

Philosophy and the Baha'i Writings

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How Philosophy Helps Bahá'ís # 1

Mentioning philosophy inevitably requires a clarification of what the Baha'i Writings say about it. Unfortunately, the role of philosophy has been subject to considerable misunderstanding among some Baha'is according to whom philosophy belongs to "[s]uch academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone [and] have never been and will never be of any worth." [1] In their view, the pursuit of philosophy contradicts Baha'u'llah's injunction that to "acquire knowledge is incumbent on all, but knowledge of those sciences which may profit the people of the earth, and not of such sciences begin in mere words and end in mere words." [2] This misunderstanding is not supported by the Writings.

In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha praises the early Christians as people who were able to transform their philosophy into positive self-transformation and proper action in the world. [3] They practiced Baha'u'llah's injunction to "Let deeds not words be your adorning." [4] However, interpreting these words requires us to recall that according to the Writings, proper action must be based on knowledge and understanding. Abdu'l-Baha says:

Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is first "to know," and then "to do" Consider how most animals labor for man, draw loads and facilitate travel; yet, as they are ignorant, they receive no reward for this toil and labor. [5]

In other words, appropriate knowledge and understanding are necessary pre-conditions for proper action. Abdu'l-Baha re-emphasises this when he says:

In the erection of a house it is first necessary to know the ground and design the house suitable for it; second, to obtain the means or funds necessary for the construction; third, to actually build it.[6]

In the following pages we shall explore what philosophy can do to prepare us for effective action by improving our inner environment through reflection and the other mental skills for which philosophy provides training.

Another statement by Abdu'l-Baha also dispels the view that the Baha'i Writings have a negative outlook on philosophy. He says:

All mankind must be given a knowledge of science and philosophy -- that is, as much as may be deemed necessary. All cannot be scientists and philosophers, but each should be educated according to his needs and deserts.[7]

It is important to note the imperative "must" in this statement; Abdu'l-Baha insists that such knowledge – albeit in varying degrees – be given to "all mankind." To one extent or another, philosophical thinking is important for all. Specifically, he says that "Philosophy develops the mind,"[8] a topic we shall pursue below.

Significantly, Abdu'l-Baha provides a definition of philosophy which clearly outlines its mandate: "Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man,"[9] In other words, philosophy, no less than science, is a way of learning about and understanding the real world. Insofar as such understanding is necessary, philosophy is necessary as well as one of our intellectual tools. Of course, he thinks philosophy is best pursued within the framework given by the Manifestations, i.e. a 'divine philosophy.' It is no accident that he wrote a book called Divine Philosophy in which part of this framework is outlined.

Nor did Shoghi Effendi think philosophy was in itself something that necessarily began and ended in words. He writes:

Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it, is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splitting is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy.[10]

The Guardian recognizes that philosophy per se is “a sound branch of learning” even while he recognizes and rejects certain abuses and/or extreme developments of this subject which diminish its value. Furthermore, the Universal House of Justice gives great encouragement to philosophical studies when it writes:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science.[11]

This statement implicitly recognizes the influential reach of philosophy is as well as the importance for Baha'is to study and correlate the Teachings with contemporary developments in this field. Identifying such correlations is obviously a way of building bridges to other schools of thought and facilitating dialogues which inevitably introduce Baha'u'llah's revelation to a wider circle of readers and thinkers – something which can only be good. Philosophy facilitates this process by allowing us to “find a point of entry into contemporary mind in order that [it] might be able to present the [Baha'i] message in terms intelligible to their own age.”[12]

Moreover, the extensive presence of philosophy in the Baha'i Writings illustrates the importance of philosophy. *Some Answered Questions*, notably in the second half, deals with numerous philosophical issues often in technical philosophical language that must be learned and understood before the texts can be fully comprehended. The same may be said of *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, and, to varying degrees about *Paris Talks*, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha* and *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. A good example of such a passage is the following:

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.[13]

This statement which is the basis of his argument for the immortality of the soul and the relationship between mind and body is steeped in the terminology and argumentation of Aristotle and is not fully comprehensible without some exposure to it. The appropriate knowledge of philosophy will, therefore, expand our understanding of the Writings and thus put us in a stronger position to explain and defend them convincingly to others. This in itself improves not only in our own inner environment but also that of our audience.

Understanding the philosophical principles explicitly and implicitly embedded in the Baha'i Writings also facilitates inter-faith dialogue especially with those religions such as Catholicism,

Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism which have highly developed philosophical traditions notably in ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Without understanding the relevant philosophical principles in the Baha'i Writings, we cannot effectively explicate let alone defend the Writings effectively – and that is bound to have a negative impact on our global intellectual and social environment. After all, as Baha'is we believe that the Writings contain the “healing medicine” needed by the world and this obligates us to be effective purveyors of this medicine. If we can clearly explicate what the Writings say such human problems as our relationship to the environment we have a better chance of influencing others and joining them in practical work to make changes in human thought, feeling and behavior.

Before identifying specific ways in which philosophy can be used to improve our inner environment and, thereby, contribute to a better relationship with the natural environment, we shall examine some of the foundations of environmentalism in the Writings.

How Philosophy Helps Bahá'ís # 2

Having seen that the Baha'i Writings actually encourage philosophical studies, it is only natural to ask about the benefits of such studies. As I see it, there are three ways in which philosophy can help us in our lives as Bahá'ís. Philosophy can help us (1) gain a better understanding of the Writings themselves, and most notably those numerous passages which are of a specialized philosophical nature; (2) improve our ability to teach, explain, and defend the Writings; (3) facilitate dialogue and bridge-building with other faiths and various influential intellectual schools especially those with highly developed philosophical foundations, e.g. Judaism Catholicism, Islam, existentialism and Marxism.

Our personal development and our ability to serve the Faith are enhanced.

The first benefit of philosophical studies is that they improve our understanding of the Writings, and particularly those numerous passages which are philosophical in nature. This benefit is conferred indirectly and directly. Indirectly, philosophical studies sharpen our thinking skills, which, like any other human capacity must be exercised or they will weaken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “Everything is either growing or declining” (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 223) and our intellectual skills are no exception. Here are some of the vital reasoning skills we use when studying the Writings: understanding reasoning and arguments; identifying implicit connections among seemingly unrelated ideas; analyzing analogies and metaphors; identifying underling principles and presuppositions; drawing inferences and asking penetrating questions. (Remember the Feast of Questions!) When we apply these various intellectual skills and our philosophical knowledge to the Writings our comprehension inevitably increases.

This becomes especially evident when we encounter passages that are clearly philosophical in nature. For example, in discussing the immortality of the soul, Abdu'l-Baha 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. (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 239)

If our comprehension of this passage is to penetrate below the surface level, we must have at least some knowledge of the philosophical terminology involved, e.g. "substance" and "accident." Indeed, if we probe even more deeply, we will also be able to see that Abdu'l-Baha's statement shows how to resolve the famed mind-body that has dogged neuroscience and philosophy for so long. Furthermore, a grounding in philosophy can also facilitate our understanding of the various proofs of God that Abdu'l-Baha offers in *Some Answered Questions* and *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Such understanding is especially useful in our times when militant atheism is gaining in popularity. Finally, philosophical knowledge deepens our comprehension of Abdu'l-Baha's arguments against metaphysical materialism, pantheism and Christian incarnationism as well as our understanding of his teachings on epistemology and the ontological issues involved in the doctrine of emanation. Finally, it is worth noting that some philosophical background assists us in seeing more of the underlying connections that unify the teachings into one coherent whole that provides guidance for thinking and living in the new age.

The second major benefit of philosophy is that it can improve our ability to teach and defend the Writings in a convincing, rational manner. Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason." (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 7), and, even more strongly, states:

If religious belief and doctrine is 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. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231; emphasis added)

Elsewhere he says:

If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation. (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.181; emphasis added))

The first idea that stands out in these passages is that according to Abdu'l-Baha, faith and reason are not opposed to each other and that the heart needs reason for genuine faith to develop. Indeed, reason is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for faith and the spiritual life of the heart. Therefore, precisely because “the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason,” it is important for Baha’i teachers to be able to present the Writings in a clear and rational manner, supporting the teachings logically with quotes from the Writings as well as additional explanations. This, of course, also requires the teacher to have a rational understanding of the Writings – and this is exactly where both a knowledge of philosophy and the mental training it provides can be extremely useful. If our teaching efforts are not clearly thought-through, a seeker may feel confused by the Writings; such confusion can only undermine confidence in them and this, in turn, inhibits the growth of faith: “Can the heart accept that which reason denies?” I think that from direct personal experience, we all know that a clear and rational explication of the Writings makes them more attractive and persuasive both to established Baha’is and to seekers. Well-reasoned explications provide credibility, especially in an age inclined to be very critical of religions.

In an age inclined to be very critical of religion, philosophy is also useful because it strengthens our efforts at apologetics, i.e. defending the Writings against various forms of criticism, some of which can be quite sophisticated. The importance of apologetics to the Faith was made clear by the success of *Making the Crooked Straight* which by itself reversed decades of governmental prejudice against the Bahá’í Faith in Germany. This book examined the critical arguments in a systematic manner, showing how the vital information had been distorted or omitted and by showing how criticisms were poorly reasoned in various ways. By casting serious doubt on the credibility of various critics, this book persuaded scholars and government officials to change their minds about the Faith.

Philosophical training is highly useful for apologetics because such training sharpens skills in

analysing the implicit presuppositions as well as the actual reasoning process that shapes an argument. Exposing how these presuppositions and subsequent arguments are flawed helps us demonstrate the inherent rationality of the Faith as well as enhance its credibility. The more reasonably a Baha'i teacher can answer critiques and challenges – say, in a Fireside – the less likely the seeker will conclude that the Writings are insufficient as a guide for life in the contemporary world. Even if the seeker is not immediately convinced by a reasonable explanation, the simple fact that such an explanation is available adds to the credibility of the Faith. I have personally seen this process at work, not only in Firesides but also at my first university, a Catholic institution, where I saw clergy answering genuinely tough questions in a rational (Thomistic) way, and, thereby, keeping many young people in the Church. They gave me my first lessons in the power of apologetics, and I think we Baha'is should not hesitate to make use of good examples: “If we are lovers of the light, we adore it in whatever lamp it may become manifest” (The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 152).

How Philosophy Helps Bahá'ís # 3

The third major benefit of philosophy for Baha'is is that a philosophical understanding of the Writings facilitates dialogue with other religions and influential schools of thought. Shoghi Effendi recognizes the importance of “correlating philosophy with the Baha'i teachings” (Unfolding Destiny, p. 445) and also states in a letter written on his behalf:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science. (*Compilations, Scholarship*, p. 17)

In other words, the Guardian recognizes the importance of comparing the Writings to the intellectual activities of our time. Not doing so risks isolating Baha'u'llah's Revelation from the deliberations of the day and that inevitably hinders teaching activities; it would also make the Faith appear less credible in the public mind since many people might conclude that the Writings have little or nothing to contribute. Since we believe that Baha'u'llah is the Manifestation for this age, and that His Revelation provides the healing solutions to humankind's most serious difficulties, then relating the Writings to contemporary intellectual and religious currents seems imperative. This brings us to the question of what philosophy can do to help.

Let us begin by asking what is meant by a ‘philosophic understanding’ of the Writings; there are,

after all, other ways of understanding them. A philosophic understanding seeks to discover what the Writings say explicitly or implicitly about certain subjects, but especially about topics related to metaphysics and ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man and philosophy of history and political and social philosophy. It seeks to elucidate the foundational principles which underlie and inform or shape the teachings on these (and other) subjects. Second, a philosophical understanding seeks to identify and study the explicit and hidden connections among the teachings, so that we can discern more of the underlying unity of the Writings, i.e. their organic, interdependent structure. Knowing these implicit connections enhances not only our understanding but also improves our application of the teachings.

A philosophical understanding of the Writings is especially useful in dialogue with religious traditions and intellectual schools that have well developed philosophical foundations.

Christianity, whose philosophical heritage goes back almost 2000 years, has a well developed philosophical tradition in its three main branches. Jewish philosophy goes back at least as many years (to the time of Philo) and has been actively developed ever since in a variety of schools. Islam also has a very rich philosophical tradition, one that has sparked renewed interest in recent years. Christian, Jewish and Islamic thought is heavily influenced by Greco-Roman thought and especially by Plotinus whose work is currently undergoing a tremendous revival; this, of course can be another area of study for Baha'i scholars. In the Far East, there are the incredibly rich philosophical heritages associated with the numerous forms of Buddhism and Hinduism in both their historical and contemporary forms. The growing world-wide influence of Buddhism lends comparative studies of Buddhism and the Baha'i Writings a special interest. Furthermore, in the contemporary world, there are exciting possibilities of establishing dialogue with a breath-taking variety of influential schools and movements: existentialism, in both its theistic and atheistic forms, process philosophy, general systems theory, postmodernism, Neoplatonism, the philosophy of science and Neo-Thomism in its diverse forms.

Facilitating such dialogue requires a philosophical understanding of the Writings because without such understanding, discussions are likely to remain at the surface level without really penetrating down to the deeper principles, assumptions and reasoning processes that shape the more overtly evident beliefs and world-views. Inevitably, this limits how far dialogue and mutual understanding can go, not only in the exploration of differences but more important from a Baha'i point of view, the exploration of similarities and convergences. The latter, after all, give explicit evidence for the teaching of the essential unity of all religions. It almost goes without saying that if we do not comprehend the deeper aspects of beliefs and teachings, we cannot really

understand which adherents to these faiths or philosophical schools act as they do. Facilitating world unity will be all the more difficult for this lack.

Footnotes

- [1] Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 169.
- [2] Compilations, *Baha'i Scriptures*, p. 154.
- [3] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 85.
- [4] ‘Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words (Persian)* # 5.
- [5] Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 382-3; emphasis added.
- [6] Abdu'l-Baha, p. 382. *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 101; see also *Bahá'í World Faith*,
- [7] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 108; emphasis added.
- [8] Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 212.
- [9] Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- [10] Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Baha'i Community*, p. 445; emphasis added.
- [11] The Universal House of Justice, 1997 Jul 20, *Scholarship and Related Subjects*; emphasis added.
- [12] John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, p.3.
- [13] `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.