

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

How perfectible is human nature as understood in Eastern\* and Western philosophy, psychology, and religion? For me this question goes back to early childhood experiences. I remember one day as a young child of perhaps five or six years being sent to my room by my mother for an afternoon nap. Lying there in silence, my mind was suddenly overwhelmed with questions: “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of it all?” Questions like these imply a goal or purpose that each of us has to achieve. Later, as a young man being brought up in the Christian tradition, I resonated strongly with Paul when he cried out in Romans 7: “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . Wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?” It is these or similar questions that poets, philosophers, psychologists, and the world’s spiritual traditions have sought to answer.

The poet T. S. Eliot in his poem *Burnt Norton* puts the question this way:

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\*I recognize that the use of terms such as “Eastern” and “Hinduism” have become problematized by feminist, subaltern, and other contemporary theoretical perspectives. Yet for an interdisciplinary volume such as this that bridges philosophy, psychology, and religious studies, the terms “Eastern thought” and “Western thought,” along with the names most widely used for the great religious traditions (e.g., “Judaism,” “Christianity,” “Islam,” “Hinduism,” “Buddhism”), seem to me to be the most accessible ones for a wide, nonspecialist, and interdisciplinary audience. As for geographical limitations, although my title “Eastern and Western Thought” suggests a very broad scope that could include areas such as China, Japan, Africa, the Caribbean, and Native America, I have restricted myself under “Eastern” to the great traditions of philosophy, psychology, and religion that are grounded in India—my area of expertise. I leave others to take on the task of examining human nature and its perfectibility in other traditions, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, and the African and Aboriginal traditions.

At the still point of the turning world. Neither  
flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards, at the still point,  
there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not  
call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered.<sup>1</sup>

Reading these lines as a young university undergraduate awakened within me a fondness for speculation about the goal to be achieved as “the still point of the turning world”—the still point from which the pattern of the universe and one’s place in it could be seen. Some years later while studying Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, speculation on the “still point” and one’s place in it was revived in a debate over its nature. For the Hindu, the perfect “still point” to be achieved is consciousness shorn of its changing mental states—the mind calmed until it becomes still like an unrippled mountain lake that perfectly reflects reality. For the Buddhist, however, the “still point” that is left when our self-centered desirous thought ceases is just the steady flow of pure consciousness, like a clear, constantly moving mountain stream in which the world is perfectly reflected. The Hindu-Buddhist debate over the nature of the goal to be achieved is revisited in some of the Western philosophers and theologians in their discussion about the nature of the goal to be reached and the degree to which it can be realized.

In human religious experience the quest for the “still point” of human perfection and its place within the pattern of the universe is seen in the search for full human realization within the world’s philosophies and religious traditions. This book examines the sometimes quite different answers offered. In Western thought, human nature is often understood as finite, flawed, and not perfectible (which in Western religion means that God’s grace is required to reach the goal). By contrast, Eastern thought arising in India frequently sees human nature to be perfectible and presumes that we will be reborn until we realize that goal (and the various yoga psychologies, philosophies, and religions are the paths by which one may perfect oneself and realize release from rebirth). This rather striking difference in the assessment of how perfectible our human natures are forms the comparative focus of this book.

There is a wide range of views about human nature, about what human beings essentially are, and about their proper goal in the universe in which they live. Keith Ward groups these views into two main categories: the first sees all human selves as essentially pure spirits; the

second views humans as embodied souls born from the material world.<sup>2</sup> At one extreme of the pure spirits category is the view that human beings are essentially spiritual and only appear to have individual souls and bodies. Indeed, their bodies are not seen as essential to them, and ultimately their individuality proves to be unreal. An example of this approach to human nature is the Advaita Vedanta school of Hindu thought, which teaches that Brahman, the divine self, is the only ultimate reality and the apparent existence of each of us as separate individuals is superimposed on it. Spiritual practice involves overcoming the illusion of separateness and realizing our true state as one with the divine Brahman defined as *sat-cit-ananda* (pure being, pure consciousness, pure bliss). This realization that we are really nothing but the universal pure spirit of the divine Brahman frees us from the illusion that we are distinct embodied individuals filled with worldly desires. Views like this Advaita Vedanta teaching that we are all ultimately nothing but pure divine spirit are found in some Indian religious traditions as well as “in Plato and in some strands of slightly heterodox Western religious thought which have Neoplatonic roots.”<sup>3</sup> The Yoga school of Indian philosophical psychology offers a different interpretation in which each human is ultimately seen to be only pure spirit, but a pure spirit or self (*purusa*) that is never absorbed into a universal Self. While we may first experience ourselves as being trapped in a real material body filled with egoistic desires (*prakṛti*), spiritual practice involves disciplined meditation to control our bodies and minds until the materialistic and egoistic desires are purged—leaving only the pure spirit of our individual consciousness shining like a star in the star-filled sky.<sup>4</sup> In these Indian Hindu traditions there is agreement that human nature is first experienced by us as being in bondage to ignorance and desire, and that our goal in life is to realize release from this bondage into a state of perfect freedom and bliss. Spiritual practice (which the Indian traditions refer to as *yoga*) involves knowledge and actions, including disciplined meditation, that enable one to realize that goal—although it may take many lifetimes to so perfect oneself.

