

Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance

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First presented at Irfan Colloquium, Bosch Bahá'í School, May, 2004.

Published in Lights of Irfan, Volume 6, 2005

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Bahá'í Writings to discover the nature of the ontology they embody. However, in a single paper, this project can only be an “initial reconnaissance,” a scouting of the territory in order to discover some of its most prominent features. A full and more complete examination awaits a book-length study.

The main value of this project lies in the fact that an ontology operates like a constitution: it is the philosophical frame of reference or context within which various ideas take on meaning. Any exposition of the Writings or any Bahá'í-based philosophizing must be in harmony with this ontological ‘constitution’, or at least, be neutral and not offend against its general principles. Thus, like any other constitution, a Bahá'í ontology provides a particular philosophical identity that distinguishes the Writings from other sacred books or the foundational books of various philosophies and ideologies. Knowing this identity lays the foundations for detailed and in-depth dialogue with religious and secular belief systems from around the world.

1. What is Ontology?

Ontology is the study of being and what it means to say that something ‘is’ or ‘exists’. As a branch of metaphysics¹, the study of the most general principles of reality, ontology specifically concerns itself with the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence. It focuses on questions related to being, such as “why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”²; what exists?³; is being an attribute?; does ‘to be’ mean to be a ‘substance’?; is true being one and unchanging?⁴; are ‘being’ and ‘existence’ the same?; is possibility or potentiality a form of existence?; what is the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’?; is reality monist (one) or pluralist (many)?; is ‘being’ amenable to rational study and if so, how and to what extent?, and, is there ontological parity among all beings? While far from complete, this list of questions provides at least a sense of the ontological enterprise.

2. Do the Bahá'í Writings Have an Ontology?

As the following example illustrates, the Bahá'í Writings definitely embody an ontology. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “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.”⁵ This statement commits the Writings to the existence – in some form – of spiritual substances such as

¹*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy; The Oxford Companion to Philosophy.*

² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This question immediately brings to mind Plato’s view that true being is only found in the realm of unchanging Ideas of which the changing entities around us are mere copies.

⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 239.

the soul⁶, and to material substances such as the body. Moreover, it defines the body, and perhaps matter in general, as an “accident”⁷, as a particular kind of attribute or quality of a spiritual substance. Because the soul is the substance and the body the attribute or accident, they obviously have different ways or modes of existing. For starters, it is evident that the ‘accidental’ body is in a relationship of existential dependence upon the soul, which it needs to exist. This suggests that the soul does not depend on the body for its existence – though it may depend on the body for its appearance or presence in the world of matter. Consequently, we are not surprised to learn that the soul or substance survives the dissolution of the physical composite⁸ we call ‘the body’. At this point, before we have even discussed what the Writings might mean by the term ‘substance’, the nature of accidents, and their relationship to time, it is clear that the Writings have supplied at least a partial answer to the basic ontological questions, ‘What exists?’, ‘What does it mean to be a substance?’ and ‘Is there ontological parity among all things?’

If the Bahá’í Writings exemplify an ontology, is it a system? At this stage in Bahá’í studies, it is not yet possible to give a definitive answer one way or the other though tentatively, we would answer in the affirmative because, as this paper shall demonstrate, it is already possible to discern the parameters of the system. We should not be misled by the fact that the system is not presented systematically throughout the Writings but rather in talks, tablets and letters given as need and opportunity occur. This piece-meal presentation does not in itself prove that when all the pieces are seen as a whole, there is no system. As this essay 6 show, the inter-relationship among ideas is so tightly-knit that it is difficult to study only one idea at a time because each idea is attached to so many others. Such an organic unity is precisely one of the hallmarks of a system.

3.) The Language of Bahá’í Ontology.

Careful analysis shows that to an almost overwhelming extent, the Writings use concepts and a philosophical language that overlap with the philosophical tradition begun with the work of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.⁹ A brief overview of these would include essence, substance; essential attribute; attribute; accident; potential; the prime mover argument; emanation; planes of existence; material, efficient, formal and final causes; the mineral, plant, animal, human kingdoms; contingent and necessary being; this world being an image of a higher world; the concept of the rational soul; an unknowable God, the institution of the Guardian; and change as the actualization of potentials. Not only are these terms and concepts used, but they are also used in a manner that is fully consistent with what we find in the original works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Moreover, the terms and concepts are used self-coherently throughout the Writings, that is, the range of meanings which are employed remains consistent.

