The Nature of Human Beings: East and West

J. L. Shaw

The aim of this paper is to discuss the nature of human beings, both from the Western and the Eastern perspectives. The first chapter will deal with Western concepts of human being, beginning with Plato. Since we come across four views in Western philosophy, this chapter will be divided into four sections, dealing with the following views: a) rationality as the defining property of human beings; b) certain attitudes or experiences, such as caring, loving, etc., as the defining properties of human beings; c) theological concepts of human beings, and d) the existentialist concepts of human beings.

The second chapter will deal with Indian concepts of human beings. Since the form of life of human beings cannot be described in terms of a particular character or property, I shall focus on the following six features, or dimensions, of human beings: a) the concept of ought and ought not; b) free will, presupposed by the concept of ought; c) the concept of infinity, or participation in both finite and infinite concepts; d) creativity, as well as suggestive meaning; e) the realisation of rajas, and f) liberation (moksa, nirvana) or freedom from bondage.

Chapter One

In this chapter I shall discuss four concepts of human beings from Western philosophy.

Section One

Traditionally, human beings are defined as rational animals. Hence, $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ has rationality and animality. Since rationality is the distinctive feature of human beings, we have to explain this concept. Regarding the use of the term “reason,” it is said “a word used in many, various, often vague senses, with complex and sometimes obscure connections, one with another (A Dictionary of Philosophy, edited by Anthony Flew, p 300).”

I think the following uses of this term may be mentioned: i) $x$ has rationality if and only if $x$ can apprehend universals which are eternal, non-spatial and non-temporal entities. This type of thesis we come across in the philosophy of Plato, as he has divided the human soul into three parts. The highest part of the soul is
reason. Reason being a faculty of the mind, or soul, apprehends Platonic Ideas, and relationships between these Ideas.

The other two parts are irrational and called “noble” and “ignoble” respectively. It is claimed that emotions such as love, courage, etc., belong to the irrational noble part of the soul, but sensuous appetites belong to the ignoble part of the irrational soul. The noble part can be treated as instinct, not reason. Plants possess only the ignoble, or the appetitive part of the soul, but animals possess both the noble and ignoble parts of the soul. Human beings alone possess all the three parts of the soul. Hence, human beings are to be distinguished from other beings in terms of reason, which is the immortal part of the soul. Since the rational part is the faculty of knowledge, human beings alone can have knowledge. Hence the knowledge of Ideas such as redness, blueness and colouredness, or the knowledge of ethical Ideas, such as justice, beauty and goodness, is due to the rational part of the soul. Moreover, it is the rational part of the soul which transmigrates and recollects the Ideas, as this part of the soul lived in the realm of Ideas, or Plato’s Heaven. (W. T. Stace, A critical History of Greek Philosophy, pp 211-217)

ii) $x$ has rationality if and only if $x$ is able to use deductive, inductive, or abductive arguments.

According to the Aristotelian definition, deduction is a valid inference, such that the premises are more general than the conclusion. Hence, a syllogistic inference such as “all human beings are mortal, all kings are human beings, therefore all kings are mortal,” is an example of deduction. Similarly, a valid inference, having a general premise and a particular premise and a particular conclusion is an example of deduction. For example, “all kings are mortal, Ozymandias is a king, therefore Ozymandias is mortal.”

But, in induction, we proceed from a set of particular premises to a general conclusion. But these definitions are not acceptable, as in a valid deductive inference, both the premise(s) and the conclusion may be particular. For example, “$a$ is taller than $b$, therefore $b$ is shorter than $a$.” Similarly, in an inductive inference, both the premise(s) and the conclusion may be particulars. For example, “the crow in my garden is black, the crow in your garden is black, therefore, the crow in the garden of John is black.”

Modern logicians do not define deduction or induction in terms of generality. According to them, in a valid deductive inference, the
conclusion necessarily follows from the premise(s). But in an inductive inference, this does not happen. In other words, in a deductive inference, if the premises are true, then the conclusion cannot be false. But in an inductive inference, the conclusion may be false or probable, although the premises are true. Therefore, in a valid deductive argument, the conclusion cannot be denied without denying the premise(s). But, in an inductive argument, the conclusion may be denied without denying the premise(s). For example, “swans in New Zealand are white, swans in Asian countries are white, therefore all swans are white.” The premises are true, but the conclusion is false, as black swans have been discovered in Australia.

