crime, child abuse,

fraud, infidelity, and cruelty of all kinds. The negative is seldom neutralized by the positive. This abundance of bad news creates a bad image of humans. Since we live up to our self-image, when our attention is drawn to the negative, our image of being human declines. And as our image goes down, so do our values and our sense of honor and dignity. As humorist Will Rogers said, "God made man a little lower than the angels, and he has been getting a little lower ever since."

What we see is not what we are. Without cultivating our souls, we descend to a state lower than that of lizards and lions, and worse than wasps and wolves. If you owned a hotel, whom would you prefer as a guest, a dog or a dishonest drunkard? "A man wrote this letter to a small hotel he planned to visit on his vacation: 'I would very much like to bring my dog with me. He is well-groomed and very well-behaved. Would you be willing to let me keep him in my room with me at night?'"

An immediate reply came from the hotel owner, who said, "I've been operating this hotel for many years. In all that time, I've never had a dog steal towels, silverware, or pictures off the walls. I've never had to evict a dog in the middle of the night for being drunk and disorderly. And I've never had a dog run out on a hotel bill. Yes, indeed, your dog is welcome at my hotel. And, if your dog will

vouch for you, you're welcome to stay here, too."

A mother went to the school open house to speak with her son's teacher. The teacher said, "I'm so very pleased to meet you. Your son Tim is a delight to have in my class! He's helpful, conscientious, courteous..."

Tim's mother wondered: "My kid? Is she talking about *my* kid?" Later she told Tim: "Your teacher says you are delightful! Why can't you be that good at home?" Tim replied, "Mom, I've only got so much goodness to go around!"

Tim had a lot of potential for both good and evil. He selected and gave to each person what he or she expected of him.

How do we treat gold and garbage? We keep one, and throw the other away. That principle applies to how we perceive ourselves. If we think we are made by God and for God, we glow and glitter like gold, and our self-appreciation ascends as high as the angels. If we think we were made by chance for the grave and grubs, our self-worth descends like an unopened parachute, crashing to the ground. As the Book of Proverbs declares, "As a man thinketh, so is he."

Once again, we need to restore to our souls the glory and honor of being human, of being made in the Creator's image. These quotations from 'Abdu'l-Bahá express our true station:

Man is the sum of Creation, and the Perfect Man is the expression of the complete thought of the Creator—the Word of God.² Of all the created beings man is the nearest to the nature of God...³ Man is the highest work of creation, the nearest to God of all creatures.⁴

Bahá'u'lláh showers upon us every honor imaginable. He elevates us to the rank of the angels. He declares that God has put within each of us the very essence of His light,⁵ that we are the very purpose and fruit of all creation, the reason for which the universe came into being.

We need to be constantly reminded of our splendid destiny and the infinite riches the Creator has placed within each of us.

O SON OF BEING!

Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favor upon thee.⁶

Bahá'u'lláh

O SON OF BEING!

With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I created thee; and within thee have I placed the essence of My light. Be thou content with it and seek naught else, for My work is perfect and My command is binding. Question it not, nor have a doubt thereof.⁷

Bahá'u'lláh

O SON OF SPIRIT!

I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.⁸ Bahá'u'lláh

This statement from the Báb shows God's infinite love for human beings:

All things have been created for your sakes, and for the sake of naught else hath your creation been ordained.⁹ The Báb

Spiritually and emotionally we are living in a hostile age. The prevalence of mental disorder in our time is a symptom of deficiencies and pressures within us. We are like ships at the mercy of the winds and the waves. At this time in history, the best we can do is simply to stay afloat. To accomplish this, we must first make sure that the ship is strong and will not break down in the storms; second, we must have a goal, a sense of direction, so that we know we are not lost.

The strength of the ship is our sense of self-worth. It is having faith that, in spite of our weakness, *we are good*, we are God-made; it is believing that we are noble, worthy of preserving,

not for the grave but for God, not for a few seasons but for all eternity. To have any value, this sense of self-worth must be crowned with a purpose. That purpose for every human being is to grow, to manifest one's inner perfections, to become worthy of God, and to attain His presence.

It is absolutely essential for every human being to meet both of these needs. For our spiritual survival, they are as essential as air is for our physical. Without them, we are no more than dead bodies floating on the sea.

If parents provide an example of self-worth and a sense of passionate purpose for life, it is hard to imagine that a child would consider suicide as an alternative. People kill themselves for many reasons. But at the root of every suicide lies the lack of a strong sense of self-worth and purpose, which should be instilled early in life. If religion fails to provide both these needs, it is pseudo-religion.

The Bahá'í view of human nature has a profound impact on the way children think about themselves and relate to others. It teaches them to respect every human being. Is it possible to view people as God's masterpieces, and yet fail to respect them? Our awareness of our divine essence affects every aspect of our lives, but is best demonstrated in the way we relate to others. In the light of that knowledge, people become precious to us. We consider it a supreme honor to be in

the presence of beings whom God describes as "the essence of My light." Like a beam of light, our attitude toward others always reflects back to us and helps us appreciate God's immortal gifts and His presence in our own souls.

1. Elkind, David. *Young Children*, May 1987, p. 6.
2. *Paris Talks*, p. 51.
3. *Paris Talks*, p. 25.
4. *Paris Talks*, p. 24.
5. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 12.
6. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 11.
7. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 12.
8. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic), no. 13.
9. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 162.



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