

Udo Schaefer

Man — The Crown of Creation or its Destroyer?¹

For many people it is becoming more and more difficult to believe that *homo sapiens* is the Crown of Creation, given the destructiveness and bestiality of which he is capable. History is a slaughter-house and the century just past was bloodier than all the previous ones. In the course of his evolution, man has developed from inferior life-forms into a civilised being; but woe betide us all when the dark urges of his animal nature are unleashed and regain the upper hand.

Nietzsche described civilisation as “a thin layer of apple peel over seething chaos“, and often enough this “peel” has failed to resist those atavistic drives and barbarianism has descended upon us. The crime of the Holocaust was committed in the land of poets and philosophers, by a people who were regarded as among the most cultivated in the world. After Auschwitz, after the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, after the unthinkable atrocities in the Balkans and elsewhere, one cannot but ask oneself: what is man, if he is capable of such horrific things?

Many people take refuge in cynicism. There is talk of a “failed creation”²; man has been called a “biological freak”³, an “evolutionary misfit”⁴; “a naked ape”⁵, „a product of chance“, “a gipsy” whose duties and destiny “have not been written down”⁶. He has been condemned as a “miscarriage of nature”⁷, as the ultimate “monster”⁸, in short, as a being which, weary of all utopias and visions of paradise, is about to turn the earth, the Garden of Eden, into a sea of debris, a

1 This article is based on a paper of a public talk presented by the author in 2001 in Stuttgart. For more on Bahā'ī anthropology see Udo Schaefer, *Bahā'ī Ethics*, vol. 1, pp. 40-59; 169-256.

2 E. M. Cioran, *Die verfehlt Schöpfung*, Frankfurt am Main 1979

3 Arthur Koestler, *Janus*, pp.5, 100.

4 *ibid.*

5 B. F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, pp. 191f.; Morris, Desmond, *The Naped Ape. A Zoologist's Study of the human Animal*, New York 1967.

6 Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, pp. 160, 167

7 Theo Löbsack, *Versuch und Irrtum. Der Mensch: Fehlschlag der Natur*, Munich 1974

8 This is the meaning of the word 'Untier' in the title of a cynical book on this subject: Ulrich Horstmann, *Das Untier. Konturen einer Philosophie der Menschenflucht*, Frankfurt 1985

lunar desolation. Owing to its “constitutive deficiencies”⁹ the “monster” will, it is feared, bring about the destruction of its own species and all living things in a single final cataclysmic event. One may shudder at this shockingly negative utopia but the same basic idea was already evident in the writings of Schopenhauer, who called man “a hideous wild beast”¹⁰ and believed “that it would be better if we did not exist”¹¹. The human sciences, those known as “anthropologies from below”, also see only the lower, destructive characteristics of the human race. They reduce man to his drives and see him as a being that is “Beyond Freedom and Dignity”¹².

But this verdict is one-sided and therefore wrong. One must not blind oneself to the fact that man also has another, very different side to his character. Since he walked onto the stage, his genius has created works that will endure throughout the ages. In all cultures there have been individuals, spiritual leaders and trailblazers in the development of true humanity, who have guided mankind towards loftier realms. Man also has the potential to be an angelic being: “Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man”, says Sophocles¹³, and similar words in praise of man abound in world literature.

Like the ancient Roman god Janus, man has two faces, “two natures”¹⁴: “he has the animal side as well as the angelic side”¹⁵. He is ambivalent, capable of both good and evil. This ambivalence, the greatness and the vile baseness of man¹⁶, is a topic that has been dealt with at length by philosophers and poets and also in the sacred scriptures of the religions:

“No animal changes as often as he;
now soaring upwards, now sinking into abasement”,

says the Greek poet Menander¹⁷. An

“unfortunate being, midway between angel and beast”

9 *ibid.* p. 10

10 *Parerga und Paralipomena*, vol. II, p. 211

11 *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. II, (140/4), p. 709 (ch. 48) (no complete English edition).