Regarding abduction, some philosophers, such as C.S. Peirce, treated it as the third type of inference. This type of inference corresponds to the postulation of a scientific hypothesis to explain some given phenomena. Suppose a set of facts, say $y$, are given. In order to explain these facts, the hypothesis $x$ may be postulated, such that if $x$, then $y$. Hence, the hypothesis $x$ is treated as probable, or highly probable, although falsifiable. In this context it is to be noted that Aristotle has used it to refer to a syllogistic inference such that the conclusion is merely probably, although the major premise is certain, and the minor premise is merely probable. (See The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy, edited by Thomas Mautner).

iii) $x$ is rational if and only if the reasoning of $x$ leads to an action.

It is claimed that the practical reason of Aristotle leads to an action. To quote Aristotle,

“I need covering; a cloak is a covering. I need a cloak. What I need, I have to make; I need a cloak. I have to make a cloak. And the conclusion, that ‘I have to make a cloak,’ is an action. And he acts from a starting-point. If there is to be a cloak, there must necessarily be this first, and if this, then this. And this he does at once”. (701a 17-22, Nicomachean Ethics, quoted in “Rationality and Freedom in Aristotle and Hayek,” by Fred D. Miller Jr., Reason Papers No. 9, 1983, p 31)

It is claimed that, according to Aristotle, we must act in order to realise our reason, which is the intrinsic good of a human being. Hence, the good of a human being lies in performing actions which exhibit reason. The nature of life of a human being is determined by the function of reason, as the human good lies in reason. Since Aristotle’s ethics is treated as virtue ethics, the good of an agent lies in having virtuous characters or dispositions. If a person is virtuous, then he or she chooses the right
object, or acts in the right ways, at the time and place, for the right reasons. Wisdom, justice, courage and temperance are considered virtues by Aristotle. Since, human good is a function of reason, the decisions justified by reason are considered as good. From the above discussion it follows that a function of practical reason in Aristotle is to correlate means with ends (Nicomachean Ethics, 3.1112b 11-12).

iv) $x$ is rational if and only if $x$ can apprehend certain categories or generic universals, such as unity, plurality, totality, existence, possibility, necessity, etc., or intuit moral principles.

We come across this type of rationality, theoretical or practical, in the philosophy of Kant. According to Kant, certain categories which are forms or principles of synthesis are necessary for knowledge. Kant deduces his categories from the faculty of judgement or thought, as the unit of thought is judgment. Since there are twelve types of judgements, he accepted twelve categories, one corresponding to each judgement. There are three types of judgements of quantity, namely, singular (this $s$ is $p$), particular (some $s$ is $p$) and universal (all $s$ is $p$). The categories corresponding to these judgements are unity, plurality and totality. Similarly, there are three types of judgements of quality, namely, affirmative ($s$ is $p$), negative ($s$ is not $p$), and infinite ($s$ is not-$p$). The categories corresponding to these judgements are reality, negation, and limitation respectively.

According to relation, judgements are divided into categorical ($s$ is $p$), hypothetical (if $s$ is $p$, $q$ is $r$), and disjunctive ($s$ is either $p$ or $q$). The categories corresponding to them are inherence-subsistence, ground-consequence, and reciprocity between agent and patient respectively. Similarly, modal judgements are divided into problematic ($s$ may be $p$), assertoric ($s$ is $p$) and apodeictic ($s$ must be $p$). The categories corresponding to these judgements are possibility-impossibility, existence-nonexistence, necessity-contingency.

It is to be noted that these categories are contributions of understanding, which is a faculty of theoretic reasoning. The faculty of reason, which is a technical term in Kant, produces the Ideas of the unconditioned, such as soul, God, or the world. Reason, in its practical aspect, or in morals, produces the principles of morality, which are categorical, not hypothetical. These principles are called Categorical Imperatives. Kant has formulated them in the following five ways:
a) Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

b) Act as if the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.

c) So act as to use humanity, both in your own person, and in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end, never simply as a means.

d) So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim.

e) So act as if you were always through your maxims a law-making member in a universal kingdom of ends. (H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, p 129)

Regarding the relation between the theoretical and the practical reason, opinions have been divided. Some claim that the latter is derivable from the former. Others claim that the theoretical is derivable from the practical. But in Kantian philosophy, they are manifestations of, or the functions of, the same reason. (“Rationality, Practical”, *Routledge Encyclopedia of philosophy*, Vol 8)

v) \( x \) is rational if and only if \( x \) is real.