This leads us to the question about how to interpret the consistent use of this philosophical language. This study contends that the Baha’i Writings plainly endorse many of the ontological principles and ideas found in this tradition as the basis for further philosophizing. However, this is not to imprison future philosophical developments in ancient times, for as the work of Whitehead, the neo-Thomists and Ken Wilber has shown, the tradition begun by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus is capable of highly diverse developments.

⁶ See *Some Answered Questions*, 83, about “intellectual realities” for an analogous concept.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 167.

⁹ See for example, Nima Hazini, “*Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Metaphysics*”; Mark Foster, “*Neo-Platonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Ontology*”; John Hatcher, *The Purpose of Physical Reality*; Ian Kluge, “*The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá’í Writings*”; Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*; Juan Cole, “*The Concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings*”; Keven Brown, editor, *Evolution and Bahá’í Belief*.

There are three main reasons for taking this position. The first is the sheer pervasiveness of the use of Platonic, Aristotelian and Plotinian terminology and concepts. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to a lesser extent, Shoghi Effendi are thickly sown with terminology and concepts from this philosophical tradition. In our view, it is extremely unlikely that such a far-reaching overlap of terminology and concepts is merely a matter of accident. The literary and philosophical sophistication of the Writings show that the authors were obviously in full and complete control of their diction and chose it because they always had a specific purpose in mind.

The second reason for concluding that the choice of philosophical diction was intentional and meant as a guidance in the development of Bahá'í philosophy is that these terms and concepts used consistently throughout the Writings over a period spanning a full century of writing by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. In other words, this consistency of diction spans four generations of writers expounding their teachings in very different circumstances, to very different audiences at very different times. To assert that this is coincidental is to stretch credulity.

The third reason for concluding that a particular ontology lies in the inherent weakness of the counter-arguments, of which there are basically two. The first counter-argument is that the philosophical concepts and terms were chosen as a means of communicating with a specific audience in its own terms. This argument might possibly have some merit so far as Middle Eastern audiences of the time were concerned but such is certainly not the case for western or other non-western audiences. In the West, since the time of Galileo and Descartes in the 17th Century, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition was scientifically and philosophically discredited most particularly in the areas of prime interest, physics, metaphysics, epistemology and ontology. Since that time, despite the efforts of neo-Thomists¹⁰ and neo-Aristotelians¹¹, the philosophy of this tradition has never been a part of mainstream philosophy. Therefore, we must conclude that *if* Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi intended to use the language of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus to reach western audiences in the 19th and 20th centuries, They miscalculated grievously. For a Baha'i scholar, the notion that a Manifestation of God and His chosen interpreters err so completely is not tenable for theological reasons but even a non-Baha'i scholar would have enormous difficulties in supporting such a conclusion. It follows that if the choice of philosophical language was neither accident nor error, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá intentionally chose this tradition to convey many of Their key concepts. This indicates that They want us to continue our exploration and thinking along these philosophical lines and to read the Writings in the intellectual light provided by this tradition.

A similar argument applies to reaching non-western audiences outside of the Middle East. Here too, the argument that this language was chosen to facilitate communication fails because these peoples were wholly unfamiliar with the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition. Initially, at least, such language is bound to be a barrier, a barrier that could be overcome only by a careful study of this tradition as presented in the Writings. It makes no sense to put these non-western peoples to so much trouble if there were no special value in doing so.

3.1) Making the Tradition and Language New.

¹⁰ Of whom the most widely known are Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain.

¹¹ This movement is best represented by the renowned Mortimer J Adler.

The second major argument against the belief that the Writings' use of the language and concepts of the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition is that in Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, "All things are now made new"¹² and that God has "instilled into every word a fresh potency."¹³ For these reasons, the Writings cannot belong outmoded tradition. This argument has two decisive weaknesses. First, it cannot be rationally denied that a careful textual analysis shows that the Bahá'í Writings use the terminology and concepts of this tradition in the way that is consistent with their original usages. A secular scholar would describe this as a conceptual continuity, whereas a Baha'i scholar would say this is *confirmation* of some of the tradition's philosophical insights. Second, the confirmation of this tradition does not necessarily imprison our understanding in the work of the ancients. The work of Whitehead and de Chardin irrefutable demonstrates that this tradition is enormously flexible and capable of considerable growth beyond its origins. The words have indeed received a "fresh potency."¹⁴