12 This is the title of Skinner’s before-mentioned book (see footnote 5).

13 *Antigone*, verse 330

14 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 29:2

15 *ibid.* 64:2

16 “Everyone’s an abyss. You get dizzy if you look down” (Georg Büchner, *Woyzek*, scene 10.

17 (342-291 v. Chr.)

is how he is described by a German poet.¹⁸

The question as to man's ultimate nature and the purpose of his existence — which Immanuel Kant calls the most important of the four fundamental questions of philosophy¹⁹ — extends into the realm of metaphysics. It cannot be answered by science, and even philosophical anthropology, which takes us a little further, does not provide any certain answers. Statements that go beyond what we are able to discern through experience and rational thinking are to be found in the sacred writings of the religions. Despite all the differences that exist in matters of detail, these answers from a transcendental source display remarkable similarities, even though the essence of man is not completely unveiled in them. According to Bahā'u'llāh, man is as inscrutable as the essence of God:

“Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.”²⁰

He calls the human soul “a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel”²¹. Of all created things, it is man who is closest to God, because in the act of creation God has engraved on him His “image”.²² Therefore, “in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God”²³. Man is the ontological summit of the universe²⁴; he is God's representative²⁵ and, as it is stated in the Qur'ān, his “vicegerent (*khalīfa*) in the earth”²⁶. Created “to know Thee and to worship Thee”²⁷, man is potentially “the most perfect of all created things”²⁸ and “a mirror of His [God's] own Self”²⁹. He should purify himself from all transitory things, from all corrupt desires and passions and become a clear and polished “mirror” that can “reflect the glory of the names and attributes of

18 Albrecht v. Haller (1708–1777).

19 *Kant's Werke*, Bd. IX: *Logik*, p. 25 (no English edition).

20 *Ḥadīth qudsī*, quoted in: Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-Iqān* 107. The duty of man to know himself (see Bahā'u'llāh, *Tablets* 10:22; 4:8; Bahā'u'llāh, *Gleanings* 1:5; 100:10; 153:6; *Kitāb-Iqān* 107) is the route to knowledge of God: “He hath known God who hath known himself” (saying of Imām 'Alī, quoted in: *Kitāb-Iqān* 107. On the relationship between knowledge of God and self-knowledge see also *Qur'ān* 51:22; 59:20).

21 Bahā'u'llāh, *Gleanings* 82:1

22 “Therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty” (Bahā'u'llāh, *The Hidden Words, Arabic* 3).

23 Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-Iqān* 107

24 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 15:2; 29:1; 21

25 See Bahā'u'llāh, *Gleanings* 109:2

26 *Qur'ān* 2:30

27 As expressed in the short daily prayer

28 Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-Iqān* 109; see also Bahā'u'llāh, *The Hidden Words, Arabic* 11, 13

29 Bahā'u'llāh, *Gleanings* 27:2

God”³⁰. Man is endlessly perfectible and he is called upon to attain perfection, as set out in the Gospel of Matthew:

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.³¹

He is called upon “to soar above the world of matter”³², “he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world”³³, and free himself from the fetters of earthly existence³⁴ so as to “gain the victory over your own selves (*an-nafs al-ammāra*)”³⁵, since the self is the source of all egotism, greed, hatred and suffering. The self “is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on.”³⁶. A person can only attain true happiness if he succeeds in liberating himself from this “bondage”³⁷ and his spiritual nature gains the upper hand, enabling him, at the hour of death, “to ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High”³⁸. God’s revelation is “the Source of his [man’s] education”³⁹. One of the names of God is “*Al-Murabiyu’l-Akbar*”, the “Greatest Educator”⁴⁰. Hence, the Manifestations are the “divine educators of mankind”:

the heaven of God’s Will . . . hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race.⁴¹