We come across this type of concept of reason in the philosophy of Hegel. According to Hegel, thought or reality is moving dialectically from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, which is higher than both of them. The synthesis becomes a new thesis and leads to antithesis. Again, both of them lead to a higher synthesis. This process goes on until the opposition between thesis and antithesis is fully resolved. Since human beings, according to Hegel, are rational beings, they are real. The evolution of the absolute is the progressive realisation of the reason manifested in the world.

If we consider everything as real, then they would be equally rational. Hence the distinction between human beings and other beings cannot be drawn in terms of reason, as it is present in other being as well. Of course, we can draw the distinction in terms of degrees of manifestation of reason, but not in terms of kind. On the contrary, if it is claimed that other beings lack reason, then they would be unreal. For this reason it is
difficult to use the Hegelian notion of reason to draw the qualitative distinction between human beings and other beings.

From the above definitions of reason it follows that the function of reason is: i) to correlate an end with a means, sometimes with the best available means; ii) to apprehend certain categories, generic universals, principles, ends or goals, iii) to apply the principle to a particular case or to be guided by these principles, goals or aims.

It seems to me that these concepts of rationality cannot be used to differentiate human beings from certain higher animals. In other words, they cannot be used to draw the distinction between human beings and higher animals. Higher animals such as chimpanzees can correlate certain means with certain ends; they are also guided by certain goals or ends; they can also apprehend certain categories, such as existence, non-existence, plurality and causality. Hence, rationality, theoretical or practical, is not adequate to draw the qualitative distinction between humankind and animal kind.

Section Two

In this section I would like to discuss some definitions of human beings or persons proposed by pro-abortionists.

i) \( x \) is a human being if and only if \( x \) is formed by certain experiences, such as loving, caring, learning, etc.

Pro-abortionists claim that a foetus, or an unborn child, is not a human being, as it does not have the experience of loving, caring, etc. Hence, the destruction of a foetus, or the termination of pregnancy, does not amount to murder or killing a human being.

This definition also is not adequate to draw the distinction between human beings and other higher animals, such as chimpanzees. This is due to the fact that we cannot substantiate the thesis that higher animals do not have experiences, such as loving, or caring, or learning.

The following definitions also suffer from similar shortcomings:

ii) \( x \) is a human being if and only if \( x \) can communicate with others.

iii) \( x \) is a human being if and only if \( x \) possesses a concept of self as a continuing subject of experiences and other mental states.
Since higher animals can also communicate with others, have expectations, or continuity of experiences, and recognise objects or creatures, the above criteria cannot be used to distinguish human beings from higher animals.

Section Three

Now I would like to mention the views of theologians, especially the Orthodox Christianity.

i) $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ is created by God after His image.

This definition is put forward to explain our idea of God as a perfect being, or the idea of perfection itself. Human beings are conscious of their defects or finitude because they compare themselves with the absolute perfection of God. Since God has created human beings after his imagine, they are born with the idea of perfection or perfect being. Other beings are created by God, but not after His image.

ii) The Hasidic concept of human being, which has its origin in the Kabbalistic concepts, emphasises the origin of the soul, creation, and the participation in the Divine Realm. Hence it may be stated thus:

$x$ is a human being if and only if the soul of $x$ has its origin in the divine, $x$ is formed after the model of the supernal elements, and $x$ has influence in the Divine Realm.

This view emphasises the reciprocal relation between human beings and God. To quote Teshima:

“God gives man life, blessings and judgement, and man in his turn restores the cosmic order through his devotion, eventually strengthening the upper world. To the Kabbalistis, the divine origin of the soul was most important in dealing with the nature of man, because it is by virtue of the soul that man is qualified to participate with God”. (J.Y. Teshima, Zen Buddhism and Hasidism, p 108)

iii) $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ is ensouled.

According to Orthodox Christianity, a foetus gains at soul at the moment of quickening, and the mother feels its movement. Hence, according to this view, ensoulment distinguishes human beings from other beings.
But the views of theologians lack empirical or rational justification. It depends on a lot of assumptions which are difficult to accept or substantiate. Hence, these views are either dogmas, or articles of faith, or myths.

