

Bahá'u'lláh's Toolbox

The Philosophical Concepts Used in the Bahá'í Writings

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Part I: Introduction

The Bahá'í Writings use a considerable number of philosophical concepts, terms and arguments to explain the Teachings and to analyze and explain reality in a coherent, concise and systematic way. Familiarity with them is an integral part of understanding many passages in the Writings. As we shall demonstrate below[1], many – but not all – of these concepts, terms and arguments are the key elements in Aristotle's method of analyzing and explaining reality. Everything we encounter in the phenomenal or created world can be understood or comprehended in terms of these concepts, including, as we shall see below, “intellectual realities”[2] and spiritual issues. God in Himself, of course, is the exception, although as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, His existence “hath been clearly established on the basis of logical proofs”[3] which, in the case of the Writings, often originate with Aristotle. A systematic understanding of reality is possible because all created things share certain basic features by which they can be, among other things, analyzed, compared, contrasted and studied for logical consequences. In this study we shall identify and explain these concepts and show how they are used by Bahá'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Writings.

Mini Glossary:

Here is a small glossary, terms we shall cover. While some of these terms have everyday conventional uses, in the Writings they also have specialized usages which broaden and deepen our understanding of what the Writings say. We will find that many (if not all) of the teachings have a metaphysical aspect, i.e. they are supported by the structure of reality as reality is analyzed and explained by the Writings. The following list is arranged by subject matter.

1 – **Essence:** what a thing actually is, or, its definition which distinguishes it from all other kinds of things; its unique identity as a certain kind of being. Each essence has a unique set of potentials and therefore, a unique form; and is also unique substance.* We cannot know the essence of anything directly; we can only know about essences by means of the attributes in the phenomenal world.[4]

2 – **Attribute:** the qualities that an essence or a particular thing has. There are two kinds of attributes. Essential attributes are those that an essence or a particular thing must have to be what it is. Being a mammal is an essential attribute for a dog. Accidental attributes are those that can change without changing what a thing is. Being black and white is an accidental quality of a dog; if its color were different, it would still have the essence of a dog. Sometimes, an attribute is essential from one point of view but not from another. Being brindle colored is an essential attribute for my particular dog, Athena, but it is not an essential attribute i.e. accidental for being a dog in general.

3 – **Form:** another term for essence from the point of view of its structure or composition as seen in real things. Form identifies something as the particular kind of thing it is. Everything we know has form because without it we could not distinguish one thing from another. Even ideas have form, or, as Abdu'l-Bahá calls them, “intelligible form,”[5] i.e. a particular composition by which we can understand them. Form is more than just physical shape.

4 – **Matter:** is that from which something else is made. “Matter is a relative term, to each form there corresponds a special matter.”[6] For example, paper is matter relative to books and books are matter relative to libraries. Matter can be physical but can also be concepts that are formed into an argument or a plot idea formed into a novel. It is sometimes called ‘substance.’ The same idea/matter can often have more than one “intelligible form” just as certain mathematical ideas can be expressed in different formulas. There is no such thing as actual matter without form.

5 – **Hylomorphism:** the belief that all actual beings – except God – are composed of matter and form. The Writings support this view. It is evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's four-fold causality where formal causality is involved in everything that happens to matter. He also refers to hylomorphism directly:

For example, letters and words are composed of two things: The first is the substance which is ink and pencil-lead and is the "Fashioned" while the second is the forms and features of the letters and words which are the "Fashioner".[7]

In “I was a Hidden Treasure” 'Abdu'l-Bahá also writes:

For it is not possible for a thing to have an external existence and not to be formed into a shape because substance and primal matter in order to exist need shape and form; while shape and form in order to appear need substance.[8]

Finally, we also read,

Then it is clear that original matter, which is in the embryonic state, and the mingled and composed elements which were its earliest forms, gradually grew and developed during many ages and cycles, passing from one shape and form to another, until they appeared in this perfection, this system, this organization and this establishment, through the supreme wisdom of God.[9]

“Original matter” is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's term for Aristotle's “primal matter” (see above) i.e. matter without form which is pure potential that has not yet been made actual. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's calls this “the embryonic state,” precisely because it is still pure potential and is impelled by God's action guided by His wisdom through various forms. Hylomorphism is also the metaphysical basis of progressive revelation in which the (subject) matter – “the eternal verities” found in every revelation – appear in various forms over historical time. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different.”[10] The actual manifestations are those in which truth can appear.

6 – Change: the movement from potential to actual or actualization of potentials, or capacities, Change may be as simple as moving from one place to another or the actualization of human potentials. Change always requires something external to make potentials actualize because if potentials could realize themselves they would not be potentials. This is the metaphysical reason for needing Manifestations: as perfectly actualized mirrors of God they are able to activate and actualize the potentials in humankind. All change, including spiritual change, is the movement from potential to actual. If there were no potentials in man or anything else, there would be nothing to actualize.

7 – Substance: has several meanings. It can be plain, simple matter, but its most important meaning refers to anything that is not an attribute of something else, i.e. it is independent, not a part of something else the way an attribute is. As we shall see, in the Writings, even God is said to be a substance. In fact, He is the only absolutely independent ‘thing’ and, therefore, is a substance in the fullest sense of the word.

8 – Four-fold Causality: 'Abdu'l-Bahá accepts Aristotle's analysis of causality[11] according to which everything has four causes:

[T]he existence of everything depends upon four causes -- the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause. For example, this chair has a maker [efficient cause] who is a carpenter, a substance which is wood [material cause], a form [formal cause] which is that of a chair, and a purpose [final cause] which is that it is to be used as a seat.[12]

In nature, all these aspects of causality work together at the same time and not in sequence but when a conscious maker is involved, the final cause, i.e. the purpose and the formal cause i.e. the plan precede the efficient and material cause. Before we actually build a desk, we make the decision to do so, i.e. conceive a purpose; then we think of a form or plan, and after that we gather the materials and get to work.

9 – Phenomenality: refers to all that is created and exist in time. All phenomenal things are preceded by a cause and require causes to continue existing.[13] That is why they are “essentially phenomenal,” i.e. it is part of their essence to require causes. The phenomenal is dependent on external causes which is why it is “contingent.” The human soul is phenomenal though it is eternal once it exists.[14] Phenomenal things can never understand the non-phenomenal, i.e. Preexistent. (See below) The phenomenal world is subject to the laws of nature. The essence of phenomenal things cannot be known directly, but only by their attributes.[15] The phenomenal world is also “the source of imperfections.”[16]

10 – Preexistence or the Preexistent: is God. The pre-existent has no cause and is absolutely independent of all other things. It includes or embraces everything (see discussion below). Its Essence is unknowable and can only be known by Its attributes as far as human powers allow.[17] It can never incarnate itself in a limited and imperfect carnal body because that would mean the Preexistent can be “qualified with phenomenal attributes.”[18] The Preexistent is perfect.

