

CHAPTER 6

Human Nature

The human being is a mystery. It needs to be revealed, and if it takes your whole life to solve this riddle, don't say that you wasted your time. I deal with this mystery for I want to be human.

— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

What comprises human nature? Undoubtedly this is one of the most important questions in life. The meaning and purpose of human life, our actions and desires — everything depends on the way we understand human nature.

Let us start with defining the difference between humans and animals.

Why do people flock to zoos? What is so attractive about animals? Of course, this question has many answers, but if you have visited the zoo, you most likely have noticed that the biggest crowds gather around the cages with monkeys. Why? Because of all animals, the behavior of monkeys is the most similar to that of humans. Their antics and expressions cause us to smile. Of course, there are also differences between humans and monkeys. You may want to draw up a list of the similarities and differences. Here are a few differences to get you started:

| Animal qualities | Human qualities |
|---|--|
| Has no sense of self | Capable of self-reflection |
| Has only a biological clock | Has a sense of time and history |
| Capable only of concrete thought | Capable of abstract reasoning |
| Speaks only one "language" | Capable of learning other languages |
| Inhabits only its own niche | Lives in almost any kind of environment |
| Has no moral sense | Has a moral sense |
| Behavior is guided by inborn instinct | Capable of learning skills, is creative |
| Is rarely monogamous | Is usually monogamous |
| Has no economy | Engages in trade |
| Has brief childhood, little sense of "family" | Has long childhood, strong sense of family |
| Does not bury the dead | Has feeling of respect toward the dead |

One can always find exceptions to this list. For example, swans are known to be monogamous, and there are many people who do not study foreign languages. Taken all together, however, it is clear that human beings are not just another kind of

animal. One of the most striking differences is that people think and write books about such matters and sometimes conclude there is no real difference!

Mind and body

When we think about what we are, the first thing we can confidently say is that we have a body. We have four limbs, a head, a trunk, and all the organs that are inside. But is that all there is to us? No. We are also aware that we have a dimension that is not physical but, rather, spiritual. We have a soul that animates our body, giving our actions meaning and purpose. We have desires for beauty, truth, and goodness that do not originate in our physical body but in our soul. Sometimes people think that the mind is the same as the brain, but whereas the brain can be seen and operated on by surgery, the mind is invisible. The body may be sitting still, relaxed and immobile, while the mind is darting from one object to another. While our body is always in the here and now, our mind can remember the past, imagine the future, and visit China, Africa, and the moon all within a few moments.

Yet are the soul and the body completely different? How do they interact so that they form a person and his personality? The best way to study a person's character is to observe his behavior, the way he expresses himself in gestures, in his manner of speech, in his presentation of himself. In this way we observe the visible, bodily expression of an invisible soul. Our body becomes the reflection, the visible expression of our spiritual side. But there is — and always will be — an element of mystery. We will never be able to understand completely the complexity of a human being.

The roots of a human being can be understood and rationalized only to some extent. The mystery of personality, its uniqueness, is not completely clear to anybody. Human personality is more mysterious than the world. It is the whole world. Man is a microcosm and encompasses everything within him.

— Nikolai Berdyaev
Russian philosopher

What is the human mind?

Let us reflect upon our inner nature a bit more, starting from the most simple things. Like animals, we all have instincts that provide for the physiological functions of our body, such as digestion, breathing, and a sense of balance. These processes are going on automatically and, unless something is wrong, there is no need to pay much attention to them. Wouldn't it be annoying if we had to remember to breathe? Or if, when riding a bicycle, we had to mathematically calculate the degree to which we should lean over when turning a corner? What if you had to consciously duck a brick flying through the air at your head? This instinctive aspect of our mind ensures that the physical body's needs — which are expressed through the desire to eat, to sleep, to be comfortable — are fulfilled. All this is concerned with self-preservation and the support and development of life — not your life as a personality, but your existence as a separate biological entity.