4) The Bedrock Principle of Bahá'í Ontology: Ontological Dualism of Creator and Created

This paper contends that the bedrock of Bahá'í ontology is the principle of ontological dualism between the Creator and the created. It rejects any form of ontological monism – a substantial one-ness of being¹⁵ – between God and humankind. God and creation are so fundamentally different in their modes of being that between them there exists an unbridgeable gulf denying any possibility of a direct connection, let alone substantial unification. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "there can be no tie of *direct* intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute."¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá also emphasizes this when he writes, "For the Preexistent is different from the phenomenal, and the phenomenal is opposed to the Preexistent."¹⁷

Because of the vast ontological gulf between the two¹⁸ – a difference of kind, not of degree – it is impossible for God to become man as held by some mystics. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this view, which he identifies with the Sufis but which also applies to Christian incarnationism, as "evident error."¹⁹ There is no way that "the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms."²⁰ He also rejects the view that man may become God; he asks rhetorically, "[H]ow can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality?"²¹ Bahá'u'lláh makes the same point when He says, "*no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being . . . every saint hath*

¹² *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 253; see also *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XIV, 27; *The Promised Day is Come* 46;

¹³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XLIII, 92 – 93.

¹⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XLIII, 92 – 93.

¹⁵ See Section 14 of this paper, "A Substantialist Ontology" for a precise meaning of 'substance.'

¹⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XXVII, 66; see also *Some Answered Questions* 293.

¹⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 293; emphasis added.

¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of course, reveals a three-fold division of existence – the stations of Creator, Manifestation and the rest of creation. (*Some Answered Questions* 295.) However, unaided natural reason, can, by itself, only identify two stations, Creator and created. The station of Manifestation requires revelation by the Manifestations of God. Moreover, the first fundamental division is between Creator and created.

¹⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 195

²⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 195

²¹ *Some Answered Questions* 221.

lost his way in seeking to comprehend [contain, encircle] His Essence.”²² He re-enforces this point by asking rhetorically, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?”²³ In other words, the ontological difference between the Creator and the created is too great to be overcome by the mere efforts of humankind.

Not only does ontological monism undermine Baha’i theology because it makes Manifestations superfluous as mediators between God and humankind, but it also ignores logic. First, if man truly becomes one with God, the Creator of all other beings, then the claimant in effect becomes his own creator, which is to say, he exists before he exists because God logically precedes all other beings. This is not logically possible. Second, the relationship of dependence on God can never be revoked or negated in any way. God is the perpetually indispensable ‘necessary and sufficient condition’ for the existence of anything other than Himself. Consequently, there can be no possible point of view, position or stance within creation where the distinction between Creator and created is overcome, where the primordial relationship of dependence on God is invalidated, or effectively negated in some way. To claim otherwise – as ontological monism does – is to ignore Baha’u’llah’s warning that “He hath assigned *no associate* unto Himself *in His Kingdom* . . .”²⁴

However, we must remember that the denial of ontological union or oneness with God does not preclude an ethical oneness in which man submits to or harmonizes his personal will with the will of God. This ethical monism is not only allowed but even encouraged by the Writings as an essential human goal. Nevertheless, we must not misinterpret this ethical harmonization as an ontological union.

The Writings provide two other reasons to reject ontological monism. First, ontological monism, in which man becomes God, also violates Baha’u’llah’s injunction not to “transgress the limits of one’s own rank and station.”²⁵ In a similar vein, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that even after death, the evolving human soul never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop.”²⁶ Second, ontological monism violates the principle of the unknowability of God, since actually (substantially) becoming one with something entail interior or subjective knowledge of it and its condition. However, in the “Commentary on the Islamic Tradition, ‘I was a Hidden Treasure . . .’”, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá categorically states his own position that “the path to knowing the innermost Essence of the Absolute is *closed to all beings* . . . How can the reality of non-existence ever understand the ipseity of being?”²⁷ Since the knowledge of God is utterly impossible, then no one – regardless of spiritual condition – can attain the necessary and sufficient conditions for obtaining such knowledge which in effect denies the possibility of unity with God.

Such knowledge is also impossible because “encompassment”²⁸ is one criteria of knowledge: “until one thing *encompasses* another, it cannot understand its inner nature.”²⁹ The problem for ontological monism is that according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the limited can never

²² *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 23 (“The Valley of Unity”); emphasis added;

²³ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 23 (“The Valley of Unity”).

²⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XCV, 192; emphasis added.

²⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XCIII, 188.

²⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 233; see also 234.

²⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure’*”; emphasis added.

²⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure’*.”

²⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure’*”; emphasis added.

See also *Some Answered Questions* 241; *Some Answered Questions* 157.

*comprehend, surround nor take in the unlimited.*³⁰ This categorical statement is itself enough to completely negate any conclusion about the equal validity of ontological monism and dualism in Bahá'í ontology.

4.1) Apparently Monist Passages

It may be argued that the Bahá'í Writings Themselves contain passages suggesting ontological monism, as, for example, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, "Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee."³¹ However, this passage is not really monist. Because we can find God's omnipresent presence reflected in the mirrors of our hearts³² does not mean that we have become ontologically one with God's Being. Moreover, this passage maintains the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived (God) – a fact which effectively precludes a monist interpretation.

Another passage that is sometimes quoted to support a monist interpretation of the Writings is found in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*.³³ Some wayfarers behold various colors, but "some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself."³⁴ A careful reading of this passage shows that its concern is epistemological – visionary – and not ontological, it is about perceiving not about the *being* of that which is perceived. To be ontologically monist, this passage would have to assert that "the place of appearance"³⁵ and the sun itself are actually one and that the person who gazes is one with what he gazes upon. However, this passage also preserves the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived and, therefore, cannot serve as an example of a monist tendency in the Writings.

The following is another passage quoted to support a monist tendency in the Writings:³⁶ "Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend."³⁷ There is no suggestion here or in immediately subsequent statements that the seeker becomes ontologically one with God since the passing away of the world or self or loss of awareness of them as separate entities – does not imply such actual one-ness. This passage is not really ontologically monist.

Finally, it is claimed that the Bahá'í belief that only God has absolute existence and that human existence is contingent is "in essence a monist position."³⁸ Such is far from being the case. First, God's absolute existence implies the nothingness of contingent creation, not the ontological identity of creation with God. Indeed, to insist on such identity is, in effect, to insist that God is nothing (like creation) and that creation is absolute (like God.) Both positions are untenable for Baha'is. Second, the assertion of ontological one-ness between Creator and created means that God is somehow present – albeit in different forms – in His creation. This position would be "appearance through manifestation"³⁹ which 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically rejects as "quite impossible."⁴⁰

³⁰ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 422; see also 81; emphasis added.

³¹ *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic) #13, 7.

³² Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 108

³³ See, for example, Moojan Momen's "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics.*"

³⁴ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20 – 21.

³⁵ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20.

³⁶ Quoted in Momen, "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics.*"

³⁷ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 36 – 37.

³⁸ "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics.*"

³⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 203.

⁴⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 203.

4.2) The Failure to Reconcile Monism and Dualism.

In light of this rejection of ontological monism in favor of ontological dualism vis-à-vis the Creator and the created, how are we to understand Dr. Moojan Momen's claim that the two positions are reconciled in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden treasure.'*"? According to Dr. Momen, 'Abdu'l-Bahá adopts a relativist approach to achieve "a reconciliation of the dichotomy"⁴¹ between an ontological dualism asserting that "there is a fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute"⁴² and an ontological monism stating that "there is no fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute."⁴³ But is this really the case? After his exposition of both views, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says,

But to this servant all these expositions and questions, stations and states are complete *in their own station* without defect or flaw. For although the object being viewed is the same, nevertheless the viewpoints and stations of these mystic knowers is different. Each viewpoint, *with respect to the person who is in that station* is perfect and complete.⁴⁴

Analysis shows that 'Abdu'l-Bahá strictly confines his remarks to the *subjective* criteria for truth: given their own presuppositions and criteria, the advocates of each viewpoint reason correctly and attain a conclusion that is consistent with their spiritual conditions as "knowers." In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is *subjectively* epistemological – concerned with the "knowers" and not with what is objectively known, with the perceiver and not with the perceived. He is not talking about what actually is the case but rather about what the viewer thinks is the case because of his presuppositions, nature and spiritual condition. Once this distinction is noted, it becomes clear that his judgment about the two viewpoints has no ontological implications at all.⁴⁵ Consequently, seeing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words as a relativist reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is to mistake a rather studiously neutral statement about two kinds of viewers as an endorsement of both their opinions.⁴⁶ Such is patently not the case.

If Dr. Momen's reading is correct, it would follow that 'Abdu'l-Bahá assumes that the spiritual condition, nature and understanding of the believer are by themselves sufficient to determine the objective *correctness* or *truthfulness* of a belief. However, the Writings do not espouse such a subjectivist theory of truth.⁴⁷ If They did, they would be maintaining that standpoint and spiritual condition is sufficient to establish objective truthfulness – which in turn

⁴¹ Momen, "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*" <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html> . Posted with permission of author and publisher (Kalimat Press 1988.)

⁴² Momen, "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*."

⁴³ Momen, "*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*."

⁴⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'*"; emphasis added.

⁴⁵ A similar conclusion was reached by Keven Brown in "*'Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to the Doctrine of the Unity of Existence*" in *The Journal of Bahai Studies*, Vol. 11, Number 34, September-December 2001.

⁴⁶ This, of course, raises the question as to why 'Abdu'l-Bahá would take such a neutral position and on this score we enter the realm of historical speculation. It is possible, for example, that he did not want to get the new faith or its adherents embroiled in a long-standing Islamic theological dispute especially while they were in Baghdad.

⁴⁷ In fact, the Writings hold to a correspondence theory of truth. See Ian Kluge, "*The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings*" for detailed documentation about the correspondence theory of truth in the Writings. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/4944/aristotle.html>

would prevent Them from dismissing some beliefs as “vain imaginings,”⁴⁸ “error,”⁴⁹ and “the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness”⁵⁰.

5) Evolutionary Relativism.

We are still left with the question of whether relativism be “a basis for Bahá’í metaphysics”⁵¹ or ontology? According to Dr. Momen, there can be no ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ interpretation of certain experiences and statements as monist or dualist because all knowledge “is relative [to the speaker’s standpoint] . . . This may be termed a cognitive or epistemic relativism.”⁵²

This assertion has a number of problems the first of which is the claim that humans are “unable to make any absolute statements about Reality.”⁵³ If this is meant categorically, what are Baha’is to make of the assertion “God exists”? For Bahá’ís, this declaration cannot be anything less than absolute since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá himself provided “proofs and evidences of the existence of God”⁵⁴ without any conditions on that conclusion. It is affirmed absolutely as true from all possible viewpoints and because nothing can be added to make it more true than it already is. Furthermore, from God’s absolute existence, we can – contrary to Dr. Momen’s claim – make indisputable ontological deductions. For example, God’s existence puts Him at the head of a hierarchy of being whose other members are existentially dependent on Him. This dependence is true from all possible viewpoints within creation. Denying or relativising this irreparably undermines the foundations of the Bahá’í theology.

Second, Dr. Momen falls into self-contradiction when he claims that “there can be no “absolute statements about Reality.”⁵⁵ This problem – well understood among philosophers – bedevils all assertions of absolute relativism because such statements undermine their own claims to be true. Once we realize we could just as well set aside the relativist principle as being relative itself, it loses any epistemic privilege to become the “basis of Bahá’í metaphysics.”

A third problem is that the denial of “absolute statements about reality”⁵⁶ in effect asserts that all viewpoints are equally true (or false) which in turn undermines the central doctrine of “progressive revelation.”⁵⁷ Guided by successive Manifestations, humans attain ever more adequate – though never perfect – knowledge of reality. We were “created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization.”⁵⁸ This injunction implicitly suggests an “*evolutionary relativism*”

⁴⁸ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 41.

⁴⁹ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 10.

⁵⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 137. This rejection of a subjective theory of truth is illustrated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s denial of the geocentric theory of the solar system. He says, “The eye sees the sun and planets revolving around the earth, whereas *in reality* the sun is stationary, central, and the earth revolves upon its own axis.” (“*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*” <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html>)

⁵² “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*” <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html> .

⁵³ “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*” <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html> .

⁵⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 5. Of course, it is important to distinguish the absolute assertion that God exists from particular descriptions of God; the latter may well be limited by our personal perspectives, but the former is an absolute truth.

⁵⁵ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*” <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html> .

⁵⁶ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*” <http://bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html>

⁵⁷ *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 220.

⁵⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* CIX, 215; emphasis added.

which asserts that knowledge – while never perfect – is nonetheless genuinely improving and progressive.

A fourth difficulty is that Dr. Momen’s “cognitive or epistemic relativism”⁵⁹ rejects epistemic privilege, a position that maintains that inasmuch as all views are conditioned by personality, spiritual, historical and cultural factors, they are equal. There is no absolute standard. However, in the Baha’i Faith the Manifestations “the perfectly polished mirror[s]”⁶⁰ and Their chosen interpreters are, indeed, epistemically privileged: Baha’u’llah’s “Book itself is the “Unerring Balance” established amongst men.”⁶¹ Baha’i teaching on this issue cannot be logically reconciled with epistemic relativism.

A fifth difficulty: if we argue that the statements of the Manifestations are privileged, but human interpretations of these statements are not, we face the problem of vacuousness. When all readings are equally true, then – because some readings contradict others – none are. Consequently, it becomes impossible to teach the Writings or even to discuss them since – all interpretations being equally accurate – no one knows what the Writings actually say. What is the point of becoming a Bahá’í or offering the Faith’s teachings as a solution to a wide variety of world problems if no one knows what the Writings ‘really’ mean? Obviously, the very *raison d’être* of the Bahá’í Faith is removed by an unqualified cognitive relativism.

How can we distinguish various degrees of truthfulness without infringing on every Bahá’í’s right to interpret the Writings for him or herself? This paper contends that the Bahá’í community has adopted negative gate-keeping as a means of retaining doctrinal cohesion. Any understanding of the Writings is acceptable if it is not ‘forbidden,’ that is, inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Sacred Text and/or the guidance from Abdu’l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. By adopting negative gate-keeping, Bahá’ís have, in fact, adopted a *qualified relativism* inasmuch as negative gate-keeping stipulates that within the framework provided by Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá , Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, all understandings that are not forbidden are equally valid or true.

The sixth problem with Dr. Momen’s views on relativism is his interpretation of Shoghi Effendi’s statement that Bahá’í Faith’s “teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.”⁶² He appears to understand this as a blanket relativism applicable to all subjects, but such is not the case. The context of this statement is progressive revelation in regards to which we must recall Abdu’l-Baha’s statements that “every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time.”⁶³ It is the “material ordinances” *not* the “essential ordinances” or “golden core”⁶⁴ which are relative. Because these “essential ordinances”⁶⁵ of religion are not relative, it follows that only a qualified relativism can apply to the Bahá’í Writings.

6) The First Great Ontological Question: Introduction

⁵⁹ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics.*”

⁶⁰ *Paris Talks* 26.

⁶¹ The Kita-i-Aqdas 13.

⁶² *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 58; see also the Preface to *The Promised Day is Come*; Bahá’í Administration 185.

⁶³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 106.

⁶⁴ Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.

⁶⁵ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 106.

Because the Bahá'í Writings embody an explicit and implicit ontology, they are able to answer one of the most fundamental ontological questions: “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”⁶⁶ In answering this basic question, the Writings also answer a host of supplementary questions and thereby lay out an entire ontological schema for future exploration and development. The question arises because nothing in our experience emerges from nothing. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “absolute nothingness cannot find existence.”⁶⁷ We never see matter created or destroyed; everything comes from something else not itself.

6.1) ‘To Be’ Means ‘to be Caused’ (With One Exception).

Unlike God, the created universe lacks “essential preexistence . . . which is not preceded by a cause,”⁶⁸ and, therefore lacks ontological self-sufficiency and independence. For this reason, the created universe, like every one of its contents, requires a creator or pre-existing cause since according to Bahá'u'lláh, “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.”⁶⁹ Already at this point several far-reaching ontological and metaphysical issues come to light. First, the Writings have provided at least a partial answer to the question, ‘What does it mean ‘to be’?’ Among other things, ‘to be’ means to be caused and to be contingent⁷⁰, that is, to require a pre-existent and external cause. Consequently, ‘to be’ also means to be part of a causal chain or network, to be essentially connected to other entities or acts in a community of predecessors that extends through time.⁷¹ This in turn suggests that the Bahá'í Writings are committed to a causal ontology.⁷² Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh removes any doubt on this issue in His declaration that “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.”⁷³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá declares that every effect must have a cause⁷⁴ and rejects as “manifestly absurd”⁷⁵ the notion of an infinite causal chain that does not lead to a First Mover. He uses this to prove the existence of God.⁷⁶ The fact that only God does not need a prior cause once again highlights what we have called the ‘bedrock principle’ of Bahá'í ontology – the absolute distinction between God Who has “essential preexistence”⁷⁷ and creation which does not. This distinction reinforces the commitment to some form of ontological dualism.

