

Some Answered Questions, The Difference between Man and Animal

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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The Difference between Man and Animal

We have already had one or two conversations on the subject of the spirit, but they were not written down.

Know that the people of the world are of two kinds; that is, they belong to two groups. One group denies the human spirit and says that man is a kind of animal. Why? Because we see that man and animal share in common the same powers and senses. The simple and individual elements that fill the space around us are brought together in countless combinations, each of which gives rise to a different being. Among these are sentient beings possessed of certain powers and senses. The more complete the combination, the nobler the being. The combination of the elements in the body of man is more complete than in any other being, and its elements have been combined in perfect equilibrium, and thus it is more noble and more perfect. It is not, they say, that man has a special power and spirit of which the other animals are deprived: Animals too have sensory perceptions, but man's powers are simply more acute in certain respects (although with respect to the outer senses, such as hearing, sight, taste, smell, and touch, and even with regard to inner powers such as memory, the animal is more richly endowed than man). The animal, they say, possesses the powers of intelligence and understanding. All they will concede is that man's intelligence is greater.

Such are the claims of the present-day philosophers. Such are their words, such are their claims, and such are the dictates of their imaginations. And so, after extensive research and armed with powerful arguments, they place man in the lineage of the animal, saying that at one time man was an animal, and that the species gradually changed and evolved until it reached the human degree.



TRANSLATION

But the divine philosophers say: No, this is not so. Although man shares the same outward powers and senses in common with the animal, there exists in him an extraordinary power of which the animal is deprived. All sciences, arts, inventions, crafts, and discoveries of realities proceed from this singular power. This is a power that encompasses all created things, comprehends their realities, unravels their hidden mysteries, and brings them under its control. It even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow—all of which are intelligible realities. Moreover, all the existing sciences and crafts, all the great undertakings and myriad discoveries of man were at one time hidden and concealed mysteries, and it is that all-encompassing human power that has discovered them and brought them forth from the invisible into the visible realm. So the telegraph, the photograph, the phonograph—all such great inventions and crafts were once hidden mysteries which that human reality discovered and brought forth from the invisible to the visible realm. There was even a time when this piece of iron before you, and indeed every mineral, was a hidden mystery. The human reality discovered this mineral and wrought its metal into this finished form. The same holds true for all the other discoveries and inventions of man, which are innumerable. This matter is irrefutable and there is no point in denying it.

If we were to claim that all these effects proceed from the powers of the animal nature and the physical senses, then we see plainly and clearly that, with regard to these powers, the animals are superior to man. For example, the sight of animals is much keener than that of man, their hearing is more acute, and likewise with their powers of smell and taste. Briefly, in the powers which man and animal share in common, the animal often has the advantage. Take the power of memory: If you carry a pigeon from here to a faraway country, and there set it free, it will remember the way and return home. Take a dog from here to the heart of Asia, set it free, and it will return home without ever losing its way. And so is it with the other powers, such as hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch. It is clear then that if man did not possess a power beyond the animal powers, the animal would perforce surpass man in significant discoveries and in the comprehension of realities. It follows from this argument that man is endowed with a gift, and possesses a perfection, which is not present in the animal.

Moreover, the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities. For example, the animal sees that which is within the range of its vision but cannot comprehend or conceive that which lies beyond it. Thus it is not possible for the animal to comprehend that the earth has a spherical shape. But man can deduce the unknown from the known and discover hidden realities. So, for example, from observing the inclination of the heavens man infers the curvature of the earth. The Pole Star at 'Akká, for instance, is at 33 degrees; that is, it is inclined 33 degrees above the horizon. When one goes towards the North Pole, the Pole Star rises one degree above

the horizon for every degree of distance travelled; that is, the inclination of the Pole Star will reach 34 degrees, then 40, 50, 60, and 70 degrees. When one reaches the North Pole, the inclination of the Pole Star will be 90 degrees and the star will be seen at the zenith, that is, directly overhead.

Now, the Pole Star is a sensible reality, and so too is its ascension, that is, the fact that the closer one goes to the Pole, the higher the Pole Star rises. And from these two known realities an unknown reality is discovered, namely, that the heavens are inclined, meaning that the sky above the horizon at each latitude is different from that at another latitude. Man comprehends this relation and reasons from it a previously unknown thing, namely, the curvature of the earth. But this comprehension is impossible for the animal. It is likewise impossible for the animal to comprehend that the sun is the centre and that the earth revolves around it. The animal is a prisoner of the senses and is circumscribed by them: It cannot comprehend anything that lies beyond the reach or control of the senses, even though it excels man in the outward powers and senses. It is therefore clearly established that man is endowed with a power of discovery that distinguishes him from the animal, and this power is none but the human spirit.

Praise be to God! Man ever aspires to greater heights and loftier goals. He ever seeks to attain a world surpassing that which he inhabits, and to ascend to a degree above that which he occupies. This love of transcendence is one of the hallmarks of man. I am astonished that certain philosophers in Europe and America have consented to lower themselves to the animal realm and so to regress, whereas all existence must ever aspire towards exaltation. And yet, were you to call one of them an animal, he would be most hurt and offended.

What a difference between the world of man and the world of the animal! What a difference between the loftiness of man and the abasement of the animal, between the perfections of man and the ignorance of the animal, between the light of man and the darkness of the animal, between the glory of man and the degradation of the animal! An Arab child of ten years can subdue two or three hundred camels in the desert and lead them about with his mere voice. A feeble Indian can so subdue a mighty elephant as to compel it to move in strict obedience. All things are subdued by the hand of man, who withstands nature itself.

All other beings are captives of nature and cannot free themselves from its exigencies: Man alone can withstand nature. So nature attracts all bodies to the centre of the earth, but through mechanical means man moves away from it and soars in the air; nature prevents man from crossing the sea, but man builds ships and traverses the heart of the great ocean, and so forth—the subject is endless. For example, man traverses mountains and plains in vehicles and gathers in one place the news of the events of East and West. This is how man withstands nature. The sea in all its vastness cannot

deviate one iota from the rule of nature; the sun in all its greatness cannot stray so much as a needle's point from the rule of nature, nor can it ever comprehend the states, conditions, properties, movements, and nature of man. What then is the power residing in man's puny form that encompasses all this? What conquering power is this that subdues all things?

One more point remains. Modern philosophers say: "Nowhere do we see a spirit in man, and, although we have investigated the inmost recesses of the human body, nowhere do we perceive a spiritual power. How then are we to imagine a power which is not sensible?" The divine philosophers reply: "The spirit of the animal is not sensible either and cannot be perceived through our material powers: How do you infer its existence? There is no doubt that it is from its effects that you infer in the animal the existence of a power which is lacking in the plant, and that is the power of the senses—sight, hearing, and the other powers. It is from these that you infer that there is an animal spirit. Infer, likewise, from the aforementioned signs and arguments the existence of a human spirit. Thus, since there are signs in the animal that cannot be found in the plant, you say that this sensory power is one of the hallmarks of the animal spirit. You see likewise in man signs, powers, and perfections that do not exist in the animal: Infer then that there is a power in him of which the animal is bereft."

If we were to deny all that is not accessible to the senses, then we would be forced to deny realities which undoubtedly exist. For example, the ether is not sensible, although its reality can be proven. The power of gravity is not sensible, although its existence is likewise undeniable. Whence do we affirm their existence? From their signs. For instance, this light consists in the vibrations of the ether, and from these vibrations we infer its existence.