

Some Answered Questions, The Differences in Human Character

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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The Differences in Human Character

Question: How many kinds of character are there in man and what are the causes of the differences and variations among them?

Answer: There are the innate character, the inherited character, and the acquired character, which is gained through education.

As to the innate character, although the innate nature bestowed by God upon man is purely good, yet that character differs among men according to the degrees they occupy: All degrees are good, but some are more so than others. Thus every human being possesses intelligence and capacity, but intelligence, capacity, and aptitude differ from person to person. This is self-evident.

For example, take a number of children from the same place and family, attending the same school and instructed by the same teacher, raised on the same food and in the same climate, wearing the same clothing and studying the same lessons: It is certain that among these children some will become skilled in the arts and sciences, some will be of average ability, and some will be dull. It is therefore clear that in man's innate nature there is a difference in degree, aptitude, and capacity, but it is not a matter of good or evil—it is merely a difference of degree. One occupies the highest degree, another the middle degree, and yet another the lowest degree. Thus man, the animal, the plant, and the mineral all exist, but the existence of these four kinds of beings is different. Indeed, what a difference there is between the existence of man and that of the animal! Yet all these do exist, and it is evident that in existence there are differences of degree.



TRANSLATION

As to differences in inherited character, they arise from the strength and weakness of man's constitution; that is, if the parents are of weak constitution, then the children will be likewise, and if they are strong, then the children will also be robust. Moreover, the excellence of the bloodline exerts a major influence; for the goodly seed is like the superior stock that exists, likewise, among plants and animals. For example, you see that children born of a weak and sickly mother and father will naturally have a weak constitution and nerves, will lack patience, endurance, resolution, and perseverance, and will be impulsive, for they have inherited the weakness and frailty of their parents.

Aside from this, certain families and lineages have been singled out for a special blessing. Thus the descendants of Abraham received the special blessing that all the Prophets of the House of Israel were raised up from among their ranks. This is a blessing that God bestowed upon that lineage. Moses, through both His father and His mother; Christ, through His mother; Muḥammad; the Báb; and all the Prophets and Holy Ones of Israel belong to that lineage. Bahá'u'lláh too is a lineal descendant of Abraham, for Abraham had other sons besides Ishmael and Isaac who in those days emigrated to the regions of Persia and Afghánistán, and the Blessed Beauty is one of their descendants.

Hence it is evident that inherited character also exists, to such a degree that if one's character does not conform to that of one's forebears, one would not be accounted among that lineage in spirit even if one were a descendant in body. Such is the case of Canaan, who is not reckoned among the descendants of Noah.

As to the differences of character arising from education, they are great indeed, for education exerts an enormous influence. Through education the ignorant become learned, the cowardly become courageous, the crooked branch becomes straight, the acrid and bitter fruit of the mountains and woods becomes sweet and succulent, and the five-petalled flower puts forth a hundred petals. Through education barbarous nations become civilized and even animals take on human-like manners. Education must be accorded the greatest importance; for just as diseases are highly communicable in the world of bodies, so is character highly communicable in the realm of hearts and spirits. The differences caused by education are enormous and exert a major influence.

Now, someone might say that, since the capacity and aptitude of souls differ, such difference in capacity must inevitably lead to a difference in character. But this is not so, for capacity is of two kinds: innate and acquired. The innate capacity, which is the creation of God, is wholly and entirely good—in the innate nature there is no evil. The acquired capacity, however, can become the cause of evil. For example, God has created all men in such a fashion, and has given them such a capacity and disposition, that they are benefited by sugar and honey and are harmed or killed by poison. This is an innate capacity and disposition that God has bestowed equally upon all men. But

man may begin little by little to take poison by ingesting a small quantity every day and gradually increasing it until he reaches the point where he would perish if he were not to consume several grams of opium every day, and where his innate capacities are completely subverted. Consider how the innate capacity and disposition can be so completely changed, through variation of habit and training, as to be entirely perverted. It is not on account of their innate capacity and disposition that one reproaches the wicked, but rather on account of that which they themselves have acquired.

In the innate nature of things there is no evil—all is good. This applies even to certain apparently blameworthy attributes and dispositions which seem inherent in some people, but which are not in reality reprehensible. For example, you can see in a nursing child, from the beginning of its life, the signs of greed, of anger, and of ill temper; and so it might be argued that good and evil are innate in the reality of man, and that this is contrary to the pure goodness of the innate nature and of creation. The answer is that greed, which is to demand ever more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is displayed under the right circumstances. Thus, should a person show greed in acquiring science and knowledge, or in the exercise of compassion, high-mindedness, and justice, this would be most praiseworthy. And should he direct his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, this too would be most praiseworthy. But should he display these qualities under other conditions, this would be deserving of blame.

It follows therefore that in existence and creation there is no evil at all, but that when man's innate qualities are used in an unlawful way, they become blameworthy. Thus if a wealthy and generous person gives alms to a poor man to spend on his necessities, and if the latter spends that sum in an improper way, that is blameworthy. The same holds true of all the innate qualities of man which constitute the capital of human life: if they are displayed and employed in an improper way, they become blameworthy. It is clear then that the innate nature is purely good.

Consider that the worst of all qualities and the most odious of all attributes, and the very foundation of all evil, is lying, and that no more evil or reprehensible quality can be imagined in all existence. It brings all human perfections to naught and gives rise to countless vices. There is no worse attribute than this, and it is the foundation of all wickedness. Now, all this notwithstanding, should a physician console a patient and say, "Thank God, you are doing better and there is hope for your recovery", although these words may be contrary to the truth, yet sometimes they will ease the patient's mind and become the means of curing the illness. And this is not blameworthy.

This question has now been elucidated most clearly.