7) Why is There Something Rather than Nothing? The First Answer.

The Bahá'í Writings provide two, answers to this question. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “a creator without a creature is impossible . . . all the divine names and attributes demand the existence of beings.”⁷⁸ This, and similar statements⁷⁹ affirm the idea that there is something rather

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 1.

⁶⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 281.

⁶⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 280.

⁶⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXXXII, 162; see also LXXXI, 157 and *Some Answered Questions* 280.

⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* LXXXI, 157: “Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause . . .”

⁷¹ *Some Answered Questions* 178; emphasis added.

⁷² This moves Bahá'í ontology in the direction of causal or hidden variable interpretations of quantum phenomena in agreement with Einstein and Bohm that the Copenhagen interpretation is incomplete.

⁷³ *Some Answered Questions* 178.

⁷⁴ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 307; emphasis added. See also 424; *Tablet to August Forel* 16.

⁷⁵ *Bahá'í World Faith* 343.

⁷⁶ *Bahá'í World Faith* 343.

⁷⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 280.

⁷⁸ *Bahá'í World Faith* 297; emphasis added.

than nothing because God's perfection includes the title or name of 'Creator' which, in turn, logically "demand[s]"⁸⁰ a creation without which God would suffer a deficiency inconceivable in "the Exalted, the Supreme"⁸¹. A good name for this line of reasoning is the argument from divine perfection. It is possible to generalise this answer to say that creation follows logically from God's transitive attributes such as "All-Merciful,"⁸² "the Help in Peril"⁸³ and "the Ever-Forgiving."⁸⁴ This, in turn can be generalised even further as 'Abdu'l-Bahá does when he writes "all the divine names and attributes [transitive and intransitive] *demand* the existence of beings,"⁸⁵

7.1) God's Free Will and Necessary Creation.

Do not such demands limit the freedom of God Who "is powerful to do as He willeth."⁸⁶ One possible answer is that given the limitations of human understanding, we must simply accept God's freedom as a paradox or mystery. There is nothing necessarily irrational about this stance – known as moderate rationalism⁸⁷ – since recognising the limits of logic is not in itself illogical. Another possible resolution is to say that God has committed Himself to follow the laws of reason that He has established or willed into being. Thus, if God is constrained, He is constrained only by Himself which, in effect, leaves God doing as He wills. Creation is a consequences of willing His own perfection.

8) Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing? The Second Answer.

Creation also exists because God wished to be known. Bahá'u'lláh's makes approving use of the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure. I *wished to be made known*, and thus I called creation into being in order *that I might be known*."⁸⁸ Elsewhere He says, "Wishing to *reveal Thyself*, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds."⁸⁹ These and similar passages⁹⁰ highlight the fact that it is God's wish to be known, from which it follows that if creation is necessary, it is a freely chosen necessity imposed by God upon Himself by virtue of His wish.

However, if God is the "the Self-Sufficing,"⁹¹ why does He wish to be known?' One possible reply, the 'devotional answer', is that God's will in all its mystery ought to be sufficient reason for us since He is "inscrutable unto all men."⁹² Another possible response argues that

⁷⁹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 219.

⁸⁰ *Bahai World Faith* 297

⁸¹ *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 197.

⁸² *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 12.

⁸³ Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations* 14.

⁸⁴ Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations* 17.

⁸⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 180.

⁸⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CXLIV, 314.

⁸⁷ One way of schematising philosophies is by their answer to the question, 'How much can reason/logic tell us for certain?' Rationalists answer, 'Everything – and what is not rational is not real knowledge.' Irrationalists answer, 'Nothing. It's all just viewpoints and opinions.' Moderate rationalists answer, 'Some things – but not everything.'

⁸⁸ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 175; emphasis added.

⁸⁹ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 175; emphasis added.

⁹⁰ As in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Commentary on 'I was a Hidden Treasure' " provisionally translated by Moojan Momen.

⁹¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* IX, 12.

⁹² *Selections from the Writings of the Bab* 113.

without beings to know Him, God exists purely as a subject and thus lacks being as an object. Since God cannot have any deficiency⁹³, He must – according to the logical rules He has willed and to which He has freely committed Himself – also exist as an object of knowledge in creations that are fundamentally different than He.