People are more than just bundles of physical needs. We also have desires and aspirations of a spiritual nature. These spiritual desires are the basis of — and the creative force behind — human culture and civilization. Psychologists often distinguish between different faculties of the mind such as intellect, emotion, and will. Our intellect is active when we study or try to solve a mathematical problem. The intellectual function of the mind enables us to analyze information and judge its accuracy. We use our intellectual faculty to draw up





and evaluate plans. The intellect naturally seeks truth, and it is this pursuit of truth that has led to the development of science and philosophy.

The emotional aspect of our mind searches for beauty. So when we see a flower, we feel that it is beautiful and we feel joy. When we listen to an out-of-tune piano being played, we shudder. It is this emotional desire to create and appreciate beauty that is the wellspring of art and music.

And what about the will? The will naturally wants to do what is good. This is why we want to clearly know the difference between right and wrong. When we must make a decision, we want to make the right one, and when we are not sure what is right, our conscience feels terrible. In fact, this desire for goodness is so deep that it is very difficult to do something wrong. When we do something wrong, it is because we have convinced ourselves that it is really right, or at least not so bad. Criminals think up all kinds of justifications for their actions and reasons why their deeds are not actually wrong. Still, most people want to know what is right, and this is one of the impulses behind the development of religion. Religion discusses what is right and wrong and seeks to teach a moral way of life.

Our will acts as an energetic force that is influenced most profoundly by the interrelationship between our emotional feeling and intellectual understanding of a situation. Thus, if we have a clear idea, through our intellect, of how and why to achieve something and, concurrently, a strong emotional desire to reach the goal, our volition will have the power to persevere through difficulties to accomplish it. If, however, our emotional desire for the goal is weak or we don't know how to achieve it, the force of our volition will be compromised. That is why it is important that each of the faculties of the mind be developed in a balanced way. A person who is dominated by his intellect is likely to be too critical, perhaps incapable of forming close relationships. A person who is too emotional may be sentimental and mawkish, unable to make sensible decisions. When intellect and emotion are not properly developed, the force of volition can be misdirected as well, causing a person to be obstinate and obdurate.

The inner nature of human beings is influenced, on the one hand, by instincts which are directed toward supporting our biological life, and, on the other hand, by the deeper desires of the mind, which are mainly concerned with the fulfillment of our spiritual needs. The spiritual side of our life also consists of two parts. One aspect is concerned with the spiritual development of oneself, while the other is connected with living for the sake of others. What is the way to bring harmony between these two components?

To be sure, a life guided by noble values includes experiencing joy by fulfilling and satisfying one's own spiritual desires. However, the essence of a life of values is seeking to live harmoniously with others. In other words, a life of values is a *for-others* type of life.

What should be the relationship between our spiritual and bodily aspects, between personal development and living for the sake of others? Which element should be dominant in our lives, our physical desires or our spiritual desires?

Our physical desires are natural and good, but need to be controlled by the value-centered desires of the mind. For instance, the desire for self-preservation is not the highest value. A coward is someone who cannot control this desire and subordinate it to a higher purpose. When faced with danger, he runs away. Likewise, a glutton is someone who lives to eat instead of eating to live. He uses his mind to think how he can get food. He finds it difficult to share food with others and often eats his food in secret. A lazy person is someone who is dominated by the desire to sleep or rest. When the body dominates the mind, we put the fulfillment of physical desires first, even at the sacrifice of spiritual values. If self-centeredness becomes a habit, our mind and conscience become dull. It's clear that the mind's desire to realize values should control our physical desires; when this occurs, our physical desires can be fulfilled appropriately.

If we consider the two spiritual categories — personal development and living for the sake of others — we will see the same principle of relationship in operation between them. Personal maturity fulfills the individual purpose, while living for others fulfills the purpose of the whole. (You will remember that we spoke about these two categories in the chapter “The World of Relationships.”) It is very important to achieve maturity of character, to develop one's inner potential and unique talents, but such personal development will be truly directed toward goodness only if it is concerned with living for others.