Section Four

In this section I would like to mention the views of existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Ortega and Sartre. Following the suggestions of these philosophers, the following definitions or characteristics of human beings may be suggested:

i) $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ is an emotional being.

In this context the expression “emotions” refers to some turbulent states of mind, such as anxiety, dread, alienation, forlornness, abandonment, etc. It is to be noted that the traditional concept of human beings emphasises the cognitive, or the rational, aspect, but the existentialist philosophers focus on the emotional, or non-cognitive, aspect of human beings.

Philosophers of the Enlightenment claim that reason can solve not only problems of science, but also the problems of human beings. “Reason, in the form of the scientific method, was viewed as the magic wand by means of which ignorance, injustice, prejudice, and superstition were to be eliminated.” (R. Grossman, *Phenomenology and Existentialism*, p 69) But, existentialists such as Kierkegaard claim that reason cannot solve central problems of life. The self is to be understood, not in terms of rationality, or thought, but in terms of possibilities, dread, or anxiety, and the decisions that follow them. Similarly, truth is not revealed by reason. Truth depends on our choices or decisions. Kierkegaard also claims that anxiety, or dread, is the defining property of human beings. Animals have fear, but not anxiety. He says, “One does not therefore find dread in the beast, precisely for the reason that by nature the beast is not qualified by spirit.” (*The Concept of Dread*, quoted in R. Grossman, p 71) Anxiety has no object, but fear has an object. Hence, it is claimed that nothingness is the content of anxiety. The possibility of freedom appears in anxiety or dread. “... dread is the dizziness of freedom.” (Ibid. p 72)

But, according to Heidegger, the object of anxiety is not anything particular. It is also claimed that, since the object is not any specific thing, it is everything in general, and this everything is the world. For this
reason, a human being asks ‘why am I here?’ or ‘why am I being abandoned in this world?’ Regarding anxiety he also says “... anxiety reveals in human beings the being of the possibility of being ones own, that means, of being free for the freedom of choosing and defining oneself.” (quoted in Grossman, p 160-161) He also claims that it is anxiety that individuates, pulls us back from the world of everyday living, where we are a part of what one does, what one says, what one thinks. (Ibid. p 161)

ii) $x$ is a human being if and only if the essence of $x$ lies in its existence.

We come across this type of characterisation in Heidegger. It is claimed that the essence of a human being ($Dasein$) lies in its “to be.” Hence, its essence must be conceived in terms of its existence (see R.C. Solomon, Existentialism, p 96). The so-called properties of human being are to be conceived as “possible ways for it to be”. (Ibid. p 96) Hence, there are no Platonic essences anywhere. Since each mode of being of an individual is its essence, each of them would be particular. Hence, neither the Platonic essences, nor the universals, are to be postulated for the explanation of the nature of a human being.

iii) $x$ is a human being if and only if the being of $x$ is ahead of oneself, always on the way (unterwegs).

We come across this type of characterisation in the philosophy of Heidegger. In order to understand his use of the word “$Dasein$,” which refers to a human being, we have to understand his use of the word “sorge,” translated as “care.” To quote Heidegger: “The primary factor of care, ‘being ahead of itself,’ however, means that $dasein$ always exists for the sake of itself.” (quoted in Basic Writings of Existentialist, edited by Gordon Marino, p 299-300)

There is always something outstanding in $Dasein$ which has not yet become real, although it remains as a possibility of its being. “A constant unfinished quality thus lies in the essence of the constitution of $Dasein$.” (Ibid. p 300) In other words, we cannot give an account of a human being without reference to his or her projects, hopes, aspirations, intentions, etc. Hence, a human being is always in the process of becoming. The reference to the process of becoming, or striving for something, will define or describe a particular human being. Hence, an individual is necessarily unfinished or incomplete. According to Heidegger, we can never grasp the wholeness of $Dasein$. This is due to the fact that it reaches its wholeness in death, and when it happens, $Dasein$ loses its being of the there. Hence this view emphasises the becoming aspect of our being.
iv) $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ is what $x$ is not.

We come across this type of view in the philosophy of Spanish existentialist Ortega y Gasset. According to Ortega, human beings do not have nature, but history. They live in the realms of planning, hopes and aspirations which are constructed throughout their history. Regarding desire, he says: “... a constant mobilisation of our being towards something beyond itself; untiring bowman, shooting without rest on exciting targets.” (*The Subject of Our Time*, quoted at www.e-torredebabel.com, p 17)

His conception of future is worth mentioning, as we live in the future coloured by past and present. The existence of a human being is what it is going to be, not what it is. Human beings are characterised in terms of future, unlike other beings who are characterised by present. This is due to the fact that we are constantly betting on projects, and struggling for their achievement. To quote Ortega: “First of all, living is running into the future. No, it is not the present nor the past what we first live; life is an activity executed towards, and present and past are only discovered later, in relation to the future. Life is making future, life is what it is not yet.” (*What is Philosophy*, quoted at www.e-torredebabel.com, p 11)

Hence, the time of human being is future. Past and present are interpreted in terms of future or “get sense from future.” We are living in the unrealised future projects. It seems to me that he is emphasising the unfulfilled aspects of our life, not simply unterwegs (on the way aspects of our lives) or the becoming aspect of our life. Hence, iii) emphasises incompleteness of our being, but iv) emphasises the unfulfilled aspects of our being. This is how we can draw the distinction between iii) and iv).

v) $x$ is a human being if and only if $x$ is constituted of a set of free choices or decisions. In other words, $x$ is formed out of choices.

According to this view one individual can be distinguished from another in terms of sets of choices and the circumstances in which those choices are made. Since a set of decisions is the defining property of an individual, he or she does not have any essence prior to his or her existence. For this reason, the existence of a human being precedes his essence, not the other way around. Moreover, the essence of a human being is not universal, as it explains the uniqueness or the individuality of the person. Regarding choice, Sartre says “... the choice is nothing other than the being of each human reality, this amounts to saying that a partial
particular behaviour is or expresses the original choice of this human reality since for human reality there is no difference between existing and choosing for itself.” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, The Wisdom Library, 1968, p 76)

As an example of a situation for the exercise of freedom or free choice, Sartre mentions the condition of a young man who cannot decide whether to join the French Liberation Forces or to serve his ailing mother. Sartre claims that there is no pre-existing guideline or moral rules for making a choice in this situation. He has to choose. This is what is meant by the word “abandonment.” To quote Sartre: “We are left alone, without excuse. That is what I mean when I say that man is condemned to be free.” (Sartre, *Existentialism*, quoted in *Existentialism From Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, edited by Walter Kaufman, p 295)

As regards the nature of choice or exercise of freedom, Sartre has rejected the traditional ‘cause-intention-act-end’ model or ‘motive-act-end’ model. He claims that the motive is to be understood in terms of an end which is non-existent. To quote him: “The motive is understood only by the end; that is, by the non-existent. It is therefore in itself a negative. If I accept a niggardly salary it is doubtless because of fear; and fear is a motive. But it is fear of dying from starvation; that is, this fear has meaning only outside itself in an end ideally posited, which is the preservation of life which I apprehend as ‘in danger’.” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p 564)

Sartre also claims that a motive is not the cause of an act, as motive act and end constitute a single upsurge. To quote him again: “... the motive, the act and the end are all constituted in a single upsurge. Each of these structures claims the two others as its meaning. But the organised totality of the three is no longer explained by any particular structure,... it is the act which decides its ends and its motives, and the act is the expression of freedom (Ibid., p 565).”

From the above discussion it follows that Sartre defines human beings in terms of choices which are not caused by any antecedent motives or desires. It is doubtful whether the causal model can be rejected for the explanation of human freedom. Moreover, it is difficult to distinguish human beings from other animals in terms of certain emotions which are precursors of the exercise of free choices. A chimpanzee also experiences anxiety, or dread, in the absence of her child or partner. She also experiences grief, or abandonment, if there is mishap. Hence, the feelings of higher animals are similar to ours, although there may be difference in
degree. They also make choices similar to ours. Similarly, they have also hopes and desires. They are also in the process of becoming. Hence the above characterisations of the existentialist philosophers are not adequate to distinguish human beings from higher animals, although they have rightly emphasised the emotional or the free-choice aspect of human beings.

Chapter Two

In this chapter I would like to discuss the nature of human beings from the perspective of Indian philosophers. Unlike Western philosophers, Indian philosophers do not define human beings in terms of reason or certain attitudes, such as caring, etc., or in terms of certain emotions, such as anxiety. This is due to the fact that these properties are present in higher animals, such as chimpanzees.