Man is not merely a highly developed animal. Through his power of reason, his rational, immortal soul, which is a “sign of God”⁴², he is on a higher level in the hierarchy of creation. He is the only created being that has a share in the spiritual world⁴³, but he can only achieve his destiny, his salvation, under the Covenant of

30 See also Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 124:22-3

31 5:48; see also Leviticus 19:2

32 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 3:7

33 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Selections* 227:20

34 “The heart is prone to evil” (see *Qur’ān* 12:53), i.e. one’s natural urges. Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions in Islam*, pp. 25, 112

35 See Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 7:10; Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 43:3

36 Shoghi Effendi, quoted in: *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. II, no. 1318 (*Living the Life*).

37 “Say: Deliver your souls, O people, from the bondage of self (*nafs*) and purify them from all attachment to anything besides Me” (Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 136:1; 45). For this struggle (known in Islam as the “great *Jihād*”), man requires divine assistance.

38 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 81

39 Ibid. 11:3; 7:13; ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 3:7.

40 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 93:14.

41 Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 7:13.

42 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 82:1, 6; 83:1; ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 4

43 see ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 64:2

God — that eternal Covenant⁴⁴ that the prophets and messengers of God have continually renewed. Without divine revelation and guidance (*hudā*), without “proper education” he remains “deprived ... of that which he doth inherently possess”.⁴⁵ Revelation, „the true education”⁴⁶ can overcome man’s ignorance about his true self, enlighten him and cause him to attain his “high destiny” and his “lofty ... station”⁴⁷.

Man must consciously decide to follow this pattern of life, and he has the freedom to do so. Whereas the animal is a “captive of nature”⁴⁸, man has been granted freedom.⁴⁹ The determining characteristic of human existence and human dignity consists in man’s ability, irrespective of the prevailing biological and social conditions, to subdue his vital urges, to control and sublimate his impulses so that these imperfections become useful and “are transformed into human perfections”⁵⁰. He has the choice between right and wrong, the potential to do good or to do evil.⁵¹ This image of man is a verdict against the widespread delusion of innocence, the popular idea that nobody is responsible for anything, that it is only society or structures that are at fault, the secular dogma of the “good individual” being victimised by “evil society”.

Bahā’u’llāh’s image of man does not concur with the naive, optimistic Enlightenment motto “*Man is good!*” He is only *potentially* good, but he is certainly not predestined to be good, with peace and happiness automatically ensuing if the right social conditions prevail. The idea that it is only “relations” that prevent the individual from being a “good person” — as expressed by Bertolt Brecht in his “Ballad of the Good Man”⁵² — is mistaken. Even in the best of all possible worlds man’s happiness and peace on earth are unattainable unless man turns around, transforms himself and, by the grace of God, rises unto that for which he was created.

44 see *Qur’ān* 7:172.

45 *Tablets* 11:3.

46 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 3:7.

47 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 101.

48 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*, p. 10

49 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 9:19; 11:6. On free will see Schaefer, *Die Freiheit und ihre Schranken*, pp. 19ff.

50 ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 29:7

51 cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 5:13; 9:19

52 In *The Threepenny’s Opera*, act 6, “The Threepenny Finale”.

However, man is also not “framed out of ... crooked wood”⁵³, he is not of a “fallen nature”, not fundamentally evil and corrupt. Adam’s fall from grace does not mean that man is inherently sinful. Each individual is born into the world in a state of complete purity, but his animal nature means that he is “prone to evil”⁵⁴. Existentially he is a sinner (*āthim*)⁵⁵, because as long as he is still on the path towards his goal, which is perfection, he is always deficient compared with what he has the potential to become.