When there is unity between mind and body, spiritual values permeate and elevate the physical life. Whole branches of culture have developed to fulfill physical desires in a meaningful way. For example, in many societies eating practices are highly ritualized. Food is carefully prepared and elegantly served. Eating a meal is a time for fellowship with family and friends. Architects design and build beautiful houses to live in. It is this infusion of values or spirituality in the physical functions that distinguishes human beings from animals. Sexual desire, too, becomes humanized by love and elevated into something sacred.

We can see that culture is an expression of the life of the mind. Even the economy has a spiritual aspect, since it is dependent upon entrepreneurs' creativity and the relationships between buyers and sellers. Thus, the quality of a society's culture and the level of its civilization naturally depend on the spiritual and mental health of its people.

Which aspect of human nature is most important?

But what is at the root of the soul? What is the deepest part of our nature, which harmonizes and integrates intellect, emotion, and will? Do you remember the exercise you did in which you made a list of the values you cherish most? You probably placed love toward the top of your list. Love of family, friends, and pets, among other things, are values that human beings tend to place above all else. Above power, wealth, intelligence, beauty, and all the rest, love seems to be what we desire most in life.

The 19th century Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev said that beauty, truth and goodness are all expressions of love.

Thus, love creates beauty, and we love something that is beautiful. Truth, too, is beautiful and elegant. And love put into practice creates goodness. Thus, love is the basis and source of value.

Our desire for love is the deepest and most fundamental spiritual desire of our mind. We all seek to love and be loved. This urge originates from a place deeper than will, deeper than intellect, and even deeper than emotion. In fact, our desire for love often contradicts rational explanation. The desire and

Goodness, truth and beauty are different images of unity. ... Every kind of unity on the basis of an internal connection is love. In this respect, goodness, truth and beauty are only different images of love.

— Vladimir Soloviev
Lectures on Godmanhood

capacity to give and receive love originate in the deepest part of the soul, the part of ourselves we call the heart. From the heart we have the impulse to seek joy through love. And it is through loving and being loved that we experience the greatest happiness.

Heart is deeper than emotion. We feel joyful if our heart's desire is fulfilled, and sad or angry when it is not. When we are intoxicated with love, life is full and complete. If a person does not grow up in an atmosphere of love, he may try to find joy through other means, such as power, money or fame. But nothing can give him complete happiness if he doesn't have love.

Heart is the core and essence of personality. Though intelligence is highly prized, and we often emphasize our capacity to think as what generally distinguishes humans from animals, we are much more than this. We are not just *Homo Sapiens*, or knowing man, we are also *Homo Amans* — loving man. That human beings are beings with heart means that we can live a life of love.

Perhaps you have heard the expression "He's got a good heart." Such a person is one who is kind and compassionate toward others. It is heart that is the motivating force toward harmony in everything we do. The quality of heart determines the direction or underlying purpose of our actions. For example, suppose you decide to study in the university. First you need to

think about what kind of entrance exams you would need to pass, to be able to prepare for them beforehand. Out of many colleges where you might study similar disciplines, you will most likely choose the one you like the most. And when making this choice, you will use not only your intellect, but also your emotions. Finally, you will need to use your will to overcome the many obstacles that can appear on the way to your goal. From even this simple example, it is clear that it is purpose that gives direction to our intellect, emotion and will. But none of them is the origin of purpose. It is heart that determines this.

The centrality of love

Poets and philosophers have described love for ages, and certainly we cannot begin to exhaust the mystery and magic of that topic. Here we will discuss it briefly in the context of moral values and our human nature.

What, then, is love? We cannot see love, but we can feel it. It is a magnet that attracts us. When asked how love looks, one person will describe it as being round

like the moon or broad like the ocean. A dramatic person might say love is like a wild desert. A romantic person might say it is like a beautiful, rocky mountain, while yet another might say it is powerful like Niagara Falls. All these would be correct answers, because they all describe different aspects of love. Love reveals itself to each person in a unique way. In one sense, love is harder than a diamond, but in another sense it is softer than down.

Love is precious because it gathers all things into harmony.

Heart is the impulse
to experience joy
through giving and
receiving love



Love is important not as one of our feelings, but because it transfers all of our life interests from concern for ourselves to concern for others, because it changes the whole center of our personal life.

— Vladimir Soloviev
The Meaning of Love

Love has the power to make the world into harmonious oneness. No other power can achieve this. Love is more than a magnetic power that attracts people's hearts. Love unites all five senses and focuses the whole person in one direction. When you really love a certain person, all your intentions and hopes, your soul itself, is concentrated on your beloved one. We feel the problems and worries of those we love as our own. In this sense, true love opposes egoism. We are not speaking only of romantic, conjugal love. This is the way a mother feels toward her child. This is the feeling that connects good friends.

When you think about love, what kind of love do you want? Do you want a love that is always changing, or unchanging? Do you want a love that is temporary, or one that is lasting? What love song would ever become popular if it portrayed love as temporary, conditional, changeable? Can you imagine the lyrics?

"I will love you as long as you cook my meals and wash my clothes ... "

In reality, when we are in love with someone, we feel that love will last forever. Why do lovers around the world make such promises to each other if true love is something impossible to achieve? We profess it, and believe it, because human beings are capable of true love. We all *want* love to be — and *expect* love to be — lasting, unchanging, and unconditional.

True love involves the giving of oneself for the benefit of the other. It includes the offering of our thoughts, our words and, especially, our actions. It is a commitment, a responsive act of will, a decision to care, a choice to be together in joy and sadness, in times of challenges and difficulties. Such love has four main qualities:

- ✗ True love is unselfish, often involving putting off our own immediate needs.
- ✗ True love is unchanging, not based on the whims of feelings, convenience, or other circumstances.
- ✗ True love is unconditional, meaning it does not demand anything in return, not payment, appreciation or any other reward.
- ✗ True love is unique, treating each person as an individual.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. ... So faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love.

— 1 Corinthians 13:4-13

In true love, we naturally feel those we love to be part of our deepest being. Then, our own sense of self-preservation will not allow our beloved to be hurt. This is what is meant by the teaching in the Christian tradition "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" Our ability to create a family of love and peace, a community of love and peace, and a world of love and peace depends on our ability to become individuals of love and peace.

Physical and spiritual development of the person

How are the spiritual and physical aspects of ourselves related to each other? What do we need for harmonious growth and development, not only of our body but also of our spirit?

For our body to grow to be strong and healthy, certain things are needed. Obviously we need air, light, warmth, water, a well-balanced diet, appropriate clothing, shelter, sufficient sleep and physical exercise, and an environment that is not badly polluted. Our health reflects the quality of the elements we take in. If any of these is lacking, our body soon starts to

complain. Our stomach quickly reminds us if we miss a meal, and our nose wrinkles up automatically if there is an unpleasant smell.

Our spiritual side grows in a similar way. It also needs certain elements for its growth and maturity. We need the love and security that come from being with our parents, family, and friends. We need to develop our understanding, wisdom, and insight into the purpose and meaning of life. We need to learn what is right and what is wrong. Initially, we learn these things from our parents; later, we learn them through studying religious literature, philosophy, and novels by such authors as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Dickens. We need to have stimulating and meaningful experiences. We need to grow up in a moral atmosphere, rich in the elements of our culture, in which we can have the freedom and confidence to develop ourselves. However, if we read immoral books, pornographic magazines and trashy newspapers, if we watch movies that advocate violence and cruelty, then we are poisoning our spirit — similar to the way poisonous food destroys our physical health.

Finally, for our spirit to grow we have to not only receive love but give it by doing good deeds. When we use our physical body to good ends, our soul is nourished. That's why, when we do something good, we feel good. Our spirit becomes bright and beautiful. We have energy. You will notice that an old person who has led a life of being kind to others will have a bright and beautiful countenance despite all the wrinkles. Selfish behavior, on the other hand, corrupts the soul. A person who continuously uses his body to do evil deeds will develop an ugly and unattractive character. Thus, we may think of our body as the soil in which our spirit grows.

It may be difficult to understand and accept all of these explanations concerning our spiritual nature, but quite simply what it boils down to is this: *What we think determines what we do, and what we do shapes our character.* Therefore, the development

of our heart and character depends upon how much we practice what we believe. Although choosing a profession or career is important, our greatest concern in life should be to become a person who practices unselfish love.

The mere fact that we are born does not mean automatically that we are truly human. On the contrary, we may be lulled into believing that any action committed by a person is human. However, to be human is not a fact, but a task, and one may need a lifetime to fulfill it.



Something to
think about



"To be human is not a fact, but a task, and one may need a lifetime to fulfill it." What is this task, and how do we go about fulfilling it?

For Your
Journal



Puzzle of myself

Close your eyes and say to yourself: *I contain within myself many qualities or aspects. Where are they?* Meditate upon your human characteristics and personality traits.

Create a graphic design in which you depict the different aspects of yourself, such as: feelings, intellect, will, humor, faith, hope, mind, body, creativity, conscience, depression, anger, affection, energy, etc. Find the labels that best describe your own unique qualities. You may want to write these labels into the design.

Look at the finished design and write down your impressions and reactions. This is an opportunity to discover the many facets of your personality and how each element relates to the others. Which aspects are more dominant? Which parts need more integration in order for you to experience a sense of unity within?

Night

by Ivan Bunin

In the book *Night*, Russian author Ivan Bunin describes the depth of the night sky, “full of many-colored hanging stars.” He can feel the silence tugging at his thoughts and almost hear the “crystal tinkling present in that silent world like some clanging dream.” Bunin is drawn into the mystery of the night sky and begins the universal inner dialogue:

What am I thinking about? When I asked myself this question, I wanted to remember what I was thinking about, and immediately I thought of my thinking, that this thinking was the most surprising, the most amazing and the most fatal thing in my life. What was I thinking about, what was there in me? Some thoughts (or something like thoughts) about the surroundings, and a wish to remember these surroundings, to keep them in me. ... What else? A feeling of great happiness caused by this great silence, great harmony of night. ...

What was I thinking about? That I understood nothing both in myself and in the world, and at the same time understood I didn’t understand, understood my being lost in that night, in that magic sound, either living, dead, senseless of telling me something most important.

That thought about my own thought, that understanding of my own lack of understanding, is the most irresistible proof of my being part of something many times greater than myself. This is the proof of my immortality. Besides everything that is mine, there is something else in me, something essential and indivisible — really, it is a particle of God. ...

Only man is surprised at his own existence and thinks of it. This is his main difference from other beings who are still in Paradise, in the state of unthinking about themselves. Do they think, these myriad of the night field, these cicadas which fill the whole world with their love song? They are in Paradise, in a blessed dream of life. I have already woken up. I am awake. The world is in them, and they are in it, and I am apart and looking at it.

I am listening and thinking, and that is why I am infinitely lonely in this midnight silence, magically tinkling with myriad of crystal brooks, unendingly, with a great obedience and thoughtlessness pouring into some fathomless bosom. The bright light of Jupiter eerily illuminates the tremendous space between sky and sea, the great



temple of the night, above which it hangs as a sign of the Holy Spirit. I am alone in this temple. I am awake. ...

It has become still more majestic and terrible, the endless temple of the star-laden sky. Many large morning stars have already emerged in it. The misty golden pillar of light is falling vertically into the milky mirror of the lethargic sea. The small trees seem even more immobile, and even smaller in this scarce southern garden. And the continuous unending tinkling, filling the silence of sky, ground and sea has become more like some beautiful crystal flowers. ... What will this tinkling silence reach at last?

Here it is, the sigh of life, the rustle of a wave on the shore, and then again some light movement of air, of sea freshness and of flower scent. And I wake up: I look round and get up. I run down from the balcony, go along the garden and run down to the water. I go along the sand, sit down at the edge of the water and blissfully immerse my hands in it. They immediately begin to sparkle with myriad of shining drops, of countless lives. ...



To read

Chapter 1 “The Law of Human Nature” in *Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis