

The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings

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1) Introduction

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that the Baha'i Writings re-affirm many of the philosophical insights first developed by Aristotle. Although a paper of this length can only be a survey of the evidence, it will at least provide an idea of the enormous wealth of material available on this subject. The pervasive and far-reaching congruence of Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can be seen in seven main areas: physics; the analysis of reality; epistemology; ethics; theology; statecraft and anthropology or the study of humankind. The Aristotelian substratum not only makes it possible to resolve many apparent paradoxes in the Writings, but also to explicate the Writings in a way that harmonizes with common human experience and common sense. On this basis it is possible to develop a systematic and rational apologetics that can be linked with several developments in modern philosophy.

In order to prevent any initial misunderstandings, it is important to clarify what our thesis does *not* mean. Certainly there is no intention of suggesting that the Baha'i Writings are nothing but a permutation of Aristotle or crudely reducible to his thought. Rather, I would emphasize that the Baha'i Writings *re-affirm* many – though by no means all – of Aristotle's philosophical ideas and methods of studying reality and adapt and develop them to their own unique purpose of laying the philosophical foundations for a Baha'u'llah's new world order. This Aristotelian substratum links the Baha'i Writings with an intellectual heritage that, in the persons of Maimonides, Avicenna, Averroes, St. Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus, not only unites thinkers from the Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions but also shows itself sufficiently versatile to accommodate fresh re-formulations in light of new discoveries and intellectual developments especially in relationship to Heidegger's existentialism and Whitehead's process philosophy. Indeed, once we recognize substances as *activities*, this tradition is also capable of harmonizing itself with other, non-western process philosophies such as Buddhism's doctrine of dependent arising. In other

words, the Aristotelian substratum provides a highly flexible, far-reaching yet orderly way for us to develop our understanding of the Baha'i Writings and see their connection to a variety of other traditions. I believe that the Writings re-affirm much of Aristotle's philosophy precisely because it allows enormous flexibility and capacity for growth in new directions.

1.1) Using Aristotle

At this point it would be natural to ask whether the Baha'i Writings do not simply use Aristotle as a vehicle for expressing certain ideas in a form more easily comprehensible to modern and specifically western audiences. Does this use really imply any systematic intellectual continuity with Aristotle's philosophy? I believe so, for reasons the body of my paper shall make clear. For now, it suffices to make three points. First, if the use of this philosophy was an attempted adaptation to modern and especially western audiences, it was a remarkably infelicitous and short-sighted thing to do. Even in Abdu'l-Baha's time, in the mind of the western public and certainly in the minds of most scientists, Aristotelian philosophy and analysis had been discredited scientifically since Galileo and philosophically since Descartes. If cultural adaptation is the reason for the choice of terminology, it is hard to see how any worthwhile advantage could be derived therefrom. This is even more true now than in Baha'u'llah's and Abdu'l-Baha's time. Moreover, how such a putative cultural adaptation to the west could help teach the Cause among the non-western cultures that form the majority of humankind, is also hard to fathom. A far more likely reason, aside from the fact that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha lived in an intellectual culture heavily influenced by Aristotelian thought, is that Aristotle's analysis of reality is common sense and accessible in principle by anyone. A curious mind and probing thoughtfulness but no specialized equipment and no specialized experimental experiences are needed to verify the value of Aristotle's analysis of reality. We shall touch on this issue again later.

This brings us to our second reason for rejecting the notion that the Aristotelian terminology was used only for illustrative or other pedagogical purposes. Not only do the Writings make pervasive and continuous use of this terminology, they usually use it precisely as Aristotle did. The terminology and the associated concepts are not merely employed for illustrative purposes but to develop, expound and prove particular conclusions, as for example, Abdu'l-Baha's employment of Aristotle's Prime Mover argument. Abdu'l-Baha clearly expects the logical processes on which he builds his argument to be accepted – and inherent in those processes are the concepts and premises derived from Aristotle's analysis of reality. If we do not accept them, neither can we accept the argument based on them. However, to reject the argument is to reject Abdu'l-Baha's teaching – and that is obviously not what Abdu'l-Baha expects us to do. He clearly presents these arguments in the belief that they reflect reality and that the arguments are, therefore, true, or, at least reflect one reasonable view of reality.

With this consideration in mind, we can see a third reason to reject the argument of cultural adaptation and pedagogical uses: one cannot simply make use of, let alone make extensive use of a philosophical terminology without committing oneself to a considerable degree to the ideas embodied in these terms especially if one employs those terms in their original way. The pervasive use of any particular terminology lays a foundation which has logical implications, and sets certain limitations, on the nature of what one can build on it. For example, as we shall see, the Writings are clearly committed to Aristotle's theory of causation and this commitment not only rules out acceptance of absolute chaos but also implies a particular theory of 'chance' and the fortuitous. This, in turn, affects Baha'i views on evolution not to mention autopoiesis and self-organization.

A related question might be whether or not we are possibly being misled by a series of mere coincidences which in turn leads one to question to what degree these coincidences are meaningful. I think the best way to answer is to point out that the congruencies between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings are not merely numerous and superficial, but rather, are numerous and deep, that is, related to a set of fundamental issues in physics, metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics and statecraft. In other words, these congruencies reflect essential agreements in underlying premises and attitudes. They show that Aristotle, of whom Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha thought very highly¹, was at least beginning to think along the same lines and from the same and / or similar premises and axioms. Conversely, one might say that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha regarded Aristotle with enough esteem to adopt his philosophy as the best philosophical vehicle for expressing the new revelation. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha lavished special praise on Plato and Aristotle for exploring natural and supernatural phenomena, and then adds,

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.²

Some might argue that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha had no choice given that the Baha'i Faith arose in a culture whose philosophical tradition was heavily imbued with Aristotelian influence. However, this argument fails for two reasons. First, nothing in the cultural environment could force anyone, let alone a Manifestation of God, to make such extensive, deep and far-reaching use of the tradition. He could have used it strictly for illustrative purposes but the fact remains, He did not, nor did His official interpreter. The inescapable conclusion is that the Manifestation found the Aristotelian philosophy especially useful in leading us to the truth on a wide variety of important issues. This suggests that Aristotle's philosophy and its associated modes of thought are especially apt for discovering truth and understanding the Writings. Second, for theological reasons, it is doubtful that any human factors, even cultural milieu, could constrain the Divine to act in a certain way. God could, for example, have anointed the Manifestation in places other than Persia, but instead, chose a cultural locale heavily imbued with Aristotelianism.

1.2) Plato and Neo-Platonism

Finally in this introduction, I need to say that I certainly do not mean to deny or diminish the obvious neo-Platonic aspects of the Baha'i Writing though I do wish to point out that neo-Platonism itself is heavily influenced by Aristotle. Even such an author as Keven Brown, whose article in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief* inclines to see heavy Platonic influences, cannot help but wage his pro-Platonic arguments with concepts, terms and arguments originating in Aristotle. Thus, the presence of neo-Platonic elements in the Baha'i Writings tends to support rather than deny my assertions about the Aristotelian substratum insofar as neo-Platonism itself resulted at least in part from Aristotle's effect on Platonism. The neo-Platonists accepted such key Aristotelian concepts as essence, substance, actuality and actualization, potential, the transcendentals and the Unmoved Mover.

One of the reasons Platonism needed to be recast was precisely because thinkers such as Plotinus took Aristotle's critique of Plato's independent world of ideas as decisive and final. They tried to answer Aristotle's critique while maintaining the existence of Ideas or exemplars by placing them in the First Mind or First Will or what Baha'u'llah calls "the Kingdom of Names."³ Moreover, we must recall that emanationism itself does not necessarily make one a neo-Platonist as can be seen in the case of St Thomas, an Aristotelian who also espouses emanationism.⁴ Indeed, the concept of emanationism, is already logically implicit in Aristotle's doctrine of God as the Divine thinking Itself. In this situation, we have God the thinker and God, the object of God's thought; the object is obviously dependent upon the thinking subject, and this relationship of dependence is precisely the relationship between God and His emanations. Without question, Plotinus and the neo-Platonists developed this idea to a far greater extent than Aristotle ever did, but it is important to recognize that even this neo-Platonic doctrine has some Aristotelian roots.

The issue concerning Plato's forms or Ideas is, of course, vital in this debate. The bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings are clearly Platonic insofar as they present a variation of Plato's forms or Ideas, called the "Names of God"⁵ as residing as independent substances in a separate realm called "the Kingdom of Names"⁶ which is itself identified with the First Mind.⁶ For Aristotle, the forms, essences, ideas or universals do not reside as independent substances in a separate realm but rather are found in particular things. In short, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings differ on the issue of *where and how the original essences or forms reside*, an issue on which the Writings take a decidedly Platonic turn. However, it must be noted that Aristotle's view is not entirely excluded, since the Writings tell us that the Names of God are reflected in every created thing, and so, in that sense, formally or virtually present in every particular.⁷ This means that while the Writings take a Platonic view about the original essences, exemplars or Names, they do not entirely abandon the Aristotelian view that these are present in all created things. From this perspective, the Writings may be seen as synthesizing Plato's and Aristotle's views, a project of great importance to the neo-Platonists.

2) Physics

I shall begin my survey of the Aristotelian substratum of the Baha'i Writings with an examination of physics. To put it plainly, the foundations of 'Baha'i physics' are Aristotelian, by which I mean that there is a pervasive and systematic overlap between Aristotle's book *Physics* and the Baha'i Teachings. Although this may, at first sight, seem, at best, an academic curiosity, it does, in fact, have profound consequences for any future Baha'i metaphysic

and epistemology and has a serious impact on our understanding of the unity of science and religion. It also requires a logical commitment to some metaphysical and epistemological views and the rejection of others.

2.1) The Co-eternity of Matter or Creation

One of the key issues on which Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings also agree is the eternity of the world or creation. According to Aristotle, prime matter, which is the capacity or potential to receive form, has always existed along with the Unmoved Mover since a mover without something to move or affect is logically impossible.⁸ In other words, Aristotle's matter is co-eternal although logically dependent on the Unmoved Mover. There was no moment at which matter was suddenly created after a period of non-existence, because the nature of the Unmoved Mover required its existence. This, of course, is precisely the Baha'i doctrine that creation has always existed because "a creator without a creature is impossible."⁹ In other words, both

Aristotle and the Writings hold that creation is co-eternal or co-existent insofar as it has existed with God since the "beginning that hath no beginning."¹⁰

Unfortunately, this is misunderstood in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*. Keven Brown claims that Aristotle recognized "no transcendent cause for the existence of things, saw the universe as self-existent"¹¹, a belief that would clearly separate Aristotle from the Writings. However, Brown ignores the fact that the nature of God as Unmoved Mover, is logically prior to its consequence, the existence of matter, so that in a logical sense, God is, indeed, the cause, the necessary prior condition, of matter.

As already noted, the Unmoved Mover requires something to move. Furthermore, if by "self-existent"¹² Brown means 'self-created', then he is mistaken about Aristotle's doctrine. According to Aristotle, matter did not create itself; instead, matter has always existed though dependent upon the eternal Unmoved Mover; that is, Aristotle's matter is co-eternal which is exactly what the Writings teach.

If by there being "no transcendent cause for the existence of things"¹³ Brown means that matter is independent of God, he is in error from yet another perspective because according to Aristotle, matter also depends on God for order and form. Aristotle's God, as we recall, is the universal "the object of desire"¹⁴, that is the final cause for which all things strive. However, by being the final cause of all motion, the Divine is also the efficient cause of all motion, that which actually sets things into movement; moreover, by being the final cause, the Divine is also the formal cause.¹⁵ Nor can matter form itself according to Aristotle since it is a fundamental

principle of his system that actuality precedes potentiality¹⁶, which is to say that all potentials must be actualized by an actuality or, in this case, God, who is pure actuality. We must, therefore, reject Brown's effort to erect the co-eternity of matter or creation as a barrier between Aristotle and the Writings.

Indeed, a correct understanding of Aristotle's doctrine not only allows a resolution to the apparent self-contradiction between a creation that is co-eternal with God and the doctrine of a specific moment of creation, but also allows a reconciliation or synthesis with Brown's views about "God's actional Will"¹⁷ and the "first creation"¹⁸ in the world of possibilities. The co-eternity of creation refers to the co-eternity of matter, that is, the capacity or potential to manifest form whereas the specific moment of creation refers to the actualization and manifestation of particular forms. Thus, insofar as the potentials are co-eternal with God, creation is also timeless, whereas the actualization of form is something that occurs at some particular point in time. As we can see, this beginning or actualization of form, has, from the perspective of potentials, no beginning itself: the potentials have always existed. That is why Baha'u'llah is able to refer to the "beginning that hath no beginning."¹⁹ Using Aristotle's definition of matter as the potential to receive and manifest form, it becomes obvious that matter in this sense may be identified with "God's actional Will as part of His 'First Creation' " of the universe *in potentia*."²⁰ With this in mind, an Aristotelian reading of the Writings can fully agree with Brown when he says "This Will, which corresponds to the possible, manifests the realities of things as a sea manifests itself in the forms of the waves."²¹ Moreover, this actualization is voluntary insofar as the Divine must select which potentials to actualize and which to leave in their potential state at least for the present.

2.2) Motion and Change

Motion or change is the next issue we must explore. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

There are different degrees of motion. There is motion of transit, that is from place to place . . . Another kind is the motion of inherent growth . . . The third kind is the motion of condition – the sick man passes from the stage of sickness to the state of health. The fourth kind is that of spirit. For instance, the child while in the mother's womb has all the potential qualities of the spirit, but those qualities begin to unfold little by little, as the child is born and grows and develops and finally manifests all the attributes and qualities of the spirit. The fifth is the motion of the intellect, whereby the ignorant become wise . . . the carnally minded spiritual . . . the sixth is that of the eternal essence. That is to say, all phenomena either step from the arena of non-existence into the court of objectivity, or

from existence to non-existence. Just as being in motion is the test of life, so being stationary is the test of death . . . [22](#)

This passage reveals its Aristotelian nature in various ways. First of all, we see the nature of change as being from one thing to its contrary or contradictory, that is, from one place or condition to its opposite.[23](#) Next, we see that Abdu'l-Baha has explicitly adopted Aristotle's definition of change as the motion from potentiality to actuality[24](#), which is to say that in motion or change qualities and attributes that were potential but not overtly present or active become actualized, that is, overtly present and active.[25](#) In other words, it is evident that Abdu'l-Baha has adopted Aristotle's concept of motion as self-actualization in one or more of three areas: quantity, quality and place. (On this point Brown's belief that Aristotle defines change as "the exchange of one accidental quality for another"[26](#) is a serious error that leads to a distorted view of Aristotle's system as being fundamentally static.) Like Aristotle, Abdu'l-Baha identifies growth as a kind of motion, being a positive change in quantity and quality which is more complex than what Aristotle calls "locomotion"[27](#) or "transit . . . from place to place."[28](#) Change of quality is evident in the change from sickness to health, from a baby's unactualized potentials to their actualization and in the change from ignorance to wisdom and carnality to spirituality. Aristotle's view that change includes coming into existence[29](#) is evident in Abdu'l-Baha's sixth form of motion, the movement from non-existence to existence.

It should be noted that the qualitative changes mentioned here are what Aristotle sometimes calls "alteration"[30](#) in order to distinguish them from "coming to be and passing away"[31](#)namely, Abdu'l-Baha's sixth sense of change or motion. This is a noteworthy development because in effect, it shows Abdu'l-Baha expressing a preference for one Aristotelian term over another. For Baha'i this raises an interesting and important question: is there any significance in this? I believe there is because this question relates to the Baha'i Teaching that existence and non-existence are relative.[32](#) In other words there are degrees of existence just as Abdu'l-Baha says there are "degrees of motion."[33](#)

Moreover, this question relates to Abdu'l-Baha's categorical statement that nothing comes from absolute nothingness: "absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, they would not have come into being[34](#) and "therefore, nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable."[35](#) Logic forces us to admit that if this is the case, then all existing things, including us, have had a potential pre-existence, (albeit it a phenomenal pre-existence caused by God, the Prime Mover)[36](#) before they stepped "into the court of objectivity."[37](#) In short, we all pre-existed potentially before we attained material existence, a fact confirmed by Abdu'l-Baha when he says, "Before we were born into this world did we not pray, "O God! Give me a mother; give me two fountains of bright milk; purify the air for my breathing; grant me rest and comfort; prepare food for my sustenance and living"? Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings *before we were created?*"[38](#) In Some

Answered Questions, he tells us that “all creatures emanate from God – that is to say, it is by God that all things are realized”³⁹, in other words, the potentials of things become real, are realized or brought into material existence by God’s action. This explains why Abdu’l-Baha considered the movement from existence into existence as a *degree* of change, even though Aristotle thought of specifically differentiated *types* of change: for Baha’is, “generation”⁴⁰, that is, the movement from non-existence to existence is simply the change from potentiality to actuality, which is Aristotle’s original and fundamental definition of movement. “Alternation”⁴¹ is a change from a something to something else, and in the Baha’i view, the movement from non-existence, that is, potential existence, to existence is simply the actualization of an already existing potentiality.

This choice by Abdu’l-Baha is of extreme importance because it provides another perspective from which the Baha’i Writings resolve the apparent contradiction between the eternity of the universe and the creation of the world. How can the universe be an eternal emanation from an eternal Creator and the world be created at a point in time by a Prime Mover? Aristotle’s notion of potential existence allows us to resolve this seeming self-contradiction by defining the ‘creation’ of a particular world or being in an Aristotelian manner as the actualization of pre-existing potentials from an infinite store of such potentials. This change requires a mover and, according to Aristotle – as well as the Baha’i Writings and prayers – ultimately there is only one such mover, namely the Divine. Aristotle’s concepts of ‘potential’ and ‘actual’ also provide a philosophical reason why God is the “Sustainer”: He sustains the universe by being the Prime Mover in a causal chain that leads to the continuous actualization of potentialities in all the kingdoms of material existence.

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It should be noted that the qualitative changes mentioned here are what Aristotle sometimes calls "alteration"³⁰ in order to distinguish them from "coming to be and passing away"³¹ namely, Abdu'l-Baha's sixth sense of change or motion. This is a noteworthy development because in effect, it shows Abdu'l-Baha expressing a preference for one Aristotelian term over another. For Baha'i this raises an interesting and important question: is there any significance in this? I believe there is because this question relates to the Baha'i Teaching that existence and non-existence are relative.³² In other words there are degrees of existence just as Abdu'l-Baha says there are "degrees of motion."³³

Moreover, this question relates to Abdu'l-Baha's categorical statement that nothing comes from absolute nothingness: "absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, they would not have come into being³⁴ and "therefore, nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable."³⁵ Logic forces us to admit that if this is the case, then all existing things, including us, have had a potential pre-existence, (albeit it a phenomenal pre-existence caused by God, the Prime Mover)³⁶ before they stepped "into the court of objectivity."³⁷ In short, we all pre-existed potentially before we attained material existence, a fact confirmed by Abdu'l-Baha when he says, "Before we were born into this world did we not pray, "O God! Give me a mother; give me two fountains of bright milk; purify the air for my breathing; grant me rest and comfort; prepare food for my sustenance and living"? Did we not *pray potentially* for these needed blessings *before we were created?*"³⁸ In *Some Answered Questions*, he tells us that "all creatures

emanate from God – that is to say, it is by God that all things are realized”³⁹, in other words, the potentials of things become real, are real-ized or brought into material existence by God’s action. This explains why Abdu’l-Baha considered the movement from existence into existence as a *degree* of change, even though Aristotle thought of specifically differentiated *types* of change: for Baha’is, “generation”⁴⁰, that is, the movement from non-existence to existence is simply the change from potentiality to actuality, which is Aristotle’s original and fundamental definition of movement. “Alternation”⁴¹ is a change from a something to something else, and in the Baha’i view, the movement from non-existence, that is, potential existence, to existence is simply the actualization of an already existing potentiality.

This choice by Abdu’l-Baha is of extreme importance because it provides another perspective from which the Baha’i Writings resolve the apparent contradiction between the eternity of the universe and the creation of the world. How can the universe be an eternal emanation from an eternal Creator and the world be created at a point in time by a Prime Mover? Aristotle’s notion of potential existence allows us to resolve this seeming self-contradiction by defining the ‘creation’ of a particular world or being in an Aristotelian manner as the actualization of pre-existing potentials from an infinite store of such potentials. This change requires a mover and, according to Aristotle – as well as the Baha’i Writings and prayers – ultimately there is only one such mover, namely the Divine. Aristotle’s concepts of ‘potential’ and ‘actual’ also provide a philosophical reason why God is the “Sustainer”: He sustains the universe by being the Prime Mover in a causal chain that leads to the continuous actualization of potentialities in all the kingdoms of material existence.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha’i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha’i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called ‘self-organizing’ is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the ‘self-organizing’ we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha’i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of ‘self-organization’ as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .[42](#)

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."[43](#) In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.[44](#) Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion[45](#); (b) this prime mover must be unmoved[46](#); (c) it must be apart from nature[47](#); (d) it must be one and eternal.[48](#) Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"[49](#) the "Prime Mover"[50](#), the "Self-Subsisting."[51](#) The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."[52](#) Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.⁵⁵

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism. Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"⁵⁶ The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe’s physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the “Prime Mover”⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha’i Writings say, “Self-Subsisting”⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is ‘beyond’ the phenomenal realm, both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu’l-Baha says,

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.

By the “Reality of Divinity”⁶⁸ Abdu’l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle’s God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha’u’llah’s and Aristotle’s concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the “object of desire.”⁷² In the Baha’i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God’s bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu’l-Baha says, “God has created all and all return to God.”⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha’i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created “to know Thee and to worship Thee.” However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point,

Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysic and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics

which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as *necessary*, but denies that such knowledge is *sufficient* to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random" ⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at

least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.[95](#)

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[96](#) This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"[97](#); species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and

developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.98

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or

achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.¹⁰⁵

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.¹⁰⁶ We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate¹⁰⁷ and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.¹⁰⁸ This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of

vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exereth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical

world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of

motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

... we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences ... Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.⁵⁵

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such

an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"⁵⁶ The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe’s physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the “Prime Mover”⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha’i Writings say, “Self-Subsisting”⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is ‘beyond’ the phenomenal realm, both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu’l-Baha says,

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.

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By the “Reality of Divinity”⁶⁸ Abdu’l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle’s God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered*

Questions, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics*⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysic and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as *necessary*, but denies that such knowledge is *sufficient* to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random" ⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in

nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of

the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human

manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.¹⁰⁵

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.¹⁰⁶ We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate¹⁰⁷ and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute

randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe¹¹¹ and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."¹¹² This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"¹¹³ and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."¹¹⁴ Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."¹¹⁵

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what appears to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .[42](#)

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."[43](#) In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.[44](#) Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion[45](#); (b) this prime mover must be unmoved[46](#); (c) it must be apart from nature[47](#); (d) it must be one and eternal.[48](#) Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"[49](#) the "Prime Mover"[50](#), the "Self-Subsisting."[51](#) The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."[52](#) Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.⁵⁵

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine

radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"⁵⁶ The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all

change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is ‘beyond’ the phenomenal realm, both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

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By the “Reality of Divinity”⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle’s God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the “object of desire.”⁷² In the Baha’i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God’s bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their

own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not

only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysic and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i

Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as *necessary*, but denies that such knowledge is *sufficient* to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random" ⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain

pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a

completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking,

similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an *essential* difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls

'theology."¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.¹⁰⁵

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.¹⁰⁶ We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate¹⁰⁷ and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.¹⁰⁸ This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.¹⁰⁹

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" ¹¹⁰ in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe¹¹¹ and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause.

Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."¹¹² This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"¹¹³ and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."¹¹⁴ Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."¹¹⁵

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what appears to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from

another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .[42](#)

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."[43](#) In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.[44](#) Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion[45](#); (b) this prime mover must be unmoved[46](#); (c) it must be apart from nature[47](#); (d) it must be one and eternal.[48](#) Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"[49](#) the "Prime Mover"[50](#), the "Self-Subsisting."[51](#) The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."[52](#) Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."[53](#) Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause;

this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."[54](#)

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist

doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"⁵⁶ The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not

in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is ‘beyond’ the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

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By the “Reality of Divinity”⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the “object of desire.”⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, “God has created all and all

return to God.”⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha’i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created “to know Thee and to worship Thee.” However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. However, the Baha’i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle’s theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God’s Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind’s exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu’l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: “the 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 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.”⁷⁶ Abdu’l-Baha’s statement simply elaborates Baha’u’llah’s statement that “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.”⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu’l-Baha’s, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics*⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu’l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu’l-Baha employ Aristotle’s terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we

have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle

epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as *necessary*, but denies that such knowledge is *sufficient* to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the “craft analogy”⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be ‘the best they can be’. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees.”⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle’s view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha’i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call ‘micro-evolution’, meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while “species and genera are eternal”⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated

premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.¹⁰⁵

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.¹⁰⁶ We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate¹⁰⁷ and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.¹⁰⁸ This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot;

we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.¹⁰⁹

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" ¹¹⁰ in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe¹¹¹ and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."¹¹² This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"¹¹³ and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."¹¹⁴ Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."¹¹⁵

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .[42](#)

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."[43](#) In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.[44](#) Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion[45](#); (b) this prime mover must be unmoved[46](#); (c) it must be apart from nature[47](#); (d) it must be one and eternal.[48](#) Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"[49](#) the "Prime Mover"[50](#), the "Self-Subsisting."[51](#) The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."[52](#) Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."[53](#) Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other

influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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.”⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle’s argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle’s argument in the following quote from Abdu’l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.⁵⁵

In this case, Abdu’l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu’l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha’i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato’s works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato’s *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle’s notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha’u’llah setting up this very situation: “Consider the relation between the

craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"⁵⁶ The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite

beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

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By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason

for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about

the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysic and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the

Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as *necessary*, but denies that such knowledge is *sufficient* to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random" ⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate

final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.[95](#)

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of *entelechy*, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[96](#) This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"[97](#); species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we

understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.98

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to

realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the

appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.¹⁰⁵

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.¹⁰⁶ We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate¹⁰⁷ and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.¹⁰⁸ This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exereth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what appears to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .[42](#)

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."[43](#) In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.[44](#) Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion[45](#); (b) this prime mover must be unmoved[46](#); (c) it must be apart from nature[47](#); (d) it must be one and eternal.[48](#) Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"[49](#) the "Prime Mover"[50](#), the "Self-Subsisting."[51](#) The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."[52](#) Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."[53](#) Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."[54](#)

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism. Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of

course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another – and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent – all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

2.3) Autopoiesis

The belief in potentials and a fundamental order in the universe affects Baha'i apologetics insofar as it puts constraints on the concept of autopoiesis or self-organizing. From the Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, what is called 'self-organizing' is simply the actualization of possibilities for order already present in matter itself – not to mention the entire experimental situation – both of which are already highly organized. In what *appears* to be the 'self-organizing' we are not witnessing the emergence of order from absolute chaos but rather the emergence of one kind of order from another under special circumstances. This means that from a Baha'i / Aristotelian point of view, we cannot logically accept the argument that the existence of 'self-organization' as a so-called proof that God is unnecessary to explain order in the cosmos.

2.4) God as the First Mover

At this point we have arrived at the question of the origin of motion and this, of course, is one of the various ways by which we can approach the subject of the Prime Mover. Here again we see how Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings overlap significantly. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence. . . This state of motion is

said to be essential – that is natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement . . .⁴²

Similarly, Aristotle tells us that motion is an inextricable aspect of nature: "Nature has been defined as a 'principle of motion and change'."⁴³ In other words nature and motion are necessarily correlated, and whatever is in nature, whatever exists, as Abdu'l-Baha says, is in motion. The fact of motion in nature, or in creation, leads inevitably to the concept of a Prime Mover because whatever is moved is moved by something.⁴⁴ Now things either move themselves or they are moved by another and since matter cannot bring itself into existence or set itself into motion (in effect, the same thing given the correlation between nature and movement) a first mover is required to avoid an infinite regress of movers. Aristotle lays out his arguments on this issue in Book VIII of the *Physics*. The various arguments and deviations require no explication here but the conclusions he draws are important to our subject: (a) there must be a prime mover to first impart motion⁴⁵; (b) this prime mover must be unmoved⁴⁶; (c) it must be apart from nature⁴⁷; (d) it must be one and eternal.⁴⁸ Every Baha'i will recognize these characteristics as some of the descriptors applied to God in the Writings: "the One, the Single"⁴⁹ the "Prime Mover"⁵⁰, the "Self-Subsisting."⁵¹ The notion that the Prime Mover must be apart from nature is seen in Baha'u'llah's statement that "the one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness."⁵² Aristotle, who thought of God as pure form thinking on Itself (and knowing creation through knowing Itself) would certainly agree.

Albeit very succinctly, Baha'u'llah Himself makes use of the unmoved mover argument when He says, "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause. This fact, in itself, establisheth, beyond the shadow of a doubt, the unity of the Creator."⁵³ Here Baha'u'llah simply states the conclusion of the argument first advanced by Aristotle, namely that all motion and contingent beings have a cause; this requires the existence of an uncreated First Cause to bring them into being and set them into motion. Indeed, it proves not just the existence of God but His unity, because oneness is the origin of multiplicity. Abdu'l-Baha uses the same argument:

. . . we observe that motion without motive force and an effect without a cause are both impossible: that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences . . . Such a process of causation goes, 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."⁵⁴

This is, in effect, nothing less than a paraphrase of Aristotle's argument using causality and the impossibility of an infinite regress of causes to prove the existence of God. We can also recognize Aristotle's argument in the following quote from Abdu'l-Baha:

Throughout the world of existence it is the same; the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker.[55](#)

In this case, Abdu'l-Baha is simply applying the same craftsman argument used by Aristotle to the things of this world. Having no necessary existence, they are all contingent. The sheer fact of their actual existence means that there must be a non-contingent entity whose existence is necessary and which is capable of bringing the mere potentials into actuality or existence. The denial of such an entity results in an infinite regress which, as Aristotle and Abdu'l-Baha point out, is logically absurd: there cannot be an indefinite number of definite things. Here, too, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are of one mind.

2.5) Emanationism and Divine Personalism

It might be objected that whatever the similarities between Baha'i and Aristotelian concepts of God, two great differences irremediably separate them: emanationism and divine personalism.

Emanationism, the belief, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, that God originates the universe by divine radiation and not by divine mutation, is generally associated not with Aristotle but with Plotinus, Proclus and other neo-Platonists. Oddly enough, there are no specific references to emanation in Plato's works to support the term neo-Platonism, invented by Thomas Taylor in the early nineteenth century; indeed, if anything, Plato's *Timaeus* with its world-making demiurge suggests a creationist doctrine. That aside, the fact remains that the concept of emanation can be logically derived directly from Aristotle's notion of God as the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself. As already noted, this concept sets up the archetypal emanationist situation: a producer and a product, a thinker and a thought. It is evident that in the order of logic, the thinker is prior to the thought. There can be no thought without a thinker, and thought obviously lacks the power to think the thinker whereas the opposite is not true. Consequently, the thought is related to but distinct from the thinker and, because of its logically derivative nature, belongs to an ontologically secondary level of being. This order – which could also be repeated with the concept of Will – is precisely what emanationism asserts. We even see Baha'u'llah setting up this very situation: "Consider the relation between the craftsman and his handiwork, between the painter and his painting. Can it ever be maintained that the work their hands have produced is the same as themselves?"[56](#) The only reasonable conclusion left us is that emanationism is logically derivable from Aristotle's concept of God and need be neither Platonic in origin nor in nature.

As to the second objection, there is no doubt that Aristotle's concept of God is impersonal, but even this must be understood in a carefully hedged way because there is nothing that logically requires Aristotle's God to be absolutely impersonal. When we ask if the Unmoved Mover thinking upon Itself can think about us, the answer that immediately suggests itself (and was, in fact adopted) is that the Divine can do so insofar as in contemplating Itself it contemplates supreme perfection which, of course, includes creation, the universe, and us. In other words, God does not perceive us as a subject perceives an object, but rather contemplates us through thoughts focussed on the Divine

perfections – which includes the perfection of actualization of potentials. This makes it virtually self-evident that whereas the Unmoved Mover described by Aristotle is impersonal, there is no logical objection to developing his ideas in a personalist direction. Aristotle's God can be harmonized with the God of the Baha'i Writings who takes sufficient personal interest in creation to send Manifestations.

2.6) A Theological Interlude: Other Similarities Regarding God

Because Aristotle and the Writings do not recognize a hard and fast distinction between physics and metaphysics and / or theology – a fact of enormous significance in our consideration of the unity of science and religion – the Divine is an inevitable part of any discussion of the universe's physical constitution. Not only do both see God as the "Prime Mover"⁵⁷ but they also regard God as utterly self-sufficient, meaning, philosophically speaking, as not preceded by a cause⁵⁸ or, as the Baha'i Writings say, "Self-Subsisting"⁵⁹ and, therefore, independent of all other existing things. According to Aristotle, God is also the First Mover Who is Himself unmoved or unchanged.⁶⁰ This is because the Unmoved Mover is pure actuality⁶¹, that is, has no potentials, and is, therefore, beyond all change⁶² because there are no potentials left to actualize. One might also express this by saying that God has no privations, no lacks or deficiencies requiring fulfillment. Moreover, the Divine is one and eternal⁶³ that is, undivided and beyond time, characteristics which also suggest that God is not in space among other phenomenal beings. God is not limited by the normal attributes of all phenomenal, material beings.⁶⁴ God is also alive⁶⁵ conscious and thinking.

Because God is 'beyond' the phenomenal realm, both the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree that God is essentially unknowable and do so for similar reasons. According to Aristotle, God, unlike all phenomena which are composed of matter and form, is one because the Divine has no matter and is pure form. The Divine is, moreover, pure existence, that is, a non-contingent entity⁶⁶ whose nature is to exist; It is also pure thought thinking only on Itself. As time-and-space bound, composite beings, we can understand these concepts verbally, but cannot comprehend or understand what it is or means to enjoy this sort of being. Similarly, Abdu'l-Baha says,

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.

By the "Reality of Divinity"⁶⁸ Abdu'l-Baha means the essence of divinity which is beyond human comprehension. The attributes of divinity can, of course, be known or comprehended, but not the essence of Divinity.⁶⁹ As pure form thinking Itself⁷⁰, Aristotle's God also enjoys a form of being whose nature can be deduced by Its attributes and actions in the phenomenal realm but cannot be known immediately. This is because, according to Aristotle, true knowledge is knowledge of causes⁷¹ and not mere description. That, however, is the level at which we must remain with the Unmoved Mover.

The similarities between Baha'u'llah's and Aristotle's concept of God do not end here. In both views, God is seen to set things into motion not by a direct physical impetus but rather by attracting them to Himself, by being the "object of desire."⁷² In the Baha'i Writings this idea is expressed in three ways. First, it is implicit in the prime mover argument used by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha: God Who is beyond change and motion is, nonetheless, the source of all movement, a feat that can only be accomplished by being – to borrow a term from fractal geometry – the Great Attractor towards which all beings strive, though only humans may do so consciously. Second, the notion of God as the Great Attractor is also seen in the belief that all beings seek their own perfection, that is, their final cause which can ultimately be found only in God Who is the final goal of their endeavours. They strive to reflect God's bounty more adequately and, thereby, perfect their own existences. Their varying capacities constitute the diversity and very order of the universe from the mineral up through the angelic. Third, the concept of attraction to God is implicit in the Teaching that all things in their own degree reflect the perfections of God, that is, are essentially identified by their capacity to manifest, reflect or turn themselves to the Divine. Such reflection is also a return to the Divine and Its bounties. Humankind is no exception to this; as Abdu'l-Baha says, "God has created all and all return to God."⁷³ Indeed, the role of the Manifestation is to both renew and expand the scope of our conscious and willful effort to return to the Divine. One need hardly explain that at the simplest, material level, such a return can only mean physical motion for which reason God is the Prime Mover.

If God sets and keeps all phenomenal beings in motion, if God is the goal which all phenomenal beings strive to emulate as best they can, then it follows that the Divine is their final cause, their purpose, their reason for being. This idea, is, of course, reflected in the Baha'i Noonday Prayer which states that we were created "to know Thee and to worship Thee." However, in being the final cause of creation, the Great Attractor, God sets it and keeps it in motion, thereby also becoming its ultimate efficient cause. The ordinary events of daily life of course have immediate or proximate efficient causes. Up to this point, Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree. However, the Baha'i Writings do not stop here, but rather develop Aristotle's theory of causation one step further: according to them, God is also the ultimate formal cause because creatures are formed, given an essence, by their varying capacities to reflect God's Names and attributes.⁷⁴ Difference in this capacity create essential distinctions among creatures, a fact most readily seen in humankind's exalted position.⁷⁵

2.7) Causality in Physics

Another far-reaching agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle concerns the all important subject of causality. In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha states that all phenomena require four causes: "the 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 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."⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Baha's statement simply elaborates Baha'u'llah's statement that "All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause."⁷⁷ The views promulgated here, and most specifically Abdu'l-Baha's, are exactly those first propounded in Aristotle in his *Physics* ⁷⁸ and the *Metaphysics*.⁷⁹ Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by Abdu'l-Baha: the material cause, or matter; the formal cause, or form; the efficient cause, or mover or maker; and the final cause, or purpose. Not only does Abdu'l-Baha employ Aristotle's terms, he uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, he uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of reality. As we have already seen previously, both Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha use the Prime, Unmoved Mover argument first promulgated by Aristotle.

In examining Abdu'l-Baha's statement, we notice, first of all, the categorical nature of his statement: "the existence of everything depends on four causes."⁸⁰ He is not using Aristotle's theory to illustrate an answer he has already given in other words or to make something more comprehensible to westerners: he is making an unequivocal statement about the nature of phenomenal, that is, emanated reality. Indeed, the immediate context of this statement is a metaphysical question about the kinds of preexistence and phenomena to which question he provides the answer we have quoted. From this alone it is clear that Abdu'l-Baha is committed to the answer he provides as a physical and metaphysical truth that we must understand, accept and work with. At this point we might also recall Baha'u'llah's statement that "[a]ll that is created, however, is preceded by a cause"⁸¹ and his reference to God as "the King of the entire creation and its Prime Mover."⁸² The description of God as the "Prime Mover"⁸³ of reality is itself a term that harmonizes with Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*.

2.8) Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

The far-reaching significance of this agreement regarding causality cannot be stressed too much because Baha'u'llah's commitment to causality per se, and Abdu'l-Baha's commitment to Aristotle's theory of causality lays a particular kind of

foundation for the further development of any Baha'i cosmology, metaphysics and epistemology. This, in turn, will impact on Baha'i views on the unity of science and religion, indeed, on the very definitions of these terms.

Let us briefly examine why. As already noted above, the belief in causality inescapably commits the Baha'i Faith to a causal understanding of the physical universe and all physical events. Moreover, the categorical nature of the statements made both by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha make it irrelevant whether or not we are discussing macro or quantum events. This, in turn, limits the physical theories and interpretations of quantum physics which can be logically harmonized with the Baha'i Writings. A far-reaching example of this impact would be our understanding of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. The Baha'i Writings and their explicit commitment to causality requires us to understand this principle epistemologically, as a statement about the limitations of human knowledge rather than metaphysically as a statement about the supposedly indeterminate nature of the particles themselves. Moreover, it is important to understand that the use of statistics in sub-nuclear science does not logically force us to deny causality. Employing statistical methods merely concedes that we humans cannot comprehend and calculate all of the causes at work, and, therefore make do with knowing degrees of likelihood. There is nothing in this method that requires us to admit that any of the events are uncaused in and of themselves; we need only admit that we cannot know all the relevant causal actions. Consequently, the Baha'i Writings incline us to one of the variously available causal interpretations of quantum theory, such as David Bohm's.

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that the Baha'i Teaching about the unity of science and religion cannot simply mean uncritical agreement between the Writings and any and all scientific theories or interpretations even though accepted at a particular point in time. While the ultimate goal is agreement, that is, harmony between science and religion, it is apparent that the Writings provide us with a basis - an Aristotelian basis - from which to carry out a critical examination of scientific theories. Such a view is strongly supported by Abdu'l-Baha's epistemology which accepts material, sense knowledge as necessary, but

denies that such knowledge is sufficient to attain a complete and true understanding of the universe.

Furthermore, commitment to the Aristotelian theory of causes, commits the Baha'i Writings to a teleological view of the natural, phenomenal world, a viewpoint in which all entities, and, most obviously, all living entities⁸⁴ exist for a purpose which dictates the form and even the materials used. Nature never acts in vain Aristotle tells us, and, elsewhere he says, "God and nature make nothing at random"⁸⁵, and still elsewhere that "Nature never makes anything without a purpose and never leaves out what is necessary."⁸⁶ This requires us to conclude that in nature the final cause, the formal cause and, in at least some cases, the material cause are one; stated otherwise, the study of the formal, and sometimes, the material causes, is also implicitly knowledge of the final cause. Now, there is no question that for Aristotle, "nature works like the artist or craftsman"⁸⁷, a concept that is often reiterated throughout his work with a variety of metaphors: the sculptor, the builder, the painter, and, frequently, the doctor who, along with the gardener, is often found in the Baha'i Writings. The "craft analogy"⁸⁸ between natural and craft production is seen in Abdu'l-Baha's reference to the universe as a "Great Workshop"⁸⁹ and as "one laboratory of might under one natural system"⁹⁰ which, without humankind" would lack its "consummation"⁹¹ and has no purpose, "no result, no fruit."⁹² This argument implicitly sees the entire universe as a garden, that is, a craft work requiring certain pieces to be complete and to attain its purpose. At this point we need only recall that craft work is undertaken for a purpose to see that the "craft analogy"⁹³ operates pervasively throughout the Baha'i Writings.

This fact is of enormous importance in our understanding of science and religion because the "craft analogy"⁹⁴ of creation means that a science which purports to provide complete understanding of the universe must include final causes as part of its explanation. If we limit ourselves, as current science does, at least theoretically, to material and efficient causes, our explanations will be incomplete and, to that extent, mistaken. True scientific explanations must include both immediate and ultimate final causes, that is, must admit that full explanations of nature inevitably take us beyond the material realm. To one extent or another, they must take the supernatural into account, a point so important to Abdu'l-Baha that he specifically praises Aristotle along with Socrates and Plato, for doing so:

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.⁹⁵

2.9) The Consequences for Biology and Evolution

Applied to biology, the concept of final causes leads readily to the subject of entelechy, the notion that all things and most especially, all living things, contain particular potentials which they strive to manifest or actualize in order to be 'the best they can be'. To one extent or another - and there is room to make a case that this includes material objects albeit it to a minimal extent - all things strive to manifest their potential for self-perfection. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."⁹⁶ This not only accords with Aristotle's view about the nature and growth of all things but leads readily to a specifically Aristotelian and Baha'i view of development and evolution. Both accept what some call 'micro-evolution', meaning that there can be some change and variation *within* a species but not a transformation of one species into a completely different one. For Aristotle and the Writings, while "species and genera are eternal"⁹⁷; species evolve over time by actualizing, manifesting or displaying their store of potentials in the physical world without changing into different species.

To understand why the Writings take this position, let us examine the issue from the point of view of Aristotle's potentials. It becomes immediately apparent that the potentials required to be a member of a particular kind (or species or genera) cannot change: certain potentials are eternally necessary to be a spoon as opposed to a knife, a house cat as distinct from a walrus. This is not surprising because a spoon and a walrus have different essences and one can never become the other. No one would dispute this. Thus, if we understand Abdu'l-Baha and Aristotle to be discussing the essences of things or species, there is no real conflict with current scientific beliefs in regarding the stability of essences or species. No one would claim that a million years ago the essence of a spoon was different than it is today. The fact that essences don't change is true whether we are discussing non-living spoons or developing entities in which the various attributes appear over a period of time.

Thus the embryo of man in the womb of the mother gradually grows and develops, and appears in different forms and conditions, until in the degree of perfect beauty it reaches maturity and appears in a perfect form with the utmost grace. . . . In the same manner, it is evident

that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization.⁹⁸

The most striking point here is that like humankind, the physical earth itself came into existence with a cluster of particular potentialities and has been manifesting these over time. One of these potentials was for the development of various forms of life among which humans are included. Had there been no such potentials for manifesting life inherent in the earth, no such life forms would have developed here.

Equally important is Abdu'l-Baha's point that once in existence, all things, be they babies or planets, develop according to their potentials, and that, for various reasons, at different stages, they have different outer forms. Even though outwardly, phenomenally, 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. Thus, the conclusion drawn by an examination of bones (outward forms) that by reason of resemblance to animals, humankind was once an animal is logically unwarranted. As convergent evolution shows, similarity is no proof of any relationship, let alone ancestry; logically speaking, similarity is not identity. Moreover, similarity of bone might be covering up differences in soft, non-surviving organs such as the brain. Abdu'l-Baha does not deny that humankind once appeared more primitive than today; he simply denies the conclusion 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. It takes only a little thought to realize that even random mutations can only attain 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; carrots lack the capacity for such a change. In this population of alleged common ancestors, some had the potential for being randomly mutated in this way and some did not. That's why some mutated and some didn't. 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 don't, is an essential difference, a *difference in kind*, not 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.

It might be argued that this pits the Baha'i Writings against current scientific consensus and thus violates the Baha'i teaching of the harmony of science and religion. Whether or not this objection holds true depends on how we interpret what this teaching means. I shall argue that it does not mean that religion and science must agree on each and every point at all times and under all circumstances. This is because science itself is evolving; today's truth is tomorrow's 'myth' or falsehood. For example, at one time, science was certain that sunlight was somehow necessary to all life yet the discovery of life near deep-sea vents disproved that assertion. Rather than demanding absolute detailed agreement, in my view the doctrine of harmony between science and religions means a mutual and fundamental commitment to reason and rational inquiry as far as they can go. Rational critique by either side of the other is not ruled out by the demand for harmony between them just as rational critique among scientists themselves does not deny their harmonious co-operation in the project of discovering the truth. Aristotle's four-fold teaching about causality lets us develop this theme even further.

2.10) The Consequences for the Unity of Science and Religion

Aristotle's doctrine of four-fold causality lays the foundation for the unification of science and religion in a single, coherent scheme. Science restricts itself to the study of the material and efficient causes of all phenomena whereas religion studies the formal and final causes. In this sense, they complement, that is, complete, each other and, thereby, help us make complete sense of the phenomenal world.

The issue of final causes will, of course, lead to some controversy about the nature of science and the role of empiricism in the quest for knowledge. However, much of this conflict is spurious insofar as much of the debate on this subject is based on Galileo's and Descartes' misunderstanding of what Aristotle actually said. As Henry Veatch points out, final cause is a perfectly commonsensical notion, applicable to nature as well as products of conscious work once we understand what Aristotle meant. Here is how Veatch explains final causes:

In other words, since natural agents and efficient causes as far as we understand them, are found to have quite determinate and more or less predictable results, to that same extent we can also say that such forces are therefore ordered to their own appropriate consequences or achievement: it is these they regularly tend to produce, and it is these that may thus be said to be their proper ends . . . Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: *the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*⁹⁹

In other words, Aristotle's concept of final causes is no less scientific than a chemical formula that successfully predicts the results of certain actions or the belief in the law of gravity. One might also express this by saying that final causes are the potentials that will actualize when certain preconditions are met either naturally or through conscious human manipulation. They are not, as has been so often claimed, mere anthropomorphisms and do not undermine the doctrine of the unity of science and religion.

It has already become obvious that neither Aristotle nor the Writings countenance an absolute division between the natural and super-natural, that is between at least some aspects of natural science and what Aristotle calls 'theology.'¹⁰⁰ In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle uses logic to move smoothly from a consideration of causality to the argument for the existence of God, a non-sensible substance and cause, as a First Mover. Abdu'l-Baha, as we have already seen above, also makes use of this argument. In short, both see God, regarded as a logically necessary First Mover, as an integral part of physics. Moreover, both see science as being at least in part, deductive, that is, able to attain certainty on the basis of carefully formulated premises. This is not to say they deny induction¹⁰¹ but rather that they realize that science requires both.

Though there is no space to pursue it in detail here, it seems evident that the Baha'i Writings about epistemology and philosophy of science confirm much of Aristotle's philosophy and then add revelation as the crown of its epistemic / scientific edifice. Here is another example: the Writings accept Aristotle's enumeration of the soul's powers as the nutritive, the appetitive, the sensory, the locomotive, and the power of thinking¹⁰², the last being confined to humankind.¹⁰³ Moreover, Aristotle is even willing to countenance the idea of "immediate intuition"¹⁰⁴ although he points out it represents a different epistemological problem and does not pursue it anywhere else in his works. In his discussion of epistemological issues, Abdu'l-Baha says,

Briefly then, these four criteria according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration.[105](#)

In regards to the first two, sense perception and reason, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle are in complete agreement: the process of knowing begins with sense knowledge to which animals, though not humans, are confined.[106](#) We then rise to reason in order to draw rational conclusions that take us beyond the senses and particular objects but which we can trust if we have reasoned correctly. His brief reference to intuition aside, Aristotle's epistemology stops at this point. Abdu'l-Baha, however, while not rejecting these four sources of knowledge finds them inadequate[107](#) and points out the need for revelation. This leads to the conclusion that while Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings agree on the role of sense knowledge, reason and possibly intuition, from the Baha'i view, Aristotle's epistemology is not so much mistaken as incomplete.

2.11) The Consequences for Epistemology

Finally, the commitment to causality and especially Abdu'l-Baha's endorsement of Aristotle's four causes of phenomenal existents commits a Baha'i epistemology to the view that all knowledge of phenomenal entities is knowledge of causes - which is precisely Aristotle's view.[108](#) This also provides another reason why humans cannot comprehend God: as phenomenal beings preceded by causes we are simply incapable of understanding a being that is not. We may recognize the fact that we cannot and even why we cannot; we may be able to deduce the existence of such an entity and some of its attributes, but we are unable to provide any explanation whatever for an uncaused Being.

2.12) The Great Chain of Being

At this point in our necessarily cursory survey of Aristotelian and Baha'i cosmology, it makes sense to pause and reflect on the profound implications of what has been discovered so far. First, we see the universe portrayed as fundamentally causal. As Abdu'l-Baha writes, in an Aristotelian argument that once again employs causality to prove the existence of God:

And likewise, those outside influences are subjected to other influences in their turn. For example, the growth and development of a human being is dependent upon the existence of water, and water is dependent upon the existence of rain, and rain is dependent upon the existence of clouds, and clouds are dependent upon the existence of the sun, which causeth land and sea to produce vapour, the condensation of vapour forming the clouds. Thus each one of these entities exerteth its influence and is likewise influenced in its turn. Inescapably then, the process leadeth to One Who influenceth all, and yet is influenced by none, thus severing the chain.[109](#)

In effect, both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings promulgate the doctrine known as "the great chain of being" [110](#) in which all parts of the created world are joined together by causality or mutual influence and in which each part builds upon and augments what is below it. This cannot help but rule out any rigorously non-causal interpretations of the universe, that is, any view which asserts that events - regardless of whether they are micro or macrocosmic - simply happen without prior cause. The concept of absolute randomness is simply not an option in this view. Causality ensures that there is at least some fundamental order in the universe[111](#) and rules out any understandings of the universe as genuinely chaotic. It bears noting here that causality and determinism are not the same things. As Aristotle pointed out, two unrelated lines of causality may meet and generate a coincidence, an event that could not be determined by even the most minute analysis of either line of causality. If I go to the market to buy fruit and Ann goes to buy bread, our meeting was not pre-determined though every movement has a cause. Further, if Ann pays me the money she owes me, that too is not determined by our mere meeting. These causes, while necessary, are simply not sufficient to explain the events fully from which we may conclude that causality does not necessarily lead to the loss of free will.

There is, however, another sense in which the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on a great chain of being, namely, the existence of a cosmic hierarchy, "an order of perfection in the kinds of existence, with man highest among the biological existents."[112](#) This, of course, is readily apparent in the Baha'i Writings, when Abdu'l-Baha says, for example, that the differences in reflecting the divine bounties are "of degree and receptivity"[113](#) and that "all beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."[114](#) Humankind is the acme of natural, phenomenal beings because it is "the collective reality, the general reality and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth."[115](#)

2.13) The Structure of the Cosmos

Would Aristotle agree with Abdu'l-Baha on the nature of this cosmic hierarchy? We must answer positively because the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share identical views on the hierarchical structure of the physical world. According to Aristotle and the Writings, nature is divided into four kingdoms with ever-increasing powers of action: the mineral, vegetable, animal and human¹¹⁶ where every step up includes the powers below it in addition to a new power that provides an essential identity. Humankind, of course, comprehends all the levels below it, that is, has all the powers of the mineral, vegetable and animal in addition to a distinguishing and essentially human power of reason.¹¹⁷ Aristotle's views on this matter receive one of their most thorough explorations in Book III of *On the Soul*.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which "corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing's essence."¹³⁰ Soul, in other

words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at all.”¹⁴⁹ Not being “the formula of a thing’s essence”¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think “seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers.”¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is “set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and

eternal.”¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha’i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, “The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body” and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle’s belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha’i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke’s materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is “the cause or source of the living body.”¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu’l-Baha says, “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle’s claim that “the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter”¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu’l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – “substance [that] exists by itself”¹⁵⁹ and “accident”¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an “accident”¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the “rational soul is the substance”¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle’s who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body’s final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu’l-Baha’s statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that “The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . . ”¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential

distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Baha'i Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is

exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."[185](#) Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"[186](#) those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."[187](#) This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."[188](#)

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy[189](#) – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"[190](#) without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"[191](#) and even "the form of forms"[192](#) which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."[193](#) In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."[194](#) Because it is itself not sensible[195](#), the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"[196](#) of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities[197](#) such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms*, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to discern the truth in all things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature,

which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”[213](#) or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that

Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, "is not that the object is constituted by thought."²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an "extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind."²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says "the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence."²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He "fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously."²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their "personal desires"²¹⁹ and thus "erred grievously."²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an "ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom."²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our "lower nature, which is ignorant and defective."²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the "science of reality."²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from "the ignorant of mankind into the knowing"²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that "the ignorant must be educated."²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the 'construction' of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, "The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence."²²⁷ How we interpret those "realities"²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being "the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy"²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may

become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world.[232](#)

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?[233](#) Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?[234](#) What could the phrase "His attributes"[235](#) even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."[236](#) Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.[237](#)

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."[238](#) If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?[239](#) The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.[240](#)

If God had no real attributes how could they be made "resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man"?[241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes 'of God' and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to "join partners with God."[242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes"²⁴³, a fact supported by his statement that "In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product."²⁴⁴ If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word 'know' and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, "This gift ["the gift of understanding"] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation."²⁴⁵ Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, "the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application."²⁴⁶ Elsewhere he says, "Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things"²⁴⁷ once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word 'discover' throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials²⁴⁸; and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: 'substance', for example, is also employed as a synonym for 'wealth.'²⁴⁹

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of 'standpoint epistemologies', the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are 'relative'. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that

Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."[250](#) In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.[251](#) Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."[252](#) When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"[253](#) of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.[254](#) For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.[255](#) The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.[256](#)

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances[257](#) of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha’i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’”[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He”[263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is.”[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu’l-Baha’s explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the

Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case[276](#), but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for

instance: "Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible."²⁷⁷ The phrase "composite substance of matter"²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, 'substance' is meant as 'sensible substance' or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of 'substance' begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is "pure sperm." Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

'Substance' is certainly not being used as "sensible substance" or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The "substance of the essence of Oneness"

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means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how

Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the

earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position.

The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God [295](#); the human soul [296](#); humankind [297](#); belief in Divine Unity [298](#); justice [299](#); "all created things" [300](#) beauty [301](#); species of living things [302](#); truth [303](#); religion [304](#); "this new age" [305](#); and the spirit. [306](#) On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality" [307](#); "the realities of" [308](#); "reality of" [309](#); "inner reality" [310](#), and "inner realities" [311](#) also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence" [312](#) of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp. [313](#)

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies" [314](#) - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent" [315](#) in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality." [316](#) We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God" [317](#) where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality" [318](#) as "capacity" [319](#) or potential (which is another key

Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase “[e]ach according to its capacity.”³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or “formula”³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of ‘circular’ in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of “intuitive thinking or of perception.”³²³ As he writes, “It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form.”³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: “matter is unknowable in itself.”³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, “there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances.”³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to “opinion”³²⁸ and, although he does not explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that

only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, an book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahai Writings see the soul as a ‘foreign entity’ that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, “the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body.”¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as “absurdity”¹⁸⁶ those theories that would “join the soul to a body, or place it in a body.”¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul’s relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: “When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.”¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahai Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha’s metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle’s analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle’s belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the “spirit surrounds the body”¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahai Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind “the place of forms”¹⁹¹ and even “the form of forms”¹⁹² which is “capable of receiving the forms of an object.”¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, “the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing.”¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls “symbols”¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, “The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impossible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.”²⁶⁸ An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”²⁶⁹ It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.²⁷⁰

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path?²⁷¹

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”²⁷², of truly “utter abasement”²⁷³ before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”²⁷⁴ With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”²⁷⁵ suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahai Writings see the soul as a ‘foreign entity’ that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, “the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body—that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body.”¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as “absurdity”¹⁸⁶ those theories that would “join the soul to a body, or place it in a body.”¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul’s relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: “When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.”¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahai Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha’s metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle’s analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle’s belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the “spirit surrounds the body”¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahai Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind “the place of forms”¹⁹¹ and even “the form of forms”¹⁹² which is “capable of receiving the forms of an object.”¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, “the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing.”¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls “symbols”¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, “The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."¹⁹⁸ The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*¹⁹⁹

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."²⁰⁰ Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"²⁰¹ "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."²⁰² Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"²⁰³ of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."²⁰⁴ Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."²⁰⁵ In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"²⁰⁶ about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"²⁰⁷, an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."²⁰⁸

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He”[263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, an book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause ¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."¹⁹⁸ The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*¹⁹⁹

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."²⁰⁰ Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"²⁰¹ "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."²⁰² Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"²⁰³ of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."²⁰⁴ Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."²⁰⁵ In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"²⁰⁶ about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"²⁰⁷, an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."²⁰⁸

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind "with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*"[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human 'construction' of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or "Kingdom of Names"[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impossible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system ¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’”[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is.”[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.”²⁶⁸ An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”²⁶⁹ It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.²⁷⁰

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path?²⁷¹

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”²⁷², of truly “utter abasement”²⁷³ before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”²⁷⁴ With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”²⁷⁵ suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, an book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impossible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."¹⁹⁸ The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*¹⁹⁹

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."²⁰⁰ Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"²⁰¹ "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."²⁰² Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"²⁰³ of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."²⁰⁴ Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."²⁰⁵ In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"²⁰⁶ about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"²⁰⁷, an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."²⁰⁸

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He”[263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impossible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, an book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."¹⁹⁸ The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*¹⁹⁹

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."²⁰⁰ Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"²⁰¹ "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."²⁰² Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"²⁰³ of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."²⁰⁴ Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."²⁰⁵ In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"²⁰⁶ about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"²⁰⁷, an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."²⁰⁸

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahai Writings see the soul as a ‘foreign entity’ that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, “the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body.”¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as “absurdity”¹⁸⁶ those theories that would “join the soul to a body, or place it in a body.”¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul’s relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: “When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.”¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahai Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha’s metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle’s analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle’s belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the “spirit surrounds the body”¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahai Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind “the place of forms”¹⁹¹ and even “the form of forms”¹⁹² which is “capable of receiving the forms of an object.”¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, “the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing.”¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls “symbols”¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, “The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’”[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is.”[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.”²⁶⁸ An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”²⁶⁹ It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.²⁷⁰

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path?²⁷¹

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”²⁷², of truly “utter abasement”²⁷³ before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”²⁷⁴ With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”²⁷⁵ suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, an book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahai Writings see the soul as a ‘foreign entity’ that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, “the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body—that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body.”¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as “absurdity”¹⁸⁶ those theories that would “join the soul to a body, or place it in a body.”¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul’s relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: “When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.”¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahai Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha’s metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle’s analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle’s belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the “spirit surrounds the body”¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahai Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind “the place of forms”¹⁹¹ and even “the form of forms”¹⁹² which is “capable of receiving the forms of an object.”¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, “the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing.”¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls “symbols”¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, “The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’”[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is.”[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Baha'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Baha'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Baha'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real – albeit, as seen above, limited – knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

3) The Soul

Both the existence and nature of the soul are another key area of agreement between the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. However, before we explore this subject, it is important to clarify the Baha'i usage of some terminology. We must understand that according to Baha'u'llah, "spirit, mind, soul, hearing and sight are one but differ through differing causes."¹¹⁸ In other words, the mind, the rational soul, the power of sight and hearing are all the operations of a single power – spirit – through different instruments. Abdu'l-Baha confirms this when he says, "It is the same reality which is given different names according to the different conditions wherein it is manifested . . . when it governs the physical functions of the human body, it is called the human soul; when it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called mind; And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and travels to the spiritual world, it becomes designated as spirit."¹¹⁹ Aristotle expresses a similar view as the mind as a power of the soul when he writes, "by mind I mean that whereby the soul thinks and judges."¹²⁰ As Julio Savi writes, "These words enable us to understand the fundamental one-ness of the spirit beyond the *multiplicity of its expressions*. The instruments of the soul (or spirit of man) should not, therefore, be viewed as independent entities, but as different aspects of the same reality in its different functions."¹²¹ It is essential not to lose sight of this fact if we wish to make clear sense of what would otherwise be a confused and self-contradictory jumble in the Writings.

The significance of the equation 'spirit = mind = soul' is that it is in fundamental agreement with Aristotle's own views. As in Baha'u'llah's statement, Aristotle, too, maintains that the soul controls such bodily functions as movement¹²², nutrition and reproduction¹²³ and possesses the powers of sight¹²⁴, touch¹²⁵, sensation and, most significantly in light of Baha'u'llah's statement, thinking.¹²⁶ Thinking is an activity of the mind, or, what Aristotle calls the 'active reason' or 'active intellect'. As we shall see, it is explicitly identified with the soul's higher, specifically human functions for Aristotle, like the Baha'i Writings, also divides the human soul into two parts, the lower, that is, animal bodily functions and the higher, specifically human function of reason which he calls "divine."¹²⁷ Moreover, in complete agreement with the Baha'i Writings,¹²⁸ he makes it clear that sickness, old age and death are not a diminishing of the soul itself but rather of its bodily "vehicle."¹²⁸

We have already seen explicit agreement on the existence of a vegetable, animal and human soul each including the powers of the one below it and adding its own essentially unique powers.¹²⁹ Soul is the essence or form which “corresponds to the definitive formula of a thing’s essence.”¹³⁰ Soul, in other words, is the “essential ‘whatness of a body’.”¹³¹ This, in turn, makes soul the “substance”¹³² as well as the “actuality”¹³³ of a body – a point on which it is absolutely necessary to note that ‘substance’ does not necessarily mean ‘matter’ in Aristotle. That said, let us see just how similar Aristotle’s views and the Writings. I shall first present a list of items on which Aristotle and the Writings share congruent views on the soul, and then focus on two in particular: the immateriality of the mind and the immortality of the soul.

3.1) Rational Soul as Humankind’s Essential Attribute

The first similarity between the Writings and Aristotle’s concept of the soul is both the Baha’i Writings and Aristotle see the rational soul as the essential attribute that distinguishes humankind from the rest of nature. Abdu’l-Baha, for example identifies the “rational soul”¹³⁴ with the “human spirit”¹³⁵ and describes the “station of the rational soul”¹³⁶ as “the human reality.”¹³⁷ Elsewhere he asserts “The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing.”¹³⁸ For his part Aristotle shows his agreement with Abdu’l-Baha by saying that “Without reason man is a brute.”¹³⁹ He also asserts that “happiness is activity in accordance with virtue”¹⁴⁰ and that the highest virtue – both in the sense of the highest good and the highest power in humankind – is contemplation.¹⁴¹ He writes, “Happiness, therefore, must be some form of contemplation¹⁴² and adds that since “reason is divine”¹⁴³, “he who exercises his reason and cultivates it seems to be both in the best state of mind and most dear to the gods.”¹⁴⁴ Although Aristotle himself never uses the scholastic term “rational soul”, clearly in his view, reason distinguishes humankind distinct from the rest of nature¹⁴⁵ and it is by virtue of rationality that humankind partakes of the divine, or, at any rate partakes of it in a fuller measure than the rest.”¹⁴⁶

3.2) Rational Soul As Immortal

The fact that the human soul distinguishes us from the rest of nature prepares the way for us to recognize that, unlike other beings, it is immortal, another issue on which Aristotle and the Baha’i Writings agree. Aristotle’s own views show some development – but no wavering on the fundamental issue of eternal survival. In *Eudemus*, he asserts that the soul existed before entering the body and will continue to exist afterwards ¹⁴⁷ an opinion not continued in Aristotle’s other works touching on the same subject. This view bears at least some resemblance to the Baha’i notion that soul pre-existed potentially before its creation or actualization in material form.¹⁴⁸ However, his most famous and influential reference to immortality occurs *On the Soul*, where he tells us unequivocally that the human soul, or at least, the specifically human parts of the soul “may be separable because they are not the actualities of any body at

all."¹⁴⁹ Not being "the formula of a thing's essence"¹⁵⁰ that is, the essence of any bodily organ, they are not limited by them. Elsewhere, Aristotle informs us that the ability to think "seems to be to be a *widely different kind of soul, differing as what is eternal from what is perishable*; it alone is capable of existence in isolation from all other psychic powers."¹⁵¹ Aristotle also says that when the mind is "set free from its present conditions it [the mind] appears just as it is and nothing more; this alone is immortal and eternal."¹⁵² In short, the specifically human aspects of the soul can exist without the body and are immortal. The strength of Baha'i belief in immortality – which needs no great elaboration here – is perhaps best summed up in the title of chapter 66 of *Some Answered Questions*, "The Existence of the Rational Soul After the Death of the Body" and the various proofs offered in support. What is plainly evident is that Aristotle's belief in the immortality of the mind, or active reason¹⁵³ and the Baha'i Writings are not just in general but in quite specific agreement that what survives is our human, rational functions and not our animal selves.

3.3) Soul as Substance

Among other agreements between Aristotle and the Writings, we find the idea that the soul is a substance¹⁵⁴, not, of course, in the sense of Locke's materialist misunderstanding of the term, but in the sense of a distinct entity that does not merely exist as a predicate of something else. Indeed, it is "the cause or source of the living body."¹⁵⁵ The soul is real and no mere emergent or epiphenomenon of physiological processes and is distinct from the body. In other words, when discussing the soul, we must not confuse the appearance of the soul in the body once the body is an adequate mirror and the notion that soul is a product of physiological events. In fact, the situation is quite the other way around: as Abdu'l-Baha says, "the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists."¹⁵⁶ Elsewhere, he states:

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.¹⁵⁷

These statements could almost be a paraphrase of Aristotle's claim that "the soul is the primary substance and the body is the matter"¹⁵⁸ which is the philosophical gist of what Abdu'l-Baha says. Using Aristotelian language, – "substance [that] exists by itself"¹⁵⁹ and "accident"¹⁶⁰ – he clearly rejects the reduction of the soul to an "accident"¹⁶⁰ or epiphenomenon resulting from physiological processes. By asserting that the "rational soul is the substance"¹⁶¹, he is, of course, implicitly asserting that the rational soul is also the essence and actuality of the body; it is what the body seeks to realize as best it can given its material limitations to reflect the essence or soul. These views harmonize with Aristotle's who tells us, for example, that the soul is a substance, form, essence and actuality¹⁶², the body's final cause¹⁶³ as well as the origin or cause of the living body.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha's statement here also tells us that the soul or spirit is, in effect, unassailable by external events, a view that is shared by Aristotle when he writes that "The incapacity of old age is due to the affection not of the soul but of its vehicle . . . mind itself is impassible . . ."¹⁶⁵

3.4) Mind / matter- Mind / body Dualism

The concept that the “spirit or human soul”[166](#) can exist separately from the body inescapably commits Aristotle[168](#) and the Baha'i Writings to some form of what is called mind / matter dualism but which could just as well be termed soul / matter dualism. Aristotle says bluntly that “the body cannot be the soul”[169](#) and Abdu'l-Baha states,

The spirit, or the human soul, is the rider; and the body is only the steed. . . The spirit may be likened to the lamp within the lantern. The body is simply the outer lantern. If the lantern should break the light is ever the same . . .[170](#)

Elsewhere he tells us “the reality of man is clad in the outer garment of the animal.”[171](#) Clearly evident in these statements is an actual not merely intellectual distinction between the “human soul” or the specifically human powers of the soul and our animal bodies. This supported by the fact that Abdu'l-Baha often and approvingly quotes Christ's statement that what is born of flesh or matter is flesh, and what is born of spirit is spirit.[172](#) Clearly, spirit and matter are two essentially different things.

It may be objected that the oneness of reality precludes any form of dualism but such is not the truly case. The following quotation is often produced to support some kind of monism in the Baha'i Writings:

It is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning-- for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two. Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element. Thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized. But this permanence was not definite, and did not attain realization and perfect existence until after a very long time. Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms; or rather from the composition and combination of these elements innumerable beings appeared.[173](#)

In the first place, both this passage and its context, refer to matter rather than spirit or soul and assert no more than that originally, matter was one and that g

radually various forms of matter evolved or broke symmetry from this initial supersymmetry. There is not the slightest suggestion here that soul, spirit or mind are somehow forms of matter albeit very subtle

ones. Moreover, even if one chose to ignore its obvious reference to matter alone, and read this passage as implying that spirit and matter were all originally one, the situation does not change for us as we are today. The passage clearly indicates that matter, and by supposed implication, spirit, have by now evolved into different forms so that whatever unity they may have once had, no longer exists now. Whatever the situation may have been in the past, we now live in a world that shows a clear and essential distinction between matter and spirit. Thus, if there is a monism in the Baha'i Writings, it is at best a 'historical monism' which is no longer functional.

I would suggest that the following understanding of Abdu'l-Baha's statements is more consistent with the Writings than the 'monist' interpretation. His statement that "The organization of God is one: the evolution of existence is one: the divine system is one"¹⁷⁴ does not mean all parts of the organization or system are the same and that differences are unreal. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha rejects that concept when he says that humankind is truly and essentially separate and distinct from nature, that we possess powers not found in nature itself, that, in effect, the phenomenal universe, though one insofar as it is a coherent and unified system dependent on God, is also divided in two insofar as we possesses powers not found in the rest of nature.¹⁷⁵ This constitutes a radical division or differentiation within nature though it does not, of course, deny the oneness of the overall *system of reality*. Furthermore, according to the Writings, things differ in their capacity to reflect the divine Names or bounties¹⁷⁶ and those differences of degree are real, essential and permanent.¹⁷⁷ Just as we can never evolve into gods, so stones can never evolve into humans; these stations are fixed because "inequality in degree and capacity is a property of nature."¹⁷⁸ These inequalities and differences are real because they are divinely ordained as part of God's system. Nor can they be crossed.¹⁷⁹ The issue can, of course, be explained using Aristotelian terminology: there are many kinds of unity – unity of matter or material, unity of substance or essence, unity of form, unity of purpose, unity of logical relationship such as dependence and so on. "The organization of God"¹⁸⁰, the single divine system¹⁸¹ has a *formal and purposive unity, which is different from and must not be confused with as a material and / or substantial unity*. Because all things are unified does not mean they are all fundamentally the same. In other words, the dualism of mind-soul-spirit and physical body does not contradict the organizational or systematic unity of creation.

3.5) The Body / Soul Connection

Given their distinctness, it is natural to ask how body and soul are connected. According to Abdu'l-Baha, the mediator between the outer, bodily senses and our inner mental senses such as memory and imagination is the "common faculty" which "communicates between the outward and inward powers and thus is common to the outward and inward powers."¹⁸² Aristotle's views on this matter are not directly addressed to the mind / body issue as we understand it now, so we must infer his views from other writings to related topics. For example, he mentions the "common sense"¹⁸³ that allows the presentation of events perceived outwardly to be recollected inwardly. In effect, this "common sense" mediates between the physical senses or the body and the intellectual senses or the remembering mind. He also sees it as deriving general, that is, abstract ideas from the physical data supplied by the senses. Here too it operates as a mediator between body and mind.¹⁸⁴ He does not, however, consider it a separate sixth sense.

In continuing to explore the subject of how the soul is related to the body, we must be sure to divest ourselves of the notion that the soul somehow resides inside the body like a seed in a pot. Neither Aristotle nor the Bahá'í Writings see the soul as a 'foreign entity' that somehow enters the body. As Abdu'l-Baha tells us, "the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body--that is to say, it does not enter it, for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body."¹⁸⁵ Aristotle holds a similar view, criticizing as "absurdity"¹⁸⁶ those theories that would "join the soul to a body, or place it in a body."¹⁸⁷ This, of course, leaves us with the question of the soul's relationship to the body, a relationship described by Abdu'l-Baha as follows resembling the relationship of light to a mirror: "When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear."¹⁸⁸

What, then, is the precise relationship of the soul or spirit to the body according to Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings? We must bear in mind that both provide a philosophical answer, that is, formal answers or answers in principle, rather than specific physical or bio-chemical explanations for which we will have to look elsewhere. If we analyze Abdu'l-Baha's metaphor of the mirror and the light, we find that, in Aristotelian language, the issue is relatively straightforward: the soul is formally or virtually but not substantially present in the body just as the sun is formally but not substantially present in the mirror. The sun enlightens the mirror just as – to use Aristotle's analogy¹⁸⁹ – the impression of the signet ring informs or provides form to the wax. In other words, the sun itself is never in the mirror but its image, its form or virtual presence is there as long as the mirror is capable of reflecting it. When the mirror breaks, the sun does not disappear anymore than the signet ring is destroyed when the wax melts. In Aristotelian language, we would say that the soul in-forms matter to the degree that matter is capable of receiving that form.

Several things are clear at this point. First, in these analogies, neither the sun nor the signet ring depends on something else for its existence whereas the reverse is certainly the case. Second, light is the intermediary between the sun and the mirror, an observation similar to Aristotle's belief that the soul enlightens or provides light for the active intellect (mind) to perceive, abstract and discriminate. Third, both light source and its emanated light surround the mirror, just as, according to Abdu'l-Baha, the "spirit surrounds the body"¹⁹⁰ without being physically present in it. Aristotle would agree with at least the latter part of this statement.

4) Epistemology: Mind and Brain

Another important similarity between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings is the clear distinction between the non-material mind and its physical organ, the brain. The two work together but are not the same. For his part, Aristotle calls the mind "the place of forms"¹⁹¹ and even "the form of forms"¹⁹² which is "capable of receiving the forms of an object."¹⁹³ In other words, the mind is not a physical thing, or, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "the power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing."¹⁹⁴ Because it is itself not sensible¹⁹⁵, the mind does not work with sensible realities, that is, actual substances, but rather with forms, or what Abdu'l-Baha calls "symbols"¹⁹⁶ of outward things. Instead, the mind perceives forms, picturing to itself as forms various perceptions and intellectual realities¹⁹⁷ such as love, God, goodness and other qualities. In a discussion of epistemology, he says, "The other kind of human knowledge is intellectual – that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no

outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses."[198](#) The Aristotelian term for a phenomenal reality that is not sensible is 'form', so here too we find endorsement for the Aristotelian concept of the mind working with forms. Indeed, Abdu'l-Baha interprets this capacity to work with forms as a sign of the mind's super-natural nature:

The spirit of man, however, can manifest itself in all forms at the same time. For example, we say that a material body is either square or spherical, triangular or hexagonal. While it is triangular, it cannot be square; and while it is square, it is not triangular. Similarly, it cannot be spherical and hexagonal at the same time . . . *But the human spirit in itself contains all these forms, shapes and figures . . . As an evidence of this, at the present moment in the human spirit you have the shape of a square and the figure of a triangle. Simultaneously also you can conceive a hexagonal form. All these can be conceived at the same moment in the human spirit, and not one of them needs to be destroyed or broken in order that the spirit of man may be transferred to another.*[199](#)

At this point it need only be added that the belief that the human spirit or mind can take in by perception or imagine and contain the forms of things is one of the center-pieces of Aristotelian philosophical and cognitive psychology whose outlines are visible in Abdu'l-Baha's remarks here and elsewhere.

4.1) Reality is Discovered not Constructed

The similarities between Aristotle and the Bahá'í Writings in regards to epistemological matters do not end here. Perhaps most significant and far-reaching is their agreement that the mind or spirit discovers and does not create either spiritual or material realities. Bahá'u'llah writes, "Immerse yourselves in the ocean of My words, that ye may unravel *its* secrets, and *discover* all the pearls of wisdom that *lie hid in its depths*."[200](#) Elsewhere He writes that the divine "gift of understanding"[201](#) "giveth man the power to *discern the truth in all things*, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to discover the secrets of creation."[202](#) Nowhere does Bahá'u'llah state or even suggest that humankind creates or constructs reality. Indeed, if they create anything like reality it tends to be things like the "*thick clouds*"[203](#) of "idle fancies and vain imaginings."[204](#) Bahá'u'llah uses the latter phrase throughout His Writings to refer to those who refuse to see the truth about Him and prefer their own imaginative constructions. Significantly, He accounts them with "the lost in the Book of God."[205](#) In a similar vein, He exhorts the Persian people to "come forth to discover the Truth which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth"[206](#) about the new Manifestation of God. Abdu'l-Baha's statements consistently support the contention that human beings discover – and do not construct – truths about the spiritual and material realms. Indeed, humankind is distinct from the rest of nature and animals because it possesses "the intellectual characteristic, which *discovereth* the realities of things and comprehendeth universal principles"[207](#), an idea that is widely scattered throughout the Writings in a wide variety of contexts. He also informs us that "When we carefully investigate the kingdoms of existence and observe the phenomena of the universe about us, we *discover* the absolute order and perfection of creation."[208](#)

The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.[209](#)

Furthermore, God has endowed humankind “with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to *investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept.*”[210](#) Aristotle, of course, holds the same views, so much so that the whole notion of the human ‘construction’ of reality is found nowhere in his works. The *Metaphysics* begins with his reflections on past efforts to find the truth about reality, and their various inadequacies; the *Psychology* and various other books explore how the senses and the soul work to perceive and discover the nature of the surrounding world.

4.2) Epistemological Realism and Correspondence Theory of Truth

From this we can conclude that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle agree on several key epistemological issues subject to vociferous contemporary debate: first, that natural reality is objectively real and does not depend on human observers for its existence; second, that reality and its laws are given by God, not constructed, and that we must work with what is given; and third, that truth is the correspondence between reality and our interpretation of it, or, put otherwise, that reality and our interpretation of it are two distinct things and that we must test our interpretations against reality to discover whether or not they are in agreement. From this follows that reality is discovered and that there is such a thing as error, that is, an erroneous or inadequate understanding of reality that can be cured by abandoning it in order to change from ignorant to more knowledgeable. In other words, the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle share a realist epistemology.[211](#) Without these premises, the entire Aristotelian and Baha'i enterprises would collapse, most especially the Baha'i doctrine of progressive revelation which presumes increasingly adequate comprehension of various truths. Finally, the belief that properties are real makes the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle incompatible with nominalism, that is, the belief that properties are either arbitrary human selections or outright impositions only externally related to their objects and that essences are fictitious. (See Aristotle's refutation of the underlying logic of nominalism in *Metaphysics*, VII, 12.) For its part, realism holds that the relationship between attributes and substance is internal, that is, inherent and intrinsic and that essences are natural and real.

The fact that for Aristotle the forms, essences or universals do not exist in a separate world or “Kingdom of Names”[212](#) must not under any circumstances be interpreted to mean that for him these forms or essences are any less real than for Plato, the neo-Platonists and the Writings. No

less than Plato, Aristotle is a realist, that is, believes that essences or forms are absolutely real and not mere human constructs. Moreover, the universals we abstract from particular things correspond to absolute realities; they are emphatically not arbitrary creations or selections. For this reason, the most we may conclude is that the difference between Aristotle and Plato is not whether or not the original essences or forms exist, but rather about *where and how* they exist – in a separate world, “Kingdom”²¹³ or mind – or exemplified or instantiated in particular things. From this it follows that Aristotle cannot be presented as a nominalist without doing violence to his metaphysic and epistemology; his view, says renowned Aristotle scholar W. D. Ross, “is not that the object is constituted by thought.”²¹⁴ Indeed, he is an “extreme realist allowing for no modification, still less construction of the object by the mind.”²¹⁵ Even in regards to the universal that is abstracted from particulars, Ross says “the universal is always for Aristotle something which though perfectly real and objective has no separate existence.”²¹⁶ This means that we cannot divide the Baha'i Writings from Aristotle on the issue of the reality of forms or essences as Keven Brown seems tempted to do in *Evolution and Baha'i Belief*.²¹⁷

Indeed, it is not too much to say that anything other than a realist, correspondence theory of truth would render numerous passages in the Writings meaningless. If reality were not objectively given and all constructions equally adequate or valid, Baha'u'llah could not lament that He “fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously.”²¹⁸ These physicians are ignorant precisely because they have constructed reality to fit their “personal desires”²¹⁹ and thus “erred grievously.”²²⁰ Abdu'l-Baha could neither tell us that an “ignorant man by learning becomes knowing, and the world of savagery, through the bounty of a wise educator, is changed into a civilized kingdom.”²²¹ nor that the soul's journey is necessary in order to acquire divine knowledge²²² to overcome our “lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.”²²³ Manifestations could not provide humankind with the “science of reality.”²²⁴ Without the existence of objective truth about reality, we could not be transformed from “the ignorant of mankind into the knowing”²²⁵; it would make no sense for Abdu'l-Baha to say that “the ignorant must be educated.”²²⁶ Indeed, the whole Baha'i concept of evolution to further knowledge and understanding both in this world and the next would be moot.

Aristotle's and the Writing's agreement about the discovery (not construction) of reality and the correspondence theory of truth is bound to be a controversial issue in our times when theories about the ‘construction’ of reality abound. It is, therefore, necessary to explain in somewhat greater detail what Aristotle and the Writings mean. In a nutshell, the issue stands as follows: we all discover the same basic reality but construct different interpretations of it. However, these interpretations or constructions are constrained by the nature of what they are interpreting. For example, we may understand fire in various ways from the specific chemistry of combustion to a manifestation of divine power but what no interpretation can deny is that fire is hot and will burn human flesh unless counter-measures are taken. As Abdu'l-Baha says, “The power of the rational soul can discover the *realities of things*, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence.”²²⁷ How we interpret those “realities”²²⁸ may differ but all recognize the reality of fire's power to inflict severe damage on human flesh. In other words, in considering this issue, we must, as precisely as possible, distinguish between what is perceived and what is interpreted, that is, we must distinguish between metaphysics and epistemology and hermeneutics. Here is another example. In progressive revelation, the Writings expect all to accept the fact or reality of Christ as a Manifestation of God but also they expect us to understand or interpret what this fact means in different ways at different times in history. As we can see, the doctrine of progressive revelation logically depends on the mind's ability to distinguish real and objective fact from interpretation. Indeed, the Writings go even further because they explicitly condemn some interpretations as erroneous, as being “the dust of vain imaginings and the smoke of idle fancy”²²⁹, that is, misinterpretations due to the distortions of the ego and our lower animal natures. Here too, the Writings implicitly expect us not only to distinguish real fact from constructed interpretation but also to distinguish

between constructions that are appropriate and inappropriate for the age in which we live. This idea is also presented in the image of the sun's light or reality being diminished or distorted by the dust on the mirror: "The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."²³⁰ The fact is that the mirror can be cleansed.²³¹ Not only does Abdu'l-Baha support this but he also makes it clear that not all mirrors are equal in this regard: "The most important thing is to polish the mirrors of hearts in order that they may become illumined and receptive of the divine light. One heart may possess the capacity of the polished mirror; another, be covered and obscured by the dust and dross of this world."²³²

4.3) The Reality of Attributes

If attributes were not real, did not inhere in their substances and were not essential, how are we understand Abdu'l-Baha's statement that the "names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental"?²³³ Obviously the attributes of Divinity are not merely human constructs. If they were, why bother to strive to live up to Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "The soul that excels in attainment of His attributes and graces is most acceptable before God"?²³⁴ What could the phrase "His attributes"²³⁵ even mean? Indeed, if attributes and properties are not real, then there is no rationale for God's creation since, as Abdu'l-Baha tells us that "It is necessary that the reality of Divinity with all its perfections and attributes should become resplendent in the human world."²³⁶ Furthermore, the whole of Baha'u'llah's salvational project would be useless if properties were not real and did not provide real knowledge because of the Noonday Prayer's assertion that we were created "to know [God] and to worship [Him]" would be rendered meaningless. If attributes are only human selections or impositions, are not inherent and do not provide real knowledge about things, they could only teach us, at most, about ourselves and our own modus operandi. This would effectively leave us locked in a bubble of our own perceptions and constructs. Aside from their logical weaknesses, such views simply contradict Abdu'l-Baha when he says,

But the question may be asked: How shall we know God? We know Him by His attributes. We know Him by His signs. We know Him by His names. We know not what the reality of the sun is, but we know the sun by the ray, by the heat, by its efficacy and penetration. We recognize the sun by its bounty and effulgence.²³⁷

Indeed, it is Baha'u'llah Himself who tells us that attributes are real when he describes God as "the Creator of *all* names and attributes."²³⁸ If God created them, they are obviously real. If attributes were not real how could it be true that "His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world"?²³⁹ The following statement would also become senseless:

He must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the *attributes and the names of God* shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.²⁴⁰

If God had no real attributes how could they be made “resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man”? [241](#) Indeed, if attributes are simply human fictions and impositions, they could not be attributes ‘of God’ and it would be we, the created, who are shaping the Creator and making Him in our image. Such a notion simply violates the Baha'i principle that the created cannot comprehend – let alone shape – the Creator. Believing that such is the case would indeed be to “join partners with God.” [242](#)

Nor should we think that it is only God Whom we know by means of attributes, for, as Abdu'l-Baha says, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes” [243](#), a fact supported by his statement that “In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product.” [244](#) If these attributes did not provide real knowledge about the object, the use of the word ‘know’ and its variations would be inappropriate. Obviously attributes are not simply human impositions but rather, actually provide knowledge about the objects or substances we are studying. As Baha'u'llah says, “This gift [“the gift of understanding”] giveth man the power to discern the truth *in all* things, leadeth him to that which is right, and helpeth him to *discover* the secrets of creation.” [245](#) Abdu'l-Baha reminds us that the rational soul, “the inner ethereal reality grasps the mysteries of existence, discovers scientific truths and indicates their technical application.” [246](#) Elsewhere he says, “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things” [247](#) once again demonstrating that in the Baha'i view, humankind is capable of gaining real knowledge through an exploration of reality. The continual use of the word ‘discover’ throughout the Writings also proves that we discover what already exists independently and do not construct it.

5) The Analysis of Reality

The topic of discovering reality leads readily to the all important issue of how we analyze it to discover its truth. This subject, already touched on in our discussion of causality and the Prime Mover, makes it clear that the Writings analyze and present reality in Aristotelian terms. In other words, they present an Aristotelian vision of reality in which there are substances which have essential and non-essential attributes; in which things have essences; in which – as already shown – change is the actualization of potentials [248](#); and in which materially existing things are composites of matter and form, and subject to corruption. Readers may confirm for themselves the pervasive use of this Aristotelian terminology by typing them into any hyper-text edition of the Writings. They will find

that these words occur in almost every book. Of course, some of them also have a general, non-philosophical usage: ‘substance’, for example, is also employed as a synonym for ‘wealth.’ [249](#)

In reviewing what follows, one must remember that the Aristotelian concepts form a coherent system of inter-dependent concepts and the use of one concept necessitates the use of at least some others.

However, before embarking on our survey of the Aristotelian analysis of reality, it is necessary to look briefly at the important issue of ‘standpoint epistemologies’, the notion that reality appears differently to differing points of view. All too often these are erroneously equated to relativism, the notion that all viewpoints of reality are equally true because all are ‘relative’. However, properly understood, the two are not the same and must be clearly distinguished. The Baha'i Writings and Aristotle embody a stand point epistemology but are not even slightly relativistic. The best way to grasp the difference is to imagine a jigsaw puzzle picture of Mount Fuji. A true stand-point epistemology simply asserts that there are many pieces all of which have some portion of the truth, or the mountain; whatever their differences, the pieces

are ultimately rationally compatible with one another and will form a picture of the whole mountain. A relativist, on the other hand, asserts that any piece – indeed, any piece from any puzzle – makes an equally valid fit at every point on our Mount Fuji puzzle. There is nothing in the Baha'i Writings nor in Aristotle that suggest such relativism since doing so would vitiate not just the concept of the Manifestation as a revealer of absolute truth but the entire concept of knowledge altogether. We must not be misled, as some have been by Shoghi Effendi's statement that "religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final."²⁵⁰ In each case where Shoghi Effendi makes this statement, the word 'relative' is clearly used in reference to progressive revelation not to the truth value of the essential teachings. In terms of our illustration, each Manifestation adds a piece to the puzzle but this does not even remotely suggest that the truth value of the piece is not absolute.

5.1) A Brief Crash Course: Substance, Attribute and Essence

The primary concept in Aristotle's analysis of reality is 'substance', a concept which underwent some development but never strayed far from the belief that a substance is anything which does not exist as the attribute of something else. Substances are particulars, a fact that is used by Abdu'l-Baha in explaining the return of Elias.²⁵¹ Your raincoat is a substance and so is this essay. Substance, however, does not only mean 'matter' or what Aristotle called "sensible substances."²⁵² When it does, such matter forms the "substratum"²⁵³ of a thing, namely that which is given form. 'Matter' in Aristotle's view is a relative term: matter is anything which potentially receives form. In the case of your raincoat, matter may be physical material but in regards to this study, the matter is the ideas expressed therein. A substance possesses attributes which identify it as the particular substance it is, raincoat, essay ,rose or idea and these attributes are called its 'essence' which we must distinguish from other non-essential or 'accidental' attributes which a thing does not require to be what it is.²⁵⁴ For example, weight and color are non-essential, accidental attributes in regards to the ideas in this essay. However, being water-proof is an essential attribute to raincoats. Each of these three substances differs essentially.

Neither essential nor accidental attributes can exist by themselves as substances: no one has ever seen 'red' or 'democracy' or 'crumpled' by themselves because they depend on substances to be real. Roughly speaking, Aristotle uses 'substance' in four different ways, as "sensible substance" or physical matter that receives form and is, therefore, a composite; as "non-sensible substance" or spirit, or soul that provides form; as a general reference to any particular thing which does not exist as an attribute of something else; and finally, as the form, essence or actuality of a thing.²⁵⁵ The difference among the latter three terms is one of nuance and emphasis. 'Form' emphasizes the structure of a substance; 'essence' emphasizes its necessary attributes and 'actuality' emphasizes the typical or culminating actions of a thing. Like the Baha'i Writings, Aristotle identifies humankind as the highest substance in the phenomenal realm.²⁵⁶

5.2) God as a Substance

Let us now analyze the concept of substance as used in Aristotle and the Writings in greater depth. Both use the term in two distinct ways: as "sensible substance or matter in the ordinary sense and as something which does not exist as an attribute. There are also non-sensible substances²⁵⁷ of which Aristotle recognizes, above all, God, the Unmoved Mover. Significantly enough, this is exactly the Baha'i position. For example, speaking about the Manifestations, Baha'u'llah tells us,

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.* [258](#)

In this passage we first notice that, as with Aristotle, the “physical”[259](#) is clearly distinguished from the “substance”[260](#), in this case, God’s substance. This establishes that the physical and the substantial are not the same and that God is a non-physical or non-sensible substance. If substance were understood materialistically, this statement would suggest that God has a material substance, a notion flatly incompatible with the Baha'i Teachings for that would render God susceptible to change[261](#) and make the Divine a composite of matter and form. However, understood in an Aristotelian fashion, this passage presents no philosophical difficulties. God is the supreme substance, the only entity which absolutely exists and can in no wise be seen as an attribute of something else. He is also the supreme actuality insofar as God has no potentials left to be actualized. That is precisely what makes the Divine inaccessible to us.

Furthermore, this passage tells us that spiritually, the Manifestation is an immediate emanation from God, and is formally, though not substantially identical with the Divine. This reading, based on Aristotle’s terminology, is confirmed in the immediately following sentences which state, “He hath, moreover, conferred upon Him a double station. The first station, which is related to His innermost reality, representeth Him as One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself. To this testifieth the tradition: ‘Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is.’[262](#) The Manifestation has formal identity with God – “I am He” [263](#) – but not substantial identity with God because He is “born of the substance of God”[264](#) and “He is that He is”.[265](#) For an Aristotelian, this relationship is rational, clear and perfectly unparadoxical: it is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause of the other.

5.3) The Soul as Substance

Abdu'l-Baha's explanation of the nature of the immortal soul provides another example of the Aristotelian usage of ‘substance’ and related terms.

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.[266](#)

The first thing to notice is how the Master defines substance in proper Aristotelian fashion as something that “exists by itself”[267](#) and not as an attribute of something else. Moreover, he refers to the soul as a

non-material substance and applies this concept vis a vis the body. This is an implicit denial of any epiphenomenalist understanding of the soul, a point he emphasizes by describing the body with the Aristotelian term “accident.” [268](#) An ‘accident’ according to Aristotle, is an attribute that is non-essential to the existence of a thing which is why the substantial soul can live without the ‘accidental’ body. Thus, we can see at this point, how Abdu'l-Baha grounds his argument for the immortality of the soul in the concepts and definitions originally espoused by Aristotle. He explicitly states that “the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.”[269](#) It is, in other words, the essence that provides the form that makes a body into a human body. Interestingly enough, Baha'u'llah applies this same concept to the Manifestation’s relationship to the world:

At that time, the signs of the Son of man shall appear in heaven, that is, the promised Beauty and *Substance of life* shall, when these signs have appeared, step forth out of the realm of the invisible into the visible world.[270](#)

No materialist understanding can make rational sense of the italicized phrase. However, if we apply Aristotle’s concept of substance, its meaning becomes clear: the Manifestation is the essence of life; He is That which informs matter with life itself, and is, in that sense, the world-soul. He is also the actuality, the culmination of life, that is, the highest possible example of life in the phenomenal realm.

5.4) Other Uses of ‘Substance’

The Aristotelian use of substance also allows us to perceive new levels of meaning in some of Baha'u'llah's statements. Take, for example, the following:

When shall these things be? When shall the promised One, the object of our expectation, be made manifest, that we may arise for the triumph of His Cause, that we may sacrifice our substance for His sake, that we may offer up our lives in His path? [271](#)

At the first, most obvious level, this discusses our willingness to sacrifice our material wealth for the Manifestation. However, an Aristotelian reading suggests a deeper level: it expresses a willingness to sacrifice our very identity, our nature, our essence, our actuality for God's Cause. This is the martyrdom of ontological “evanescence”[272](#), of truly “utter abasement”[273](#) before God. Baha'u'llah alludes to such complete and ongoing ontological martyrdom when he praises such holy souls as mullah Husayn: “They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved.”[274](#) With the Aristotelian reading of ‘substance’, we see new aspects of Husayn’s martyrdom. The phrase “will continue to offer up”[275](#) suggests that such ontological martyrdom may not be a single act but rather a way of life.

I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the Writings never use the word ‘substance’ as a synonym for ‘material’, for such is patently not the case²⁷⁶, but rather that we must carefully distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian usage if we wish to avoid confusion. Take the following passage for instance: “Here we see that if attraction did not exist between the atoms, the composite substance of matter would not be possible.”²⁷⁷ The phrase “composite substance of matter”²⁷⁸ makes no sense until we recall that for Aristotle, all physical things were composites of matter which received form²⁷⁹ which together make them a substance or unity.²⁸⁰ Indeed, as seen in the following example, we find that Abdu'l-Baha fully recognizes that material things are composites of matter and form.

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection. The substance of Adam's physical life was earth, but the substance of Abraham was pure sperm; it is certain that the pure and chaste sperm is superior to earth.²⁸¹

In the first part of this statement, ‘substance’ is meant as ‘sensible substance’ or common matter which, in order to be anything must receive form. He denies the reality of darkness because in the phenomenal world, nothing that lacks substance and form is real. However, in what follows, the meaning of ‘substance’ begins to shift in an Aristotelian direction. The substance of Adam, that is, his sensible substance as well as his being as a non-attribute, is connected to the earth, whereas the substance of Abraham, a Manifestation, is “pure sperm.” Unless we read them with the Aristotelian substratum of the Writings in mind, such statements could intellectually embarrass a modern believer. However, the meaning becomes clear when we recall that for Aristotle, sperm provided the form and that for Abraham in His divine station, that form is provided by God with whom He shares a formal, though not substantial identity. This divine form is obviously superior to the sensible matter of the earth. Lest anyone quarrel too harshly with Aristotle about sperm providing form, let us recall that sperm decides whether an infant is male or female, that is, in that regard, the formative principle.

Here is another example of Abdu'l-Baha's use of substance in Aristotelian fashion:

Know that the Reality of Divinity or the substance of the Essence of Oneness is pure sanctity and absolute holiness--that is to say, it is sanctified and exempt from all praise.²⁸²

‘Substance’ is certainly not being used as “sensible substance” or matter, for

that would render the passage meaningless or in complete denial of other Baha'i Teachings concerning the non-materiality of God. This passage emphasizes in the strictest philosophical manner that God, the Reality of Divinity, is a substance insofar as it is absolutely not an attribute of anything else. The “substance of the essence of Oneness”

means that the very substratum or essence of what it means to be One is totally independent and sanctified above all other things. Although this idea is not new to Baha'is, it is interesting to observe how Abdu'l-Baha explains – and thus provides the basis for a rational philosophical defense – for this belief in Aristotelian terms.

5.5) Hylomorphism: Matter and Form

As the foregoing passages make clear, the Writings and Aristotle²⁸⁴ agree on hylomorphism, that is, the belief that everything in creation is made of both matter and form, though we must bear in mind that 'matter' is a relative term in Aristotle insofar as it can refer to physical 'stuff' sometimes called "elemental"²⁸⁵ by Abdu'l-Baha. Most fundamental to Aristotle is the doctrine that matter is the potential to receive form. In Aristotle, the form is the active principle while matter is receptive, passive or patient, an idea Baha'u'llah expresses when He writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.²⁸⁶

Two comments are in order. First, the statement that these two are the "same" ²⁸⁷ refers to their origin and nature as created entities while their differences refer to their action in the phenomenal world of creation. This statement should no more be read as a reductionism to spirit than as a reductionism to matter. The Baha'i Writings, like Aristotle's thought, are examples of hylomorphism, the belief that existence is made of matter and form; therefore, neither of them can be reduced to a spiritual-idealistic or material monism. Second, in the foregoing passage, the "heat generated"²⁸⁸ by the imposition of form onto matter is the tension that inevitably exists between form and matter, since form is the active principle of perfection while matter is the principle of receptivity but also of inertia. This tension is part of what constitutes and most especially living things since the quest for perfection, that is, highest possible self-expression, is an integral part of their existence. Although Aristotle does not explicitly refer to such tension, it is implicit in his characterization of matter and form.

The distinction between matter and form also brings us back to our resolution of the apparent self-contradiction between creationism and emanationism and the associated doctrines of time. 'Creation' refers to the notion that God made the world like an artisan, a concept implying that the world was made at some point in time. On the other hand, emanationism suggests that the universe is eternal – which, by the way, is another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings – and, consequently, there is no

creation in time. On the basis of Aristotle²⁸⁹, we may conclude that 'creation' refers to the specific creation of a concrete thing such as the earth or this universe whereas 'emanation' refers to the formal principle, essence which has always existed as a potential available for actualization. After all, a Creator requires a creation but nothing says this creation must be material. In short, there is no contradiction between the two Teachings because one refers to the order of specific matter and time, whereas the other refers to the order of potential and form.

5.6) Essences

Not only do Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings analyze the world in terms of substances and attributes, they also use the concept of 'essence' and accept essences as real. Controversial though it may be in the current philosophical climate, the bottom line is that the Baha'i Writings espouse a form of essentialism, a fact that comes as no surprise given its adherence to a realist epistemology and metaphysic. Because even the most cursory reading of such Aristotelian works as *Metaphysics*, *Physics* and *On the Soul*, or any basic exposition of his works reveals the centrality of 'essence' to his thought, I will not needlessly lengthen our study by expounding on this subject. More to our purpose is to see how the concept of essence appears in the Baha'i Writings, for here, too, it plays a key role since everything, including God, is said to have an essence.

The Baha'i Writings use the term 'essence' in a variety of contexts and to express a variety of ideas but none of them stray from the fundamental Aristotelian meaning of (a) the attributes needed for a substance to be the kind of substance it is; (b) the defining or characteristic nature of a thing and (c) the capacities or potentials inherent in a thing; (d) the final cause of a thing' (e) the formal cause of a thing and (f) substance and (g) the form of a thing and (h) actuality and (i) culmination.²⁹⁰ These various usages, differing in what aspect of the concept of 'essence' they emphasize, are related insofar as they all refer to those attributes, potential or actual, which make a thing the kind of and particular thing it is. Everything we can discuss has an essence which we can know insofar as human beings have the capacity to know it.

There seems to be little question that the Baha'i Writings see all things endowed with an essence as described by Aristotle. In *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Baha'u'llah tells us that "the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing [is] a door of knowledge."²⁹¹ In *Gleanings*, Baha'u'llah states that "it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God."²⁹² In this quotation, the essence or "inmost reality"²⁹³ of a thing is defined by its capacity or potentiality to "testify

to the revelation of the names and attributes of God."²⁹⁴ The concept of essence as capacity is in perfect harmony with Aristotle's basic position. The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God ²⁹⁵; the human soul²⁹⁶; humankind²⁹⁷; belief in Divine Unity²⁹⁸; justice²⁹⁹; "all created things"³⁰⁰ beauty³⁰¹; species of living things³⁰²; truth³⁰³; religion³⁰⁴; "this new age"³⁰⁵; and the spirit.³⁰⁶ On the basis of such a wide array of references to 'essence' it is, in my view, safe to say that the existence of essences is an important point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings. Indeed, these references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realize that such phrases as "inmost reality"³⁰⁷; "the realities of"³⁰⁸ ; "reality of"³⁰⁹; "inner reality"³¹⁰, and "inner realities"³¹¹ also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasized by the parallel usage seen in the references to the "inmost essence"³¹² of things.

In addition to being pervasive, the terms 'essence' and "inmost reality" are used in a manner that is not only consistent with but also combines several, if not all, of Aristotle's usages into one. Take, for example, the following statement:

(1) Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. (2) Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self . . . (3) These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp.³¹³

In these statements we can detect all of Aristotle's uses of the term 'essence'. The first statement shows the term being used as a reference to (a) the non-accidental attributes of a thing or substance and (b) its defining characteristic and therefore, (c) its form as well as (d) the formal cause of that substance. Because the formal cause requires (e) a final cause, we can say that the latter is included by logical implication. In the second statement, which is really a re-statement of the first with particular focus on humankind, we can detect the additional sense of 'essence' as actuality and culmination, that is, the emphasis on the undeniable existence of humankind as the culminating point of phenomenal reality. Finally, in the third statement, we see 'essence' - the attributes of God which are also "energies"³¹⁴ - portrayed as potentials or potencies "latent"³¹⁵ in us and are waiting to be moved from "from potentiality into actuality."³¹⁶ We could also repeat this analysis for Baha'u'llah's statement that "[f]rom that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the

knowledge of God"³¹⁷ where we especially notice the attention drawn to "inmost reality"³¹⁸ as "capacity" ³¹⁹ or potential (which is another key Aristotelian term) as well as to how the phrase "[e]ach according to its capacity."³²⁰ shows capacity or essential potential defining a thing as the kind of thing it is.

In light of what we have learned, it seems impossible to escape the conclusion that the Baha'i Writings espouse some form of essentialism, although at this point, the exact nature of this essentialism requires further study and exploration. This conclusion is also supported, as we shall see, by Baha'i and Aristotelian ethics. Given the already noted division of nature into the mineral, vegetable, animal, human and supernatural realms, it cannot be denied that the Baha'i world picture divides phenomenal creation into kinds, each with their essential endowments of God's attributes and consequently, natural and appropriate behaviors. These kinds are further divided into individuals who are or are not appropriate exemplars of their kind.

5.7) Essences and Epistemology

According to Aristotle³²¹ what we know of a thing is its universal form, its universal essence or "formula"³²² to use Aristotle's example, we recognize the form of 'circular' in a particular bronze circle but we must recall that while there is a formula for a circle and a formula for bronze, there is no formula or definition for this particular bronze circle. It is only recognized by the aid of "intuitive thinking or of perception."³²³ As he writes, "It is not possible to define any thing, for definition is of the universal and of the form."³²⁴ This formula or definition is known by the attributes manifested by specific examples but the particular itself is not known in and as itself: "matter is unknowable in itself."³²⁵ This position does not differ significantly from what Abdu'l-Baha means when he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.³²⁶

Not only does this passage show yet again that attributes are real and provide real knowledge, but it also tells us that the essence of a particular thing is not completely known. In other words, all human knowledge is about universals and forms, but cannot extend to the knowledge of the essence of a particular thing. As Aristotle says, "there is neither definition of nor demonstration about sensible, individual substances."³²⁷ Aristotle relegates the knowledge of particulars to "opinion"³²⁸ and, although he does not

explicitly say so, he, like the Baha'i Writings, would have to admit that only God is capable of knowing particulars in-themselves, that is, the individual essence, or what Duns Scotus called the "haecceitas".

However, this cannot logically be taken to mean that the knowledge we obtain from the attributes and qualities is (a) false or (b) inadequate for our phenomenal purposes or (c) arbitrary fictions or (d) absolutely relative. In other words, while the Baha'i world picture is divided in two, with a noumenal realm known only to God and phenomenal realm known to us via attributes and qualities, this somewhat Kantian aspect of the Writings does not undermine the adequacy or correctness of our knowledge for the phenomenal realm and of universals. If it did, it would undermine science, which is a knowledge of universals in contrast to art which provides intuition of particulars. There is simply no logical reason to lead the Writings into relativistic wastelands seen in the work of some contemporary philosophers. Instead, the limitations on our knowledge lay the foundation for a rational argument for the necessity of revelation.

5.8) Potential

Another aspect of substance, ultimately related to essence³²⁹, is potential. The word 'potential' does not refer to a mysterious little hidden 'thingy', but rather to the fact that only a certain number of transformations can be made in a substance without destroying it as the substance it is. One can use a raincoat as a blanket, a book as an eye-shade and, with some manual dexterity, a rose as a drinking cup: these are potentials that each of them has. However, no amount of effort transforms a raincoat into a 800 pound gorilla, a book into a water-well or a rose into a telephone. They simply lack the potential for that. In many ways, essences are simply a 'cluster' of potentials that define a kind and / or an individual. As something changes or evolves - either moved internally or externally - its potentials are actualized or realized, that is, its potentials are revealed and manifested. A rosebud blossoms to produce a beautiful fragrance; of their own nature, a raincoat and essay do not.

Now is also a good time to notice that raincoats, books and roses have different forms: in fact, each of them is matter that has been given a certain form that allows it to be and do certain things. All substances are composed of matter and form which are not the same: the matter in the raincoat could have been given the form of an umbrella, the words in the book arranged into a long metaphysical poem and the rose could have formed another kind of flower. Like two sides of a coin, matter and form are distinct, but not separable: all matter has form but which particular form it receives can vary. Matter also imposes potential limits on what forms can be adopted: sheet metal cannot accept the form to become light bulbs or rodeo bulls.

5.9) Essences and Potentials

In previous discussions, we have seen the close connection between essence and the concept of potentials. This connection is made even closer when we realize that an essence can also be defined as the collection of potentials that distinguish a particular kind and / or individual from other kinds and / or individuals. Humanity, for example, is endowed with and essentially defined by its rational and spiritual capacities both as an individual and as a species or kind. We must also bear in mind that potentials (and essences) are not little entities hidden in a substance like raisins in a bun. Rather they are (a) the ability or power to initiate or stop change in oneself or another³³⁰ or (b) the ability to change into or be changed into something else or be acted upon.³³¹ To make use of the old proverb, a sow's ear lacks the potential to be changed into a silk purse. The lack of a particular potential or potency is a "privation."³³² All created things suffer or exhibit absolute "privation" vis a vis God, and for this reason may be properly described as "utter nothingness."³³³ This understanding allows a logical resolution to the apparent contradiction between Baha'u'llah's statement that we come from "utter nothingness"³³⁴ and Abdu'l-Baha's claim that nothing can come from absolute nothingness.³³⁵ As the context makes clear, Baha'u'llah's statements are in relation to "privation" or our 'privative natures' vis a vis God whereas Abdu'l-Baha's assertions refer to substance and positive potentials or capacity. No logical contradiction exists because the statements are about different subjects. The concept of potentials also provides us with a rational interpretation of Baha'u'llah's statement that copper can be turned into gold and vice versa. ³³⁶ The language of this passage, for example, "lieth hidden"³³⁷, "possible"³³⁸ and "can be turned"³³⁹, clearly indicates this statement is about potentials or capacities, which makes it a statement of scientific fact.

The belief that potentials or capacities define us essentially is plain when Abdu'l-Baha says that "although capacities are not the same, every member of the human race is capable of education."³⁴⁰ This asserts that we share individually different portions of the general species capacity to learn. In both Aristotle and the Writings, these capacities are sometimes also portrayed as powers or abilities to act or be acted on.³⁴¹ The connection between capacities, or potentials and powers is plainly evident in the following quotation:

The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life. This is the bestowal of divine idealism.³⁴²

As we can see, potentials are the powers or abilities that humankind possesses, indeed, are the unique, that is, necessary characteristics that distinguish us from the rest of creation. However, we must be careful to note

that although the word 'potential', 'power', 'potency' and 'potencies' are used pervasively throughout the Writings, not all usages of the latter two refer to potentials. For example, the description of God as "He, verily, through the potency of His name, the Mighty"³⁴³ does not use 'potency' in the sense of 'potential' but rather in the sense of an existing power. As a matter of fact, reading it as 'potential' would lead to the serious theological error of ascribing potentials, that is, unactualized powers or attributes to God, and, thereby characterizing the Divine as imperfect. We must, therefore, be careful to distinguish between Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian uses of these terms. There are three other terms by which to explore the subject of potentials in the Writings: the first is 'latent', which is pervasively used.³⁴⁴ The second is "hidden" which is found in a similarly wide range of Baha'i texts referring to the concept of hidden - that is, potentially revealed or realized - qualities and their manifestation either through divine revelation, through natural processes or through human activity.³⁴⁵ The third is 'realize' which, when used philosophically instead of as a term for 'to understand suddenly', refers to the process by which the hidden or potential is made real, comes to fruition or is revealed in the world of being.³⁴⁶

The importance of the concept of potentials for Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings can hardly be over-stated especially in an age in which the topic of change, and especially evolutionary change, is so hotly debated. Both Aristotle's and the Writing's entire vision of change and development depend on his belief that change - be it locomotion, increase, growth or decay is the actualizing or realizing of hitherto invisible, hidden potentials. For this reason, they share a common understanding of evolution which is not seen as the alteration of one species into another but rather the successive actualization of hidden, unrealized potentials. This allows both to argue that each species is a specific and original complex of potentials that were always available or hidden in creation and that what appears to be the transformation of one species into another is really the actualization of hitherto hidden potentials.

(Among the alleged common ancestors of human and ape, outward similarities notwithstanding, only one group had the potential to manifest a rational soul. This group must have had this potential from the beginning because the concept of potentials leading to new potentials involves an infinite regress and is, thereby, logically untenable. Here's why. Either an organism has the potential to manifest rationality, or it does not. If it does not, it needs to acquire this potential (1) but to get this potential (1), it must first get the potential (2) to get the potential (1), and then, in turn it needs to acquire potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1) and so on . . . If the organism turns out to already possess potential (3) to get potential (2) to get potential (1), then the organism is obviously part of the distinct human line.)

Thus, it is inaccurate to say that Aristotle and the Writings deny evolution. Rather, they re-interpret the same data used by all anthropologists in terms of potentiality and conclude that all evolution is the actualization or manifestation of previously hidden potentials. They disagree with current

scientific views but they are not out of harmony with science because there is sound logical reasoning about potentials underlying their views.

5.10) Essence and Existence

The distinction between potential and actualization provides yet another point of agreement between Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings, namely the distinction between essence and existence. As already noted, for Aristotle, the essence may be seen as the potentiality of a thing: the identity of a hammer, for example, is constituted by all its potential uses that determine it can be employed as a prop to hold up a shelf of books as well as melted down to make a steel plate and cup but not as a guard dog. Our actions are required to bring the hammer's various potentials into actuality, that is, to bring them into existence. In other words, for Aristotle, existence is actualization: bringing something into existence means actualizing a potential. The same is true in the Baha'i Writings where we are brought into existence, that is, are actualized or manifest from mere potentialities which are actualized when the right combination of elements occurs. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Abdu'l-Baha asks, "Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?"³⁴⁷ The word "created"³⁴⁸ here must be read as meaning 'actualized', 'brought into appearance' or 'manifest' because if we read it as meaning 'brought into existence from absolute nothing', then Abdu'l-Baha would be contradicting his own statements that

existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.³⁴⁹

Thus, for the Writings, as for Aristotle, *to exist* means to be actualized or to be *manifest*: we do not really exist before the point of actualization although the potential for us exists because, according to Abdu'l-Baha, we cannot come into existence from absolute nothing. Consequently, it follows that things do not come into manifest existence merely because they have an essence, that is, merely because there is a potential for them to come into existence. Existence does not necessarily or automatically follow from one's potential for existing. It must be provided by a special act - in Aristotle, the continued action of the Unmoved Mover, and, in the Baha'i case, the voluntary act of God Who chooses which potentials to actualize. In other words, for a potential to come into existence requires an act from an entity that already exists and is, thereby, able to take action which is something only existing entities can do. In the Baha'i view, this 'entity' is ultimately God, Who actualizes or provides existence to all things other than Himself. Only God exists by virtue of His own nature, that is, only in God are essence / potential and actualized existence one and the same. In short,

it is not only God's nature to exist but also to exist as a perfectly actualized Being.

The distinction between essence / potential and existence is of supreme philosophical importance for both Aristotle and the Baha'i Writings because it is the foundation for a Baha'i existentialism. The core of existential philosophies is the belief that 'existence' precedes essence', although the meaning of this statement is variously interpreted. In all cases, however, existence is a result of a distinct act, and theistic and atheistic existentialisms diverge on the issue of whether God or the individual is ultimately responsible for this act. A Baha'i existentialism would, in a sense, have it both ways. As in theistic forms of existentialism, God is ultimately responsible for the act that manifests a potential in the world, and, as in atheistic existentialism, it is the individual who creates his or her own 'voluntary self' by choosing which potentials to actualize in this life. Indeed, the whole notion of our lives being a process of actualizing potentials leads us closer to the form of existentialism developed above all by Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel, although it bears affinities to Sartre's existentialism as well.

Although this issue is explored more fully in my paper "*The Call to Being: Introduction to a Baha'i Existentialism*", it is worthwhile to digress for a moment to make a few salient points to demonstrate the versatility of the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle. It is in my view, precisely this versatility which led Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha to retain whatever was useful in Aristotle as the substratum of the Writings. For example, if our lives are a process of actualizing our potential selves, certain consequences are unavoidable. Our lives are matters of perpetual choice among possibilities - often based on little more than faith - in a world in which we face the challenges of trying to relate to a God Who is essentially unknowable, as well as a world made up of things whose essences we cannot know directly. We live, and choose, in a world of essential mystery. Moreover, it also becomes evident that we are never completely ourselves which means that self-alienation and estrangement, wonder, and mystery are inherently structured into our being. We are, since the Writings assert the existence of an after-life of perpetual development and evolution, ladies and gentlemen 'in waiting', and therefore, not surprisingly, prone to 'angst' about our choices and their consequences. We are Marcel's "*homo viator*", for ever in transit, for whom every moment is simultaneously an arrival and departure and our only 'rest' is the journey itself. Moreover, we are intrinsically dissatisfied because we are, and never can be, never fully and completely ourselves. We are locked in a constant struggle to become - or to avoid becoming - what we are not and our 'nothingness' always haunts us. Indeed, we can become so overwhelmed by this struggle that we give up, act in 'bad faith', lose our individual being in the anonymity of the crowd and adopt a collective rather than true-to-ourselves, personal identity. Then, we face the challenge of hearing the 'call to being' and finding the power to answer it. We are always 'in a situation' and 'in a world'; we are concrete real beings, not abstract concepts, whose moods and attitudes present the world and others to us in various ways and condition our 'modes of being'. Finally, the Writing's emphasis on the process of actualization and on our individual and social evolution to overcome ourselves to help establish a

more highly evolved form of humankind has clearly Nietzschean overtones worthy of exploration. Readers even passingly familiar with existential thought will recognize both the existential themes as well as authors alluded to in this paragraph.

It may be objected that the Writings and Aristotle cannot be essentialist and existentialist at the same time. However, this objection does not hold because of the individual's free will to choose which of his human and personal potentials to actualize, when, where, how and why. Aristotelian essentialism does not do away with choice; it is not a form ethical determinism. What the Aristotelian insights confirmed by the Writings do is to provide an outline of the nature and structure of being and specifically human being, a project in which they are not fundamentally different than *Being and Time*, *Being and Nothingness* and *The Mystery Of Being*. (Even Sartre who is most allergic to any suggestions of a general 'human nature' still recognizes, and thereby contradicts himself by reserving for humankind the specific character of "pour-soi" as distinguished from everything else which is "en-soi".) A Baha'i existentialism explores how we personally experience the nature and structure of human being, and what this experience means for us as individuals in the world.

5.11) Substance-Attribute Ontology

Closely associated with Aristotle's concept of substance is the concept of attributes since substances can only be known by the attributes they possess, a crucial fact explicitly stated in the Baha'i Writings: "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes."³⁵⁰ This also applies to our knowledge of God:

"Inasmuch as the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities, how much more this is true concerning the reality of Divinity, that holy essential reality which transcends the plane and grasp of mind and man?"³⁵¹

This issue is of far-reaching philosophical importance because it shows that the Baha'i Writings and Aristotle both share a substance-attribute analysis of existence or a substance-attribute ontology and this, in turn, limits the kind of metaphysics and epistemologies to which they can be logically allied. This is clearly evident from even a cursory examination of Abdu'l-Baha's preceding quotations in which there are three points worthy of note. First, the properties are "their"³⁵² properties; they belong to a particular created substance and are clearly not arbitrary human constructs or 'fictions' imposed on them by the perceivers. The properties of substances are not

necessarily human impositions. Second, phenomenal things are known to us through their attributes, from which it follows logically that these attributes provide real - albeit, as seen above, limited - knowledge. However limited it may be, such knowledge is still real knowledge about the substance possessing or manifesting the attributes. Third, this knowledge comes to us directly from the substances by means of their attributes or properties which we perceive. Such is precisely the import of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that "the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror."³⁵³ In other words, the mind perceives or reflects these attributes directly and immediately just as a mirror directly and immediately reflects whatever it faces.³⁵⁴ Just as humankind reflects the divine perfections³⁵⁵, so the mind reflects the real attributes of the substances around it.

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