11- Emanation: describes the relationship between God and His creations. Here is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's clear explanation:

Know that proceeding is of two kinds: the proceeding and appearance through emanation, and the proceeding and appearance through manifestation. The proceeding through emanation is like the coming forth of the action from the actor, of the writing from the writer. Now the writing emanates from the writer, and the discourse emanates from the speaker, and in the same way the

human spirit emanates from God. It is not that it manifests God -- that is to say, no part has been detached from the Divine Reality to enter the body of man. No, as the discourse emanates from the speaker, the spirit appears in the body of man.[19]

It is the opposite of “manifestation”[20] (not related to “Manifestation. ’): the proceeding through manifestation is the manifestation of the reality of a thing in other forms, like the coming forth of this tree from the seed of the tree.”[21] Another way to think of emanation is a magnet and its magnetic field.

Of course, we must always remember that the Writings are not philosophic texts but rather as responses to questions, occasions and situations, so these philosophic elements do not all appear in the form of philosophic treatises. Instead, these terms, concepts and arguments appear as they are applied in a particular tablet.

Part II: Why is the Philosophic Form in So Many Passages?

In itself, the presence of philosophy in religious texts is not unique in the progressive revelation of religions. For example, anything more than a superficial understanding of Buddhism requires us to become familiar with at least two other methods of analyzing and understanding reality, i.e. the Theravada and the Mahayana. These form the intellectual framework within which to understand the teachings of the Buddha. The same may be said about Hinduism and the Upanishads. The Quran also contains passages that are philosophical in nature and provide guidance in the analysis and understanding of reality[22] as, to a lesser extent, does the Torah. Even mythologies i.e. narratives embodying religious teachings contain philosophic elements as shown in Paul Radin’s classic *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

The pervasive presence of philosophical passages in the Bahá'í Writings leads to an important question: if we are not meant to understand and apply these concepts, terms and arguments in teaching and defending the Faith, why would Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá include them so prominently in the first place? Why burden so many believers – especially those from non-western intellectual traditions – with the task of learning a particular method of analyzing and understanding reality? What are the supposed benefits?

Besides improving our understanding of the Writings, there are other benefits to be derived from understanding these concepts, terms and arguments. The first is that such understanding enables us to teach the Faith from a rational perspective, i.e. to show while the Writings may superficially appear to be unorganized tablets, letters and treatises responding to particular occasions and requests, they are, in actual fact, based on and informed by a coherent and systematic philosophical method. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason.”[23] Elsewhere he says, “Every subject presented to a thoughtful audience must be supported by rational proofs and logical arguments”[24] and adds, “Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is in harmony with it”. [25] If our teaching and defending the Faith is to succeed, we must be able to meet the needs of those with whom we are dealing and for an increasing number of seekers, one of those needs is for rational, philosophically coherent explanations even in religious matters. Meeting this need is our duty. As Bahá'u'lláh says, “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.”[26]

Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements reflect the Bahá'í teaching that “the foundations of religion are reasonable.”[27] He adds, “If religion were contrary to logical reason then it would cease to be a religion and be merely a tradition.”[28] In other words, reason is a necessary attribute of religion in order to retain its identity as genuine religion. Reason, in effect, is a touchstone helping us to distinguish true religion from superstition or “irreligion”. [29] Elsewhere, he adds that religion is “founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both [religion and science] must bear its [reason's] test”. [30]

The **second** reason for such a strong philosophic component in the Writings is that the understanding gained by studying the philosophical aspects of the Writings is that it gives confidence both to the teacher and the seeker: "[i]n divine questions we must not depend entirely upon the heritage of tradition and former human experience; nay, rather, we must exercise reason, analyze and logically examine the facts presented so that confidence will be inspired and faith attained."[31]

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes this by saying, "[i]f a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation." [32] These, of course, undermine confidence in both teacher and seeker. Confidence is important – as known to anyone who has ever had a teacher who was not fully confident in his or her material. It diminishes further interest and often undermines the credibility of what is being taught. One example of how this works is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's proof of the immortality of the soul. Once this argument has been properly explained, a seeker will know that belief in immortality is not necessarily blind faith or pious hopes. Even if they disagree they will usually understand that such a belief can be based on rational grounds.

A **third** reason for the pervasive inclusion of philosophical material in the Writings is that it demonstrates the underlying connection of the head, i.e. intellect and the heart, i.e. our intuitive and 'feeling knowledge.' As 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, "[t]he world of minds corresponds with the world of hearts." [33] Both must be in harmony for there to be genuine belief.

If religious belief and doctrine are at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God; therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? Is this possible? Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man and the religion of God is in harmony with it. [34]

Elsewhere, he states,

If thou wishest the divine knowledge and recognition, purify thy heart from all beside God, be wholly attracted to the ideal, beloved One; search for and choose Him and apply thyself to rational and authoritative arguments. For arguments are a guide to the path and by this the heart will be turned unto the Sun of Truth. [35]

In other words, reason can turn the heart towards God by, among other things, removing obstacles to belief or showing the implicit logic of some teaching.

A **fourth** benefit of the philosophical formulations in the Writings is such intellectual precision facilitates in inter-religious dialogue with religions that have included great philosophic traditions, such as Roman Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism. These religions explain many of their teachings in basic philosophic terms analytically derived from their sacred texts. A clear exposition of the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings expedites such inter-faith dialogue by clarifying concepts and arguments and, above all, helps identify underlying similarities and agreements.