The ambivalence of the spirit of man is that “it is capable of the utmost perfection, or it is capable of the utmost imperfection”⁵⁶. If his spiritual capacities are developed, he can become a “mirror” of divine perfection and “the most noble of the existing beings”. If these capacities of the spirit are neglected and “it acquires vices, it becomes the most degraded existence”⁵⁷. The spectrum of human existence is extremely broad: with God’s grace man can be exalted and “raised above the angels”⁵⁸, but he can also sink into depths of degradation “which the meanest of creatures have never reached”⁵⁹. As Aristotle says, “Brutality is less bad than vice, but more fearful.”⁶⁰ The diabolical side of human nature⁶¹, *la bête humaine*, the dark aspects of the world, are thus certainly not ignored.

The required way of life is a happy medium between ascetic rejection of the world⁶² and Baudelaire’s utopian vision of a life of “luxury, idleness and voluptuousness”⁶³. Bahā’u’llāh’s image of man is incompatible with the idea that the purpose of life is the satisfaction of urges and enjoyment of pleasure,⁶⁴ the

53 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*, p. 92

54 Bahā’u’llāh, *Prayers and Meditations* 124:2

55 see Bahā’u’llāh, *Prayers and Meditations* 183:5, 11, 13

56 *Some Answered Questions* 36:4

57 *ibid.* 36:4; 31:6; Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 101

58 Bahā’u’llāh, *Prayers and Meditations* 160:1; *Qur’ān* 19:57

59 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 101; ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Paris Talks* 31:6; see also *Qur’ān* 95:4-5

60 *Nicomachean Ethics* 1150a. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q 64, a2, ad 3 (“*Peior enim est malus homo quam bestia et plus nocet*”).

61 Satan, symbolised by the serpent, is a metaphor for the attachment of the soul to the human world (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahā, *Some Answered Questions* 30:6).

62 Practising “asceticism” (*al-riyadāt ash-shaqqā*) is prohibited for Bahā’īs (see Bahā’u’llāh, *Tablets* 6:37; Bahā’u’llāh, *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 36; Bahā’u’llāh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp. 49f.). The idea of detachment (*zuhd*), on the other hand, appears frequently in the Bahā’ī scriptures (see Bahā’u’llāh, *Kitāb-Iqān* 141; 170; 213; 247 etc.).

63 *Les Fleurs du Mal* (L’Invitation au voyage) : « luxe, calme et volupté »

64 The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) sees diversion or entertainment as posing a danger for man: “Men spend their time in following a ball or a hare; it is the pleasure even of kings” (*Thoughts*, no. 141). “The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin

insatiable striving for material prosperity and luxury, the cult of the orgasm and the cult of Mammon; in short, the modern lifestyle which has infected the whole world and which is causing the sense of solidarity, people's readiness to help each other, to wither and die out. A person who has — as the Qur'ān puts it — “made a God of his passions”⁶⁵, and individuals who are so caught up in selfish desires that “like the bats of darkness, they lift not their heads from their couch except to pursue the transient things of the world”⁶⁶, have, according to Bahā'u'llāh, failed to recognise the true purpose of their existence. The only lasting thing that man can attain here on earth is “love of God”⁶⁷ and “a pure, kindly and radiant heart”⁶⁸.

But when will deficient man⁶⁹, who, like Goethe's “sorcerer's apprentice”, is no longer able to solve the existential problems of humanity, change for the better? The survival of mankind depends on a new ethic and a substantially new way of thinking. The longing for the renewal of man and human society⁷⁰, the dream of a *New Man*⁷¹ is as old as the hills; it is a history of hopes and disappointments. The New Man expected by Christian eschatology at the Time of the End, has been proclaimed to be imminent again and again — by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau⁷², Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, by the Russian intelligentsia and the Latin American revolutionaries⁷³ and by the New-Age movement. But the birth of this new man seems more questionable than ever, and the idea of the recreation of man through genetic engineering is no less of a nightmare than the human breeding programme promoted by the Nazis.

ourselves. Without this we should be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death.” (ibid. no. 171).

65 Qur'ān 45:24

66 Bahā'u'llāh, *Kitāb-Iqān* 250

67 *Gleanings* 152.