According to Indian philosophers, human beings exhibit not only rationality at the level of thought, or anxiety at the level of emotion, but also certain other characteristics which will distinguish them from other higher animals. The form of life of a human being can be described by the following features:

a) Some of their actions are guided by the concept of ought or ought not. In other words, human beings are guided by the concept of dharma (righteousness), or adharma (unrighteousness). The word ‘dharma’ has been used in a very wide sense by Indian philosophers. The core meaning of the word ‘dharma’ is derived from the root ‘dhr’, meaning ‘to hold’, ‘to support’, etc. Hence x is a dharma means that 1) x supports the world (dharati lokan), 2) x supports the human society as well as the world (yo-lokan-dharayati, yena-manava-samajo-dhrtah-sa-dharmah), 3) x will help those who have fallen, are about to fall, or will fall (patitam-patantam-patisyantam-dharayatiti-dharmah), 4) x is the foundation of the universe as well as the world (dharo-visvasya-jagatah-pratistha), 5) x is real or truth (yo-dharmah-satyam-vaitat), 6) x also leads to something higher, such as peace and bliss (ya-eva-sreyaskarah-sa-eva-dharmasabdena-ucyate), 7) If you put an end to x (dharma), then it will put an end to you; if you restore x, then it will restore you (dharma eva hato hanti, dharma raksati raksitah).

From these uses of the word ‘dharma’ it follows that our total wellbeing is dependent on dharma. The laws of dharma are as real as the laws of nature. Hence any type of violence, which is a type of adharma, will cause our suffering and would ultimately lead to the elimination of living
beings. It is to be noted that the Yoga system has mentioned 81 types of violence, three of them cardinal or non-derivative. These are: i) killing or torturing someone, ii) ordering to kill or torture someone, and iii) approving of killing or torture. The word ‘approval’ implies both implicit and explicit approval. Remaining silent or not opposing violence is also another type of approval. Here the word ‘violence’ is used in such a way that the cause leading to violence or destruction is also considered as violence. Hence the destruction of nature that causes suffering or leads to the extinction of living beings is a type of violence.

b) The concept of *ought* presupposes what we can do and what we cannot do. In other words, if I ought to do *x*, then it follows that I can do *x*. Again, the latter presupposes freedom. Almost all the systems of Indian philosophy have accepted some concept of freedom or other. It is to be noted that most Indian philosophers are either Compatibilists or Libertarians, although some of them have gone beyond both categories. Indian philosophers, by and large, emphasize the ability and the achievement of human beings by their effort.

Human effort or freedom has been emphasised from the very dawn of Indian philosophy. Some of the problems of our existence can be solved by our effort. To quote *Maitri Upanishad*:

*Samsara is just one’s thought, with effort one should cleanse it.*

...  
*The mind, in truth, is for mankind the means of bondage and release. If bound to objects, bondage follows, from objects free – that is called release.*

From this passage it follows that we can overcome some of the obstacles to our existence by our effort of free will. In the Yoga system also we can overcome our suffering by controlling our senses or internal organs, including various modifications or “modes of mind.” Through our effort we can transform our minds, which is necessary for liberation.

The practice of yoga to control our internal and external senses is present not only in the Hindu tradition, but also in the Buddhist tradition, especially the Yogacara system. According to *Lankavatara sutra* (a Buddhist text) also an enlightened mind, or a pure mind is transformed into the Buddha’s mind. To quote:

*Suchness, emptiness, excellence, nirvana, realm of truth, the various bodies made from mind – I call these Buddha.*
In the *Mahabharata* also human effort plays a great role, as there is no scope for fatalism. What is called “fate” (“daiva”) is nothing but the karmic residue of one’s effort. To quote:

*Just as a field sown without seed is barren*
*So without human effort there is no fate.*

...

*The doer himself enjoys the fruit of his or her actions*
*This is seen clearly in the world in regard to activity and inactivity.*

Since there is no limit to what a human being can attain, Godly power has been ascribed to human effort. To quote:

*Heaven, enjoyment, and the desired state are all attained by actions or human effort here in this world.*

The *Yogavasistha*, which assumed the status of a proto-epic, and contains philosophical thoughts of *Vedanta, Yoga, Samkhya, Saiva Siddhanta,* and *Mahayana* Buddhism, lays much emphasis on human effort than on anything else. It is claimed that our actions determine our future, as there is no fate. To quote a few passages from the *Yogavasistha*:

*Whoever wishes to turn back fate by human action*
*has his/her wishes completely fulfilled*
*in this world and the other world (II:7.2).*

*Those who abandon their diligence*
*and take their last resort in fate*
*destroy all righteousness, wealth, and pleasure*
*and are their own enemy (II:7.3).*

*By human exertion Brhaspati became*
*teacher of gods (II:7.7).*

*A person is born in this world,*
*grows up and ages.*
*There is no fate seen here,*
*merely the progression from childhood to old age (II:7.23).*

*By pure creativity, pure results are gained quickly,*
*Impure always follows impure.*
*That which is called fate does not exist.*
According to the *Yogavasistha*, liberation, or freedom, can be achieved in the bodily form and there is no difference between the embodied and the disembodied types of liberation. As regards the nature of a liberated person, it is said:

*Although externally engaged in worldly actions, he or she has no attachment in his or her mind to any object whatsoever... he or she behaves like an ideal citizen and friend of all.*

*He or she is free from the restrictions of caste, creed, stage of life, custom, and scriptures.*

It is also claimed that activities of a liberated person are free from personal desires. This type of person spreads happiness around. To quote:

*Having seen him or her, having heard about him or her, having remembered him or her, all creatures feel delighted* (B.L. Atreya, *Yogavasastha and Its Philosophy*, pp 56-57, quoted in Christopher Chappel, *Karma and Creativity*, pp 76-77).

From the above discussion it follows that Indian philosophers, by and large, have emphasised free will or effort for achieving our desired ends, including metaphysical freedom or liberation. Hence fatalism has no role to play in the context of Indian philosophy.

c) Human beings are guided by the concept of infinity. This happens both in morality and knowledge. There is an inherent craving for the unknown and a search for the knowable. We ask the question whether there are any unknown or unknowable objects. Some systems even claim that whatever exists is knowable. No matter how much I know, I can say ‘I could have known more’. Similarly, no matter how much righteous activities I perform, I can say ‘I could have performed more’. Hence the form of life of a human being exhibits participation in Infinity both at the level of knowledge and morality.

Since we participate in Infinity or there is a craving for infinite knowledge, love or compassion, it is said that we are potentially infinite. Several scriptures have also mentioned that we are Infinite knowledge and bliss. Now the question is, how can a finite being be infinite in certain respects? When it is said that we are potentially infinite or infinite bliss or knowledge, what is meant is that we cannot draw any limit to our knowledge, practice of *dharma*, compassion, or love.
Regarding the origin of the concept of infinity, it may be said that it is derived from our knowledge of arithmetic, as the number series has no end. Moreover, since we know what a finite object or being is, we also know, at least implicitly, its correlate, which is infinite. From our conception of time also, we derive the concept of infinity, as time series has no beginning.

d) Another dimension of our form of life is creativity or suggestive meaning. This is exhibited in our language or understanding of language, art, music, literature, etc. At the level of literature or art, suggestive meaning has been introduced in addition to conventional or metaphorical meaning. It is claimed that those who understand only the literal meaning do not realize the significance of speech. It is said in the Vedas that the person who understands only the literal meaning is the person who sees, but does not see, or hears, but does not hear.

Let us consider the sentence ‘The village is on the Ganges’ (‘gangayam ghosah’). The literal meaning of the word ‘ganga’ is the river Ganges. Hence the literal meaning of the sentence is ‘The village is on the river Ganges’. Since the literal meaning gives rise to inconsistency as the village cannot be on the river, we take resort to metaphorical meaning, and interpret the sentence as ‘The village is on the bank of the river Ganges’.