There is a **fifth** reason for including these passages. As we shall see shortly, almost all of this terminology is Aristotelian – which raises the question, ‘Why did Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá choose to do this?’ What was so special about Aristotle’s analysis and explanations of reality that they would make them part of the Writings? One reason may have been cultural, namely, that Aristotle’s thought played an important role in Iranian and/or Islamic thought and using such concepts would improve communication and credibility at least with the educated classes. Of course, this creates problems with teaching in the West where Aristotle’s thought had been out of fashion for three centuries when 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrived there in 1912.[36] (By 2015 an Aristotelian revival has developed starting in ethics and political theory but expanding into metaphysics.) [37] Consequently, the first question arises again: ‘Why did Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá choose to make such pervasive use of Aristotle?’ In our view, this is neither an accident, nor a coincidence nor a serendipitous development nor a mere tactic of adaptation. After all, the Manifestation and His infallibly appointed interpreter could have chosen other means to promulgate the divine teachings. The most likely answer – from our perspective – is they are encouraging us to use, develop and expand Aristotle’s method of analyzing and understanding reality. At least three possible reasons for doing so immediately suggest themselves. *First*, Aristotle’s metaphysics and ethics form a common bond between Bahá'í, Jewish, Christian and Muslim philosophical thought. In addition to the Bahá'í Faith, three of the world’s great religious traditions find common ground here – and these common elements facilitate dialogue, understanding and co-operation.[38] *Second*, Aristotle’s method of analyzing and explaining reality is based on but not limited to ordinary experience in the natural world. It can, so to speak, be explained in anyone’s backyard and uses the ‘classical logic’ that all living creatures instinctively use[39] despite contemporary academic efforts to reject it. In short, Aristotle’s method is universally applicable. *Third*, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, it explores both the material and the spiritual aspects of existence – unlike almost all modern philosophers since the European Enlightenment.[40] He says,

The philosophers of Greece -- such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others -- were devoted to the investigation of both natural and spiritual phenomena. In their schools of teaching they

discoursed upon the world of nature as well as the supernatural world. Today the philosophy and logic of Aristotle are known throughout the world. Because they were interested in both natural and divine philosophy, furthering the development of the physical world of mankind as well as the intellectual, they rendered praiseworthy service to humanity. This was the reason of the triumph and survival of their teachings and principles. Man should continue both these lines of research and investigation so that all the human virtues, outer and inner, may become possible. The attainment of these virtues, both material and ideal, is conditioned upon intelligent investigation of reality, by which investigation the sublimity of man and his intellectual progress is accomplished.[41]

The importance of this issue for 'Abdu'l-Bahá is strengthened in light of his direct and very sharp criticism and outright rejection of materialist philosophy in modern Europe and America.[42] It is also important to note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá directly and explicitly encourages us to “continue both these lines of research and investigation”, i.e. to follow the examples set by Aristotle, Socrates and Plato in their natural and spiritual studies.

Of equal significance is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the growth of virtue “is conditioned upon intelligent investigation of reality”, i.e. the continued growth of virtue requires the continued growth of understanding reality – which is precisely what philosophy is, at least as defined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: “[p]hilosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man.”[43]

Finally, a *sixth* reason, arises in answer to an incisive question: ‘What advantage has been gained by a philosophical explanation of these teachings?’ A philosophical explanation is a series of connected inferences that lead to a logically necessary conclusion. A conclusion is necessary if denying it leads to self-contradictions and/or other logical and/or factual problems. There are at least three advantages of such explanations. *First*, they show that the Bahá'í teachings have a rational foundation and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason”.[44] Obviously, our teaching efforts have better chances of success if we meet people's needs. This leads to the *second* advantage: teachings that can be explained philosophically are better able to withstand rigorous, intense and even hostile questioning both from seekers and foes of the Faith. Moreover, those who have studied the philosophical aspects of the Writings will likely have developed the intellectual skills to disarm unsympathetic arguments by identifying and counteracting weaknesses in these critiques and/or attacks. *Finally*, the pervasiveness of philosophical explanations in the Writings are an anti-dote to seeing the Faith as driven simply by ‘faith,’ i.e. uncritical and unreflective belief. In short, it discourages fideism, i.e. the view that faith and reason are incompatible and that faith alone is superior. This is logically incompatible with the injunction to investigate the truth for ourselves.

However, this is not to deny the value of faith but to build faith on reason and conscious knowledge: it is a call to let reason play a role in our faith. This harmonizes with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's identification of "conscious knowledge" being the first part of faith: "by faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds".[45]

Part III: Important Historical Background

A brief historical note is necessary at this point to identify more clearly the philosophical concepts used so consistently and pervasively throughout the Writings. This knowledge will help us explain the concepts and arguments we encounter because we will know more about their context. Only a basic knowledge of philosophy is necessary to recognize the metaphysical concepts. Terms and arguments used in the Writings first appeared in the work of Aristotle who lived in Greece from 384 B.C. to 322 B.C.[46] These concepts, terms and arguments form the basis of Aristotle's method of analyzing and explaining reality and are used in the same way in the Writings. In our opinion, this means that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave their 'seal of approval' or imprimatur on these features of Aristotle's philosophy, thereby, encouraging us to use them as well in our own investigations of truth. Why else would they include them so consistently and pervasively. Of course, we hasten to add that using these concepts, terms and arguments does not mean that the Writings include or agree with everything Aristotle says. The only aspects of Aristotle that have any interest for us are those found in the Writings.

Indeed, explicit references to Aristotle are more numerous in the Writings than one might initially suspect. For example, at the end of one talk we find the note: "The talk developed into a learned dissertation on the Philosophy of Aristotle".[47] The words "learned dissertation" suggest 'Abdu'l-Bahá's in-depth knowledge of the subject. He also says, "As to deistic philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, they are indeed worthy of esteem and of the highest praise, for they have rendered distinguished services to mankind".[48] Elsewhere he states,

These and other references to Aristotle constitute an explicit intellectual connection to the Writings. However, there is also an historical connection between Aristotle and Muslim, and specifically Persian intellectual culture.

In 529 CE, the Roman emperor Justinian I closed the universities of Athens because of their paganism and sent many of their leading academics into exile. The Sassanid king of Persia, Khosrau I, offered them a safe haven and they arrived at his capital Ctesiphon with large collections of ancient philosophy, above all Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus related commentaries. Furthermore, a theologian known as Paul the Persian also attended Khosrau's court where he wrote several commentaries on Aristotle's work. We should also mention the key Bahá'í concept of 'emanation' originated with Plotinus (204 – 270 CE)[49] who tried to reconcile Plato and Aristotle. His work also arrived in Persia with the Athenian philosophers fleeing the Christian emperor Justinian I.

The subsequent history of Islamic and Persian philosophy shows the enormous influence of Aristotle starting with the work of Al-Kindi (801 – 873 CE). He was an early transmitter of Aristotelian philosophy into the Muslim world in what is now Iraq. In particular, he supported Aristotle's theory of reason.[50] Another major conduit for Aristotle into Islam was Al-Farabi (870 – 950 CE),[51] born in eastern Iran and known as "the second master" after Aristotle whose works he was instrumental in preserving. Later, Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198) from Spain, known as "the Commentator" on Aristotle. He deepened Aristotelian influence in Muslim philosophy. Three other specifically Persian philosophers – Ibn Sina (Avicenna)[52], Suhrawardi[53] and Mulla Sadra[54] - showed Aristotle's influence insofar as they defined their own views in light of his teachings.[55] In other words, Aristotle's ideas were part of the Islamic and Persian intellectual heritage familiar to Bahá'u'lláh and the educated people of His time. In the West that would not have been the case – but we cannot explore that issue here.