India is also the source of another group of “pure spirit” views of human nature—the various schools of Buddhism. In the Buddhist approach it is the misperception of ourselves as permanently existing individual egos with selfish desires that keeps us trapped in ignorance and suffering (*dukkha*). However, by rigorous spiritual discipline including ethical practices, along with mental and physical training in meditation, one seeks to eliminate egoism and selfish desire, and cultivate mindfulness, compassion, and equanimity. One’s everyday thought and action becomes less focused on the gratification of personal desires.

The goal is to transcend the sense of self and the attachment it spawns and to realize one's true nature as part of the harmonious, compassionate, and interdependent reality that is the universe (sometimes referred to as the "Buddha Nature"). This is the perfected state of realization that Buddhists call *nirvana*. Because we are so deeply attached to experiencing ourselves as separate individuals with our own desires (built up through repeated lifetimes), it may well take many lifetimes of dedicated Buddhist practice to overcome our attachments to egoistic desires. But, especially in the Mahayana traditions, when these ignorant desires are purged, then we are freed to realize our true selves in a state of pure knowledge and compassionate action dedicated to the welfare of all sentient beings. This is the bodhisattva state of perfection.

What is of fundamental importance for these Indian views of human nature is that the imperfections with which we begin life can be purged through rigorous and disciplined spiritual practice. This may include ritual activity, meditation, and/or devotion to gods or gurus. Such training is seen as continuing until all ignorance and egoistic desires are purged and only pure spirit (which has been one's true nature all along) remains. This may take many lifetimes. Indeed, in Indian thought, one is reborn until one is perfected and one's true state of pure spirit is realized. Such a realization is very different from our usual sense of ourselves as individuals with personal consciousness. It is not so much cancellation of our ordinary experience of human nature as an expansion of our personal consciousness into a better state of "no-self," "pure consciousness," or "pure bliss." Individual human nature, to the extent that it survives, is understood as a manifestation of spiritual being. To realize such states of perfection, human limitations such as egoistic thought and action along with illusory notions of the self have had to be overcome completely. Such is the Hindu and Buddhist idea of the perfectibility of human nature.

Whereas the traditions of India tend to think of human nature as essentially pure spirit, the Semitic traditions of the West view humans as embodied souls born from the material world. Unlike in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, such souls have had no previous lives, but they may have a resurrected existence beyond this life. Such a resurrected life would not be purely spiritual. "It will be either in a reassembled material universe or in a different form of existence in which both individuality and community will be retained. Such views may take a dualistic form, insisting on the distinctness of the spiritual and the material elements of human nature, even though they are intimately related to one another," says Ward.<sup>5</sup> These approaches stress that human beings are essentially embodied parts of the material universe;

however, “they may have other forms of embodiment in other forms of space-time. These views are characteristic of orthodox strands of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. . . .”<sup>6</sup> Although these Semitic views stress the embodied nature of human souls, they also maintain that human beings depend upon God for their existence at every moment of their lives. The religious practices of these traditions help humans to recognize and remember this through prayer, intellectual study of revealed scriptures, and various forms of contemplation. Through such activities the individual induces attitudes of reverence, humility, gratitude, repentance, and compassionate action that characterize authentic human life in these traditions. Ward describes the goal as follows:

For these traditions, human beings are parts of the material order, not separate from it. But what is important about them is that they are enlivened with the Spirit of God, given the possibility of relating in understanding, creativity and love to the Creator and to one another, and the responsibility of nurturing the material order of which they are a part. In this context, the material realm itself is seen, not as an inert, purposeless realm of impersonal laws, but as a dynamic and developing expression of the divine glory, containing already in its primal origin and constitution the potential for self-understanding and creative self-realization in a holistic and conscious community of being. Human beings are one growing point in the development of the material towards fully conscious life, attracted and empowered by the absolute value of the divine Being.<sup>7</sup>

From the above perspective of the Semitic religions, humans are embodied selves—fully and unequivocally material beings but related to the goal to be achieved in somewhat different ways. Christianity emphasizes the flawed aspect of human nature through its doctrines of original sin and the need for atonement. Humans are understood to be created from material dust in order to bring the universe into being a perfect expression of God’s glory. Judaism and Islam reject the Christian ideas of original sin and atonement. But they agree with Christianity “in seeing humans as created from dust in order to bring the material universe to a perfect expression of God’s glory.”<sup>8</sup> Judaism has little interest in the soul after death but seeks to achieve the goal by bringing in a perfected society—the future messianic kingdom. Islam, unlike Judaism, focuses on the experience human beings can look forward to after death: the Last Judgment and the resurrection of the dead. The

goal for Islam is not found in the future of this earth but in its hope for a new creation in the life to come. In the chapters that follow we will examine how each religious tradition understands human nature, the goal to be achieved, and the means of perfecting human nature toward the achievement or realization of that goal. We will also sample how human nature and its perfectibility is dealt with in Indian and Western philosophy and psychology. In part 1 we will begin with Western thought before moving on to Eastern ideas in part 2.