But the suggestive meaning goes beyond the metaphorical meaning in several directions. There are no rules for suggestive meaning as we have for metaphorical meaning. Moreover, it presupposes creativity on the part of the subject. For this reason one may attribute holiness to the village, another purity, and still another may consider it to be a suitable place for making a journey. Similar is the case with the sentence “The sun has set.” Hence a person may interpret this sentence as ‘now the time is to go back home.’ Another may interpret it as ‘it is time to worship.’ Still another as ‘it is time to meet my beloved,’ and so on. Hence, we cannot put any limit to the suggestive meaning of an expression. The creativity of human beings gives us a clue to our life which is not purely mundane or governed by a fixed set of rules.

e) The realization of certain rasas, that are impersonal in nature, suggests the spiritual nature of human beings. Rasa cannot be identified with our usual emotions, although it presupposes our ordinary emotions for its manifestation or realization.
According to some literary critics, there are ten permanent emotions (sthayibhava) and thirty-three variant emotions (vyabhicaribhava). The permanent or the abiding emotions are: 1) rati (love), 2) hasya (mirth or laughter), 3) soka (grief), 4) krodha (anger), 5) utsaha (inspiration), 6) bhaya (fear), 7) jugupsa (disgust), 8) vismaya (wonder), 9) sama or nirveda (state of tranquility or spirit of renunciation), 10) bhakti (spirit of devotion).

The last two are very important for distinguishing human beings from others. They are latent in human beings, and are manifested under certain conditions, such as association with noble or saintly persons, study of scriptures, spiritual discourse, or association with holy places.

It is to be noted that these permanent emotions are abiding impressions of our mind, and produce rasa, a type of realization. Rasa is a kind of super mundane (lokottara) experience, although it has its origin in certain intense emotions. Hence it cannot be identified with an emotion even if it is caused by it. Rasa is enjoyed by the sympathetic readers of literature or spectators of drama, or performances. The process which leads to the realization of rasa is called ‘sadharani-krti’ (‘universalisation’ or impersonalisation’). By this process a mundane emotion is transformed into a super mundane, blissful experience or rasa. Hence emotions, such as grief, anxiety, dread, etc., are transformed into a universal experience. Thus laukika (mundane) state of mind becomes lokottara (super mundane), the individual self is dissolved into a universal self. Visvanatha, a literary critic, describes the states of the realization of rasas in the following way:

_These states belong to me and do not belong to me; they also belong to others and do not belong to others._
(parasya na parasyeti mameti na mameti ca; tadasvade vibhavadeh paricchedo na vidyate.)

Hence at this level we rise above the difference between I and thou, or between you and me, as we participate in universal state of mind. Some philosophers have recognised the following rasas; srngara (love), vira (courage), hasya (mirth), rudra (fury), karuna (compassion), vibhatsa (disgust), bhayanaka (fearful), ascaya (wonder), santa (tranquility), and bhakti (devotion). It is also claimed that bhaktirasa is intrinsically super mundane, as it is a state of the realization of divinity in us. It is enjoyed by anyone at any stage of one’s life. Hence the realization of rasas, especially bhakti rasa, is another spiritual dimension of human beings.
f) Human beings can realise metaphysical freedom or liberation (*moksa* or *nirvana*) in varying degrees. Systems of Indian philosophy have interpreted the term *moksa* or *nirvana* in different ways. The connotations may be classified as positive or negative. Negatively, it is a state of mind free from sorrows, suffering, craving, selfishness, or defilements.

The word “*nirvana*” consists of the word “*ni*” plus “*vana*” or (“*nir*” plus “*vana*”). The negative particle “*ni*” signifies absence, or cessation, and the word “*vana*” signifies weaving or craving. Hence the word “*nirvana*” means cessation or extinction of all types of craving, including physical, vocal, imaginary, or dispositional. If there is no craving then there is no transgression of ethical conduct. Therefore, the state of *nirvana* does not imply the extinction of the individual or the person, but only the cessation of one’s craving or desires which are due to attachment, aversion, or delusion. It implies the extinction of the life of illusion, passion, and craving.

Positively, *moksa* or *nirvana* is a blissful experience. The Advaita Vedanta characterises it as realisation of truth, knowledge and bliss. Dhammapada, a Buddhist text, has also emphasised its blissful nature. To quote: “Health is the highest gain; contentment is the greatest wealth; trustful are the best kinsmen; *nibbana* (derived from “*nirvana*”) is the highest bliss.” (*The Dhammapada*, translated by Narada Thera, p 57) The life is also characterised by enlightenment as there is wisdom or higher knowledge. Hence, the mind of a liberated person is characterised by peace, bliss, compassionate feeling, or love for all beings or the entire creation. Even if these are ideals, human beings can realise these ideals in varying degrees in this life.

Philosophy Department  
Victoria University of Wellington