It might be argued that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to these concepts, terms and arguments in a form filtered and shaped by Persian philosophers and culture, and, therefore, are not truly Aristotelian. However, such is demonstrably not the case as shown in my "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings"[56] which establishes that the concepts and terminology used are strictly and purely Aristotelian, i.e. used in an Aristotelian manner. There is no sign of foreign i.e. non-Aristotelian elements being added and, thereby, diverting them from their original usage in Aristotle. Of course, from a theological point of view, Bahá'u'lláh does not need to learn the Aristotelian analysis of reality from human sources, but, rather, knows it by virtue of His divine intuition. The Manifestations' "knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired." [57]

Part IV: Applications

Case # 1:

Let us begin our exploratory journey by examining one of the most puzzling issues in the Writings, i.e. the teaching that God, the Manifestations and human beings surround or enclose what they perceive. This issue, which is fundamental to Bahá'í teachings in ontology and epistemology, concerns the issue of God, the Manifestations and mankind 'surrounding' the objects of perception, and, in the case of God, 'surrounding' all things. Take, for example, the following statement:

Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired - that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.[58]

We observe how 'surrounding' the "essence[s] and qualities" of things is associated with "understand[ing] all things." The Manifestations "contain all existing realities" i.e. essences[59] and "transcend" them which means to include them within Themselves but also to surpass them by means of rational understanding. The same applies to mankind. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "These ideal virtues or powers in man surpass or surround nature, comprehend natural laws and phenomena".[60] In short, man's intellectual powers "transcend", i.e. "surround" and "surpass" nature. Elsewhere he says,

But the spirit and mind of man travel to all countries and regions -- even through the limitless space of the heavens -- surround all that exists, and make discoveries in the exalted spheres and infinite distances.[61]

And finally, in *Some Answered Questions* he writes,

This spirit, [the human spirit] which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.[62]

Here, too, surrounding and understanding or learning are intimately connected. It should be noted that the “realities” of things are their essences or forms.[63]

The knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence -- that is to say, either by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart.[64]

The “conception” in the intellect of something, e.g. a circle, is the same as the form, as the latter part of this statement indicates. Here, too, knowledge and form are connected. Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror,”[65] i.e. the “images” are the forms in the mind which surrounds them. This process even applies to spiritual issues. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

In the mirror of their minds the forms of transcendent realities are reflected, and the lamp of their inner vision derives its light from the sun of universal knowledge.[66]

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the rational mind must work with the forms of things. He says that “A thing cannot be grasped by the intelligence except when it is clothed in an intelligible form; otherwise, it is but an effort of the imagination.”[67] The impression made in the wax is the “intelligible form” required by the human mind.

These are, truly, puzzling passages. How can man “surround nature” or “all beings” with his “ideal . . . powers”? Indeed, how can a human being or a Manifestation surround “all that exists” physically? Perhaps God can do so – see below – but surely anything less than God, i.e. and ontologically omnipotent God, cannot. In our view, the philosophy of Aristotle, so often referred to in the Writings, offer one possible explanation at least in regard to humans and Manifestations though not in regards to God.

The key to understanding these passages lies in Aristotle’s theory of perception. In its most basic terms, Aristotle’s theory of perception states that when we perceive something, we take in

its form but not its matter. His example is the impression left by a signet ring in a piece of wax: the form of the ring is impressed on the wax but the material is not. Moreover, the form is what gives the signet ring its essential identifying features, its essential attributes or essence while the gold is only the means by which those features are revealed. It is an accidental, not essential feature or attribute because the same form could have been made from silver or iron without changing any of its identifying or essential attributes. In the case of the signet ring, the form is, of course, a sensible form, but such need not be the case. “[M]ore often, perhaps, [the form] is thought of as something which is an object of thought, rather than sense, as the inner nature of a thing which expressed in . . . the plan of its structure.”[68] Examples of this non-sensible form are the formula for the circumference of a circle and the definition of a circle. These apply to all circles and are knowledge of the essence of the circle. The form of a sensible or non-sensible thing is its essence.

In Aristotle’s words,

By a 'sense' is meant what has the power of receiving into itself the sensible forms of things without the matter. This must be conceived of as taking place in the way in which a piece of wax takes on the impress of a signet-ring without the iron or gold; we say that what produces the impression is a signet of bronze or gold, but its particular metallic constitution makes no difference:[69]

With Aristotle’s explanation in mind, we have a rational epistemological explanation for the ability of the Manifestations and humans to surround the objects of perception and thought. They are not materially taken inside us – rather, we take in their forms and make that the subjects of our understanding. We first comprehend in the sense of taking in the form and then we comprehend in the second sense of understanding.

The Writings also make indirect or implied use of the idea of perceiving forms in their use of mirror imagery. Usually – but not always – this imagery consists of the sun and a mirror, either the sun as God and the Manifestation as the perfect mirror, or, man as the mirror and the Manifestation as the sun. However, what we see in the Manifestation is not the actual, substantial sun but an image, a form of the sun.

But the sun doth not descend from the height of its sanctity to enter into the mirror, but when the latter is purified and turned towards the Sun of Truth, the perfections of this Sun, consisting of

light and heat, are reflected and manifested in that mirror. These souls are the Divine Manifestations of God.[70]

The sun, i.e. God, is not literally present in the mirror, i.e. the Manifestation.[71] This helps us to understand Bahá'u'lláh's statement that,

Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being [the Manifestation] He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself.[72]

We shall discuss this in greater depth further below, but for now it suffices to note that the Manifestation is “born of the substance of God,” i.e. is a formal image derived directly – “born of” – from the real substantial sun just as the mirror image of something is ‘born’ of the real thing itself.

The relation of the actual thing and the formal image can be used to explain the paradoxical twofold nature of the Manifestations Who are described as perfect mirrors.

Yet the Holy Manifestations of God are even as a looking-glass, burnished and without stain, which gathereth streams of light out of that Sun . . . In that polished surface, the Sun with all Its majesty standeth clearly revealed. Thus, should the mirrored Sun proclaim, 'I am the Sun!' this is but truth; and should It cry, 'I am not the Sun!' this is the truth as well.[73]

Substantially, in actual fact, the Manifestation is not God but rather He is God formally, the perfect reflection of the sun in the perfect mirror. Of course, this does not negate the fact that for humankind the Manifestation ‘is’ God insofar as the Manifestation is as much of God as we can know and is God’s spokesman.