9) The Ontological Principle of Perfection and Plenitude.

It might be argued that only the Manifestation and, perhaps, humankind are needed for God to be known and to “reveal [Himself]”⁹⁴ but such a notion violates the principle that God’s creation is “perfect and comprehensive.”⁹⁵ This seemingly simple phrase conveys a very powerful idea, namely, that in Bahá’í ontology, the principles of perfection and plenitude are at work: creation is not only perfect⁹⁶ but the “numberless forms” of creation guarantee that God is known as completely and perfectly as possible throughout all degrees of being.

10) The Qualified Idealist Tendency in Bahá’í Ontology.

According to the Writings, all beings are “expressive of the *knowledge* of God.”⁹⁷ Indeed, without this manifestation of God’s attributes and names, there would be no beings: “but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist.”⁹⁸ Given that conscious or unconscious, knowledge of God is *the sine qua non* of existence, Bahá’í ontology has a strong idealist tendency. Like Bishop Berkeley’s principle of “esse est percipi”⁹⁹, Baha’i ontology correlates being and perception or knowledge, though in the Writings, ‘to be is to know or perceive God’ in a manner appropriate to one’s station. In this scheme, unlike most metaphysics and ontologies, existence is not a pre-requisite for knowledge or perception, but rather, is coterminous or necessarily correlated with it. We can distinguish them intellectually, but cannot separate them in actuality.

However, in order to be, things cannot just receive this knowledge but must also express or reflect the divine attributes. In this sense, every entity not only illustrates the “return to God”¹⁰⁰, but actually, in its very being, *is* the act of returning to God. If it did not ‘testify’ to God’s bounty, it would not actually exist. We might also say that at every moment an entity’s act of being is the “arc of descent”¹⁰¹ and the “arc of ascent”¹⁰² in a manner appropriate to the kind of being it is. Descent and ascent are really aspects of a single ontological process constituting at every instant an entity’s complete act of being and were this process to stop, the entity would cease to exist. As we shall see again later, in Bahá’í ontology, to be is to become.

Further reinforcing the idealist tendency in Baha’i ontology is Abdul’-Baha’s statement that “the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out.”¹⁰³ He

⁹³ *Baha’i World Faith* 315.

⁹⁴ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 175.

⁹⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXVI, 62; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 80; *Some Answered Questions* 199.

⁹⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 79.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 178; emphasis added.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 177.

⁹⁹ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*. “Esse est percipi” – “To be is to be perceived.”

¹⁰⁰ *Foundations of World Unity* 73; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 291.

¹⁰¹ *Some Answered Questions* 284.

¹⁰² *Some Answered Questions* 284.

¹⁰³ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 178.

likens the real world to a “shadow”¹⁰⁴ or “images reflected in water.”¹⁰⁵ The Platonic structure of this idea is plainly evident: the material world is an image or shadow of the ontologically superior, truly real world of the ideal Kingdom just as Plato saw the world as an image of the Ideas.

The reason we call Bahá’í ontology a ‘*qualified* idealism’ is that while the material world is an image or shadow of the Kingdom, this “nether” world is not ‘written off’ as ontologically unreal or illusory in an absolute sense. Bahá’í ontology, unlike Platonic ontology, only devalues the world therapeutically – but not ontologically – to remind us that our ultimate destiny is not on the material plane though passage through this plane is necessary for our development as individuals and as a species.

10.1) The Arc of Descent and the Arc of Ascent.

The Platonic idealist tendency in which the “nether” world is an image or shadow, of the essences of the Kingdom, is the counterpart of the arc of descent, in which things proceed from the ideal to the lower, material realm. The corresponding arc of ascent is Aristotelian insofar as entities proceed towards, or ‘return’ to God, the universal “object of desire,”¹⁰⁶ by actualising their intrinsic potentials through real experience and thus becoming ‘all they can be.’ They give up an ideal, untested perfection – the inexperienced purity of childhood¹⁰⁷ – for a more practical perfection through their experience in the “nether” realm, hence ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that through bodily life in the “nether” world, the human spirit will “acquire perfection.”¹⁰⁸ The descent is not entirely a loss since an entity’s act of being is augmented by the process of return.¹⁰⁹

11) The Two-Fold Structure of Being.

The fact that things must both receive and actively express or reflect their