68 Bahā'u'llāh, *The Hidden Words, Arabic* 1.

69 Alfred Weber has described him as the “fourth man”: he is de-humanised, faithless, intellectualised, mechanised and impersonal (*Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie*, pp. 416ff.).

70 Jean Servier, *Der Traum von der großen Harmonie. Eine Geschichte der Utopie*, Munich 1971; Martin Buber, *Pfade in Utopia*, Heidelberg 1950

71 Literature: Evangelische Akademie Baden (ed.), *Der Traum vom neuen Menschen. Hoffnung—Utopie—Illusion?*, Herrenalber Protokolle 113, Karlsruhe 1999; Schaefer, *The Imperishable Dominion*, p. 206ff.

72 See *On Education*, ed. by Leslie F. Claydon, London: MacMillan, 1969

73 Worthy of mention in this connection is, in particular, Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest, poet and revolutionary. In his speech upon being awarded the 1980 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main, he spoke of “el hombre nuevo”, the “new man”, who would come into being in Nicaragua.

Scientists who were searching for a new ethic and a new man⁷⁴ came to the despondent conclusion that: “Compared with the task of changing the sons of Adam, the splitting of the atom seems like child’s play”⁷⁵. Bahā’u’llāh says that the only thing that “is endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change” is the new “Word of God”⁷⁶. He promises mankind’s transformation in the fullness of time:

The day is approaching when God will have, by an act of His Will, raised up a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God, the All-Powerful, the Self-Subsisting. He shall purify them from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires, shall lift them up to the heights of holiness, and shall cause them to manifest the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth. Thus hath it been ordained by God, the All-Glorious, the All-Loving.⁷⁷

74 Grover Foley, “Sind wir am Ende? Amerikanische Zukunftsprognosen”, in: *Frankfurter Hefte* 10 (1971), p. 747.

75 *ibid.*

76 Bahā’u’llāh, *Gleanings* 99.

77 *Sūratu’l-Haykal*, in *The Summons of the Lord*, 8.

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As man is the summit and purpose of creation, his creation deserves its own lesson. Obviously it's a very important topic we are men and need to understand ourselves. It's especially important to understand man and his creation because God becomes a man. What we say about man we are necessarily also saying about Christ, since the Incarnation. Of course when we talk about sins, that doesn't apply to Christ, but what we say about human nature has to be correct, because we're saying it about God as well. The creation of man. 26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and I Owing to its constitutive deficiencies the monster will, it is feared, bring about the destruction of its own species and all living things in a single final cataclysmic event. One may shudder at this shockingly negative utopia but the same basic idea was already evident in the writings of Schopenhauer, who called man a hideous wild beast and believed that it would be better if we did not exist. 20. He calls the human soul a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. 21. Of all created things, it is man who is closest to God, because in the act of creation God has engraved on him His image. Man: Crown of Creation -A Christian Philosophy - The Gifts of Man - Requirements for Finals Learn with flashcards, games and more for free. A _ Philosophy of Man Concept of Man as the Crown of Creation Man is considered as the crown of all of God's creation because he is the only one which is made in the image" and likeness of God. Man and religion. refers to the to the "human - Divine" partnership and communion. Man and Morality. morality connects good moral conduct with happiness, the goal of man; this relation constitutes the human activity which is attributed to Ethics. Man and social relations. man by nature and inclination tends towards group life; this human activity results to a social relationship. M... In the course of his evolution, man has developed from inferior life-forms into a civilised being; but woe betide us all when the dark urges of his animal nature are unleashed and regain the upper hand. Nietzsche described civilisation as a thin layer of apple peel over seething chaos, and often enough this peel has failed to resist those atavistic drives and barbarianism has descended upon us. The crime of the Holocaust was committed in the land of poets and philosophers, by a people who were regarded as among the most cultivated in the world. After Auschwitz, after the genocides in Cambo