There is, however, potentially one limit to our conclusions about God in regards to ‘surrounding’ nature because God and His powers are unknowable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

[T]he Divine Essence surrounds all things. Verily, that which surrounds is greater than the surrounded, and the surrounded cannot contain that by which it is surrounded, nor comprehend its reality.”[74]

Here we see the word ‘comprehend’ used in both its senses of surrounding and including as well as understanding. Precisely because God comprehends all things He is omniscient – and we have seen why in the previous passages. This raises the question, ‘Does God physically “surround all things” ’? ‘Is such a thing even conceivable – or must it be accepted on faith alone?’ In our view, God not only does “surround all things” literally but also transcends them, a philosophical position known as panentheism. God is the universe and more. Nor is this concept inconceivable to the rational mind. There is, in fact, a geometrical illustration of this situation. In his classic novel Flatland, [75] Edwin Abbott describes a world of only two dimensions, i.e. like a flat sheet of paper on which the only directions are left and right and forward and backwards. There are circles but no spheres, triangles but no pyramids, squares but no boxes because spheres, pyramids and boxes would rise above the two dimensions into the third dimension. In the two-dimensional Flatland, there is no ‘up’ or vertical dimension that reaches into the three-dimensional world. This leaves us and the residents of Flatland in a strange situation. Although the residents of Flatland cannot look up into our three-dimensional world and see us spying on them, we can look down into their world because the three-dimensional world surrounds or encloses or comprehends the two-dimensional world both physically and formally. Strangely, we can even perform miracles in Flatland: we can lift a prisoner – Mr. Dot – out of his jail cell which is a square into the third dimension and then put him down somewhere else. To Flatlanders, Mr. Dot will just vanish and then re-appear. Similarly, beings in a four-dimensional space would physically and formally include everything in a three-dimensional space without us being aware of their presence. While this analogy does not prove anything about the nature of God, it does prove that the concept of God physically and formally surrounding creation is a rational possibility i.e. is without inherent self-contradiction. In short, it is logically tenable.

Finally, we must not forget the ontological component here as summed up in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement,

When thou dost carefully consider this matter, thou wilt see that a lower plane can never comprehend a higher. The mineral kingdom, for example, which is lower, is precluded from comprehending the vegetable kingdom . . . The higher plane, however, understandeth the lower . . . no lower degree can ever comprehend a higher.[76]

In this passage, 'comprehend' is also used in both its senses, i.e. to include and to understand. Perception is determined by one's position in the scale or chain of nature which goes from the mineral to plants, animals, humans and then to Manifestations. The following statement illustrates this point:

It is evident that the human understanding is a quality of the existence of man, and that man is a sign of God: how can the quality of the sign surround the creator of the sign? -- that is to say, how can the understanding, which is a quality of the existence of man, comprehend God? Therefore, the Reality of the Divinity is hidden from all comprehension, and concealed from the minds of all men. It is absolutely impossible to ascend to that plane. We see that everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher[77]

Humanity's ontological position on the scale or chain of nature is "a quality of the existence of man" and this, in turn, determines what humans can or cannot know. The Writings, in other words, see epistemology determined by position in the hierarchy of being.

Case # 2:

In answer to a question about the immortality of the soul, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident -- that is to say, the body -- be destroyed, the substance the spirit, remains.[78]

This also reminds us of Bahá'u'lláh's statement about the Manifestations:

Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being He hath assigned a twofold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself.[79]

Surely 'substance' cannot mean 'material' substance for that would reduce God and the soul to material entities. This cannot be the case for two reasons. First, according to Aristotle, there are two kinds of substances – material, sensible substances like bricks and jellyfish that can perish and decompose because they are made of parts, and nonsensible substances like God, or the rational soul which are not made of parts and, therefore, cannot decompose and perish. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

The soul is not a combination of elements, it is not composed of many atoms, it is of one indivisible substance and therefore eternal. It is entirely out of the order of the physical creation; it is immortal![80]

Therefore the soul and God are what Aristotle calls a “non-sensible substance”[81] and cannot decompose and, therefore, are not perishable.

Secondly, for Aristotle, the word 'substance' has several meanings not all of which concern us here. The primary meaning of the word 'substance' in Aristotle is “in the truest and primary and

most definite sense of the words, is that which neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject.”[82] In other words, a substance exists independently i.e. is an individual thing i.e. not as an attribute or quality of something else. Obviously, the phrases like “the substance of God Himself” and “the soul is the substance” refer to ‘substance’ in its primary meaning, i.e. that which is independent and does not exist as an attribute of something else. This is exactly what God is the fullest sense of the word, and the soul as well although it depends on God.

Another meaning of ‘substance’ is that which is “the cause of their being as the soul is of the being of an animal.”[83] This is the sense in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument for immortality uses the word: the soul is the substance which is the cause or origin of the body, which is an attribute. Finally, a ‘substance’ can also be the essence or form of something[84] – which is the way 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument also uses it. The substance or essence of man is the “rational soul” and the body is its attribute in the material world. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes further – he suggests that ultimately the body is superfluous by calling it an “accidental” attribute, a viewpoint that makes sense insofar as we only spend a small part of our lifetimes in the material world.

The larger context of these uses of ‘substance’ is Aristotle's theory of substance and attribute. According to Aristotle, every substance has certain qualities or attributes and is identified or known by them. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “[t]he essence of a thing is known through its qualities”. [85] Some of these attributes are essential, i.e. necessary for the substance to be what it is, e.g. a dog must have the essential attribute of being a mammal. Even God has “essential names and attributes”[86] as 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us. However, the dog's color is accidental, i.e. it would be another color without changing the dog's mammalian nature. God does not have accidental attributes since all His attributes are “identical with His Essence”[87] since otherwise the unity of God would be undermined.

It is clear that the word ‘substance’ does not mean material or sensible substance but rather substance as an independent individual thing that does not exist as part of – and, therefore, is not dependent on something else. This is in clear opposition to the claim that the soul or rational soul or mind is a product or accident developed from the material body i.e. that the soul and its power, the mind’ are dependent on the brain. In other words, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the

rational soul and mind are not emergent properties of matter regardless of how highly organized it is. In short, he rejects that brain and mind are identical – a hot issue today in neurological research and instead sees the soul as the substance, i.e. the independent entity on which the body depends. In short, the body is an attribute – an accidental which the soul can exist without. (It is not an essential attribute like the mind[88] which is necessary for the soul.)

Case # 3:

Next we shall examine what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about the nature of God:

It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension. If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist; and as Preexistence is necessary, therefore, the sequence of preexistences would become infinite. This is an evident error.[89]

This is a rigorous logical explanation of the unity of God, i.e. the identity of His attributes with His Essence. The explanation is based on Aristotle's previously discussed distinction between essential and accidental attributes or qualities that are possessed by every essence, including God's. Of course, "[t]he Divine Essence as it is in itself is however beyond all description".[90] But nonetheless 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, this does not preclude a humanly comprehensible explanation of God's unity. He says, "[t]he Unity of God is logical, and this idea is not antagonistic to the conclusions arrived at by scientific study".[91] In other words, the real unity of God is beyond human comprehension but this is a logical explanation that falls within our powers. Let us examine it.

Essential attributes are those that something must have to be what it is, e.g. an engine to be a car or, a wing to be a bird or a "rational soul" to be human. None of these attributes by itself is the car or bird or the human, but the human, car and bird cannot be what they are without these attributes. An accidental attribute is one that is not necessary for a thing to be what it is, e.g. the

brand name of the engine of a car, the exact number of feathers in a wing, or the hair color of a human. However, with God, this unity of attribute and essence reaches a higher level: each of the “names and attributes” are “identical with His Essence” so that each implicitly contains all. Otherwise, there would be disunity in God’s Essence because there would be differences between them and those differences prevent unity.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to clarify the term “pre-existences” as used in this passage. The word ‘existence’ refers to those things of the phenomenal world created by God. The essential attributes are “pre-existences” because as essential attributes of God, i.e. they exist as part of God and, therefore, before the phenomenal world. But if they are not one with God’s Essence, these essential attributes exist separately from God as well as before the phenomenal world. Thus they are called “preexistences.” The problem pointed out by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is that if the essential attributes or preexistences are distinct from God, the ontological distance between the essential attributes and God is infinite. However, an infinite distance requires an infinite number of pre-existences to connect the pre-existences with God. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, “traversing the infinite” distance is impossible, or, in his words, an “evident error.”

It is an “evident error” because the Bahá’í Writings affirm Aristotle’s view that an infinite regress of steps or causal actions is, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá’s word, “absurd”.[92] In presenting Aristotle’s First Mover argument for the existence of God, he says,

The same can be said of other beings whether they affect other things or be affected. Such process of causation goes on, and to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly absurd. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him who is the Ever-Living, the All-Powerful, who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause.[93]

We hasten to add that while the First Mover or “Prime Mover”[94] argument originated with Aristotle, it is 'Abdu'l-Bahá’s use of it that guarantees its truth and gives it authority for Bahá’ís. There are at least three reasons why “traversing the infinite” or infinite regress is “absurd”. First, if we could actually – not theoretically or mentally – traverse the infinite we

could never have arrived at 'today' because there would be infinitely many days before 'today' arrived. Second, the concept of an actual, real infinite chain – not a theoretical construct – is logically self-contradictory. No matter how many links we can add to a supposedly infinite chain, we can always add one more. But if we always add one more, then the previous link was not at infinity and therefore, the links in the chain are countable at least in principle. But if they are countable, they are not infinite because being countable means the number is finite. Yet if we add another link, we still have not reached infinity because we can add another link. As a theoretical or imaginative construct 'infinity' might make sense but not in actual reality. Third, from this we see that the infinite is never attained, or, as Aristotle put it, in the real world, the infinite is never actually finished and, therefore, is always only 'potential': "the infinite has a potential existence"[95] because the infinite is "what always has something outside of it".[96]

'Abdu'l-Bahá also uses the impossibility of an infinite regress[97] because everything that is caused is caused by an external cause of motion and this chain of causation must have a first cause (or First Cause) that is itself uncaused. If the First Cause needed a cause – as the question, 'Who made God?' implies – then the infinite regress would start again, and we know this cannot actually happen. Without an uncaused external cause there would be no motion in nature – which is absurd because it contradicts common observation..

Aristotle explained this argument by referring to two very important concepts in the Writings: 'actuality' and 'potentiality'. He stated that motion was a potential change in things and that every potential has to be actualized by something that is already actualized – and since this cannot go on infinitely, there must be a 'first actualiser', i.e. the "Prime Mover."

However, the Writings speak of "the infinite worlds of God"[98] or "this infinite creation"[99] and, thereby, seem to contradict the denial of an actual infinity of things. If a real infinite results in irresolvable paradoxes, how can there be an infinite number of worlds and how can creation be infinite? And if there can be a real infinite, why is an infinite regress of causes "absurd" as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says? Once again, if we look to the Aristotelian sense of infinity, the apparent contradiction can be resolved. As noted before, for Aristotle infinity is potentiality: "the infinite has a potential existence".[100] In other words, the infinite is "what always has something

outside of it”,[101] i.e. the ‘one more’ that can be added (or diminished) as noted previously. The infinite is (obviously) never finished, i.e. is always potential. This fits exactly with the Bahá’í teaching that God creates endlessly, i.e. brings new creations into being, i.e. always adding more to what already exists. This means that infinity here is not a magnitude nor an expanse of space but rather an attribute or quality of being unfinished. Thus phrases like “the infinite worlds of God” and “this infinite creation” refer to this on-going process of creation, i.e. actualizing potentials.

Once we realize that infinity is not a quantity of some kind but rather a potential for continued further creation, it is clear that the statement in the Writings do not fall prey to the problems of traversing the infinite and infinite regresses. Moreover, it should also be pointed out that even though the process of creation is never ending, this does not lead to an infinite regress for parts of creation like the earth which came into existence at a specific time. Consequently, each world comes into existence at a particular moment in time, and there is a limit to which the steps can be traced back.

Case # 4: Actuality and Potential

Two of Aristotle’s most foundational concepts are ‘actuality’ and ‘potential’ which are widely used throughout the Writings. Potentiality refers to the possibilities for transformation inherent in things. The word ‘potential’ does not refer to a mysterious hidden little ‘thingy’, but rather to the capacity for transformation that something has without destroying what a thing or substance actually is. Only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying its identity or essence – and everything is clearly defined by the capacities it has. Hence the folk saying that a sow’s ear cannot be turned into a silk purse. There is no potential for that transformation in a sow’s ear – nor vice versa. For example, a sheet of paper can be transformed into a crane, a paper boat, a sun visor, or, if you know how, into hard bullet-like projectiles. Possible uses are potentials too. A car can never be transformed into an 800 pound gorilla but it makes a good – maybe too good – paperweight. What all potentials have in common is that to actualize them, to make them manifest, requires an external cause, an actuality that causes them to transform themselves into a variation of their old identities.

This is the rational and metaphysical explanation why Manifestations are necessary to actualize the potentials hidden in humankind. The potentials exist in humanity but without the Manifestation, the fully actualized inspiration and guide Who passes the divine energy into the human realm, humanity's potentials would remain latent, i.e. un-actualized and, in effect, non-existent.

Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self [essence] hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal.[102]

The Manifestation in His divine aspect is a fully actualized being – that is one consequence of the perfection of His divine nature.

Understanding the nature of potentials also resolves an apparent contradiction in the Writings between Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"[103] and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.[104] As the context makes clear, Baha'u'lláh's statements refer to our relative non-existence in comparison with God. In other words, in relation to God's actuality, the potential existence of humanity is, in effect, non-existence since potentials cannot actualize themselves and act. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "[f]or absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity [potential] of existence". [105] No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa.[106] The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"[107], "possible"[108] and "can be turned"[109], clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

Finally, the concepts of potentials and actuality also allow a clear solution to the apparent

contradiction between the Writings and the evolution of mankind.

The distinction between actuality and potential may also solve questions vis-à-vis the Bahá'í view of evolution. For Aristotle and the Writings, while “species and genera are eternal”[110]; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world but, at least in the case of humankind, they do not change into different species. "But even when in the womb of the mother and in this strange form, entirely different from his present form and figure, he is the embryo of the superior species, and not of the animal; his species and essence undergo no change."[111]

Can this view be reconciled with modern evolutionary teaching? In our view, it can. All things, be they species or planets, develop according to their potentials, and, for various reasons, all have different outer forms at different stages of existence. Even though outwardly they may lack certain potentials, inwardly, or essentially they may well have them. We cannot judge strictly by the outer, apparent form at one moment because potentials manifest over a period of time. For example, a tadpole looks and acts nothing like a mature frog. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of bodily resemblance to other animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unsupportable. This is shown by convergent evolution: "Convergent evolution is the process by which unrelated or distantly related organisms evolve similar body forms, coloration, organs, and adaptations. Natural selection can result in evolutionary convergence under several different circumstances."[112]

In other words, similarity of body form is not necessarily decisive in establishing relatedness. It is important to remember that 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not deny that humankind once appeared in more primitive forms than today; he simply denies the conclusion – supported by convergent evolution – that because of their primitive appearance, our ancestors were animals. He does not deny the data, but rather the conclusion drawn from it. And he does so for good reason: no matter how dissimilar or similar they appear to other species, humans have potentials lacking in animals.

To see what this means, let us perform the following thought experiment. Imagine a population of the alleged common ancestor of apes and humans being subjected to random mutations. We soon realize that even random mutations can only achieve certain results in an organism that has the potential to be affected by the mutation in a certain way. A random mutation in a carrot will not produce a hummingbird. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for eventually actualizing human capacities and some did not – and that difference must have always been there. Even if we say that a mutation caused this potential – we have to remember that this effect of the mutation only appeared in those that already had the capacity to

be affected in a certain way. Not everyone was affected in this way.

At this point it becomes clear that the difference between those that have the potential or capacity for a change that will allow them to manifest certain human abilities and those that lack this potential, is an essential difference, a difference in kind, not a difference of degree. In other words, even then at the stage of unmanifested potentials, there was already a difference between the two populations despite similarity or even identity of outward appearance. In short, the notion that humans were once essentially animals is not only not supported by data drawn exclusively from surviving bones, but also is not supported by logical reasoning about potentials.

Case # 5: The Four Causes

For modern readers used to the language of science, the following quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá can be a serious puzzle – especially because it seems to conflict with established modern scientific belief which has dismissed formal and final causes. "[F]or the existence of everything depends upon four causes -- the efficient cause, the matter [material cause], the form [formal cause] and the final cause. For example, this chair has a maker who is a carpenter, a substance which is wood, a form which is that of a chair, and a purpose which is that it is to be used as a seat. Therefore, this chair is essentially phenomenal, for it is preceded by a cause, and its existence depends upon causes. This is called the essential and really phenomenal.[113]

In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* we read, '*cause*' means,

(1) that from which, as immanent material, a thing comes into being, e.g., the bronze is the cause of the statue and the silver of the saucer, and so are the classes which include these.

(2) the form or pattern, i.e. the definition of the essence . . .

(3) that from which the change . . . first begins; [the efficient cause] e.g. . . . in general the maker . . .

(4) the end, i.e. that for the sake of which a thing is.[114]

What exactly does this explanation of causality mean and what are its implications? First, we must note that these are not four separate steps in a process – rather they are all simultaneous and all implicate each other. These are four aspects of reality that we can identify mentally but they are not actually separable, like the two sides of a coin – distinguishable but not separable.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation is important because it has far-reaching implications about the nature of creation, the harmony of science and religion, and evolutionary understanding. His explanation of causality commits the Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities[115] exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. According to the Writings, the human potential to know God and to love Him is “the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creatio”.[116] In short, creation has a purpose or final cause. This is true for all particular created things. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees”.[117] Their – and our – individual purpose is to actualize our latent potentials to be ‘the best we can be.’

At this point, it is important to clear up a common misunderstanding about the final cause. As Aristotle pointed out, final causes even work in nature because there is no need for a conscious final cause. No conscious craftsman is needed in the operations of nature. In fact, final causes in nature are easy to illustrate. Nobody sows iron filings in hopes of harvesting sunflowers – and the reason is simple: the processes going on in iron filings are limited to producing rusty iron filings, i.e. the processes are limited and can only develop to a certain end point. No conscious craftsman is required to secure this final goal because the final goal is already inherent in the

matter of the iron filings, in the formal atomic structure of each iron atom, in the process (efficient cause) of interaction between iron atoms and water molecules which led to the particular actualization of potentials, i.e. final cause. As will be shown below, the physical final causality seen here, is only the simplest physical manifestation of final causality at a higher level.

Two comments are in order. First, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the teaching that the universe has a purpose brings the Writings into conflict with modern science which simply does not recognize formal and final causality in any form. This is a major challenge for the Bahá'í teaching of the harmony or unity of science and religion. Second, although the foregoing explanation about the iron filings shows how formal and final causation are actually involved in all physical processes, modern science finds it impossible to accommodate these concepts. The reason is simple: formal and final causality could possibly open the door to invoking supernatural causes in nature.

Paradoxically, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's four-fold causality is also important because it offers an opportunity to harmonize science and religion: science deals with the material and efficient causes and religion and its 'handmaid,' i.e. philosophy, deal with the formal and final causes. Together they provide a complete understanding of natural phenomena. Science, of course, is concerned with those aspects of physical nature that are (1) quantifiable; (2) physical/material; (3) predictable; (4) testable and repeatable; (5) falsifiable; (6) physically observable. Moreover, science is only interested in understanding in strictly material or physical terms; for its purposes – physical understanding – material and efficient understanding is sufficient. However, such is not the case if we want complete explanations. The problem is simple: nature cannot explain itself. It cannot explain the laws of nature in strictly physical terms since any attempt to do so leads to an infinite regress. If the interactions of atoms created the laws, where and how did atoms get the capacity to do so? If other forces or particles gave these attributes, where and how did they get the capacity to do so . . . ad infinitum? Nor can a purely physical science explain how atoms and subatomic particles gained the attributes that allow them to influence other particles or be influenced by them – without succumbing to infinite regress. At one point or another, a formal and final cause are necessary to stop the infinite regress and to provide a complete – or more complete – explanation of natural phenomena because then we can begin to understand why nature has some of the general attributes it has, e.g. a progress from less organized forms of being to more highly organized forms. In short, formal and final causes are necessary to develop a coherent world-view – which is exactly what religions provide us.

Part V: Conclusion

Although this paper is not an exposition of every philosophically difficult passage in the Baha'i Writings, it will have fulfilled its purpose if it has encouraged readers to look at other such passages in the Writings – or perhaps re-examine those mentioned here – and begin their own independent investigation of truth. The reward will be uncovering new layers of meaning in the Writings and gaining a fuller understanding of the deep philosophical ideas that hold them together into a coherent and rational world view.

To Be Continued . . .

Footnotes

[1] For a detailed study of this, see Ian Kluge's "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings," in *Lights of Irfan*, 4 (2003).

[2] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 186.

[3] Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 46; p. 47 – 48.

[4] *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.

[5] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 115.

[6] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk II 2, 194b

[7] Abdu'l-Baha, "I was a Hidden Treasure", (provisional translation by Moojan Momen) in *Ocean*.

[8] Abdu'l-Baha, "I was a Hidden Treasure", (provisional translation by Moojan Momen) in *Ocean*.

[9] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 182; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 29.

[10] Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p 128.

- [11] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye Bk. II, 7, 198 a, b.; *Metaphysics*, trans. By W.D. Ross, Bk. V, 1, 1013 a, b.
- [12] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- [13] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p.
- [14] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 151.
- [15] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 421.
- [16] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 293.
- [17] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- [18] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- [19] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- [20] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 294.
- [21] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- [22] See for example, S H Nasr "Islamic Metaphysics," http://www.livingislam.org/m/mxin_e.html ;
- [23] 'Abdu'l-Bahá , *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.
- [24] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 253.
- [25] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231.
- [26] Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, CVI, p. 213.
- [27] 'Abdu'l-Bahá *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 128.
- [28] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 143.
- [29] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 180.
- [30] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.
- [31] Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 326.
- [32] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

- [33] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 270; emphasis added.
- [34] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231.
- [35] ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, Vol. 1, p. 168.
- [36] This was true even in the Catholic Church in which revival of Aristotle via Thomas Aquinas had started only a short time earlier by Pope Leo XIII, in 1879.
- [37] See Tuomas Tahko, “Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics” for example.
- [38] We need only think of the rabbi Maimonides, the monks Aquinas and Scotus and the Muslim philosopher-healer Avicenna.
- [39] See Ian Kluge, “Reason and the Baha’i Writings,” in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. ; Briefly, all beings naturally recognize the law of non-contradiction. Even a baby knows it has either been fed or not fed – but not both at the same time. A man crossing a busy street checks to see if there is traffic close by or not – but not both at the same time. This is the basis of ‘classical’ logic.
- [40] Exceptions are Hegel, Schopenhauer, Whitehead, Marcel and Maritain. None of them have widespread followers in academia. Positivism, language philosophy and postmodernism and their off-shoots dominate philosophy since the 1920’s.
- [41] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 326.
- [42] See, for example, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 20; 240; Tablet to August Forel, p. 7;
- [43] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- [44] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.
- [45] Abdu’l-Baha, *Tablets of Abdu’l-Baha*, Vol. 3, p. 549.
- [46] For detailed studies of the Aristotelian presence in the Baha’i Writings, see Ian Kluge, The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha’i Writings, in *Lights of Irfan*, IV, 2003, p. 17 – 78. See also Baha’i Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance, in *Lights of Irfan*, VI, 2005, p.121 – 160; and Baha’i Ontology, Part Two: Further Explorations, in *Lights of Irfan* VII, 2006, p. 163 – 200.
- [47] Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 95.
- [48] Abdu'l-Baha, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 7.
- [49] Ian Kluge, Neoplatonism and the Bahá’í Writings, Part 1, in *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 11

- [67] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 114.
- [68] W.D. Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 76.
- [69] Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. by J.A. Smith, Bk II, 424a.
- [70] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 61.
- [71] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- [72] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 66; emphasis added.
- [73] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 50.
- [74] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146.
- [75] See Edwin Abbott Abbott, *Flatland*.
- [76] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 4.
- [77] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146.
- [78] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- [79] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 66; emphasis added.
- [80] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 88.
- [81] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, Bk VII, 15 1041a.
- [82] Aristotle, *Categories*, trans. By E.M. Edghill, 4, 2a.
- [83] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. By W.D. Ross, Bk 5, 8, 1017b.
- [84] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. By W.D. Ross, Bk 5, 8, 1017b.
- [85] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- [86] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- [87] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- [88] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- [89] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

- [90] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 15.
- [91] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 142,
- [92] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- [93] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- [94] Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 262: “Thou art He Who from everlasting hath been the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover, and Thou wilt to everlasting remain the Lord of all created things and their Ordainer.”
- [95] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. By R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk III, 6, 206a.
- [96] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. By R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk III, 6, 207a.
- [97] Aristotle, *The Physics*, trans. by R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk VIII, 5, 256b.
- [98] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 118.
- [99] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.463.
- [100] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. By R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk III, 6, 206a.
- [101] Aristotle, *Physics*, trans. By R.P. Hardie and R.K. Gaye, Bk III, 6, 207a.
- [102] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 67.
- [103] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVI, p. 61
- [104] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- [105] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- [106] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCVII, p. 197.
- [107] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCVII, p. 197.
- [108] Bahá'u'lláh, **Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh**, XCVII, p. 197.
- [109] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCVII, p. 197.
- [110] Copelston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. I, Part II, 68; *SAQ*, 184, 192; *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief*, 84-5.

[111] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.

[112] Eric R Planka, "Convergent Evolution,"
<http://www.zo.utexas.edu/courses/THOC/Convergence.html>

[113] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

[114] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W.D. Ross, Bk V, 2, 1013a.

[115] Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. by J.A. Smith, Bk III, 11, 434a.

[116] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 65.

[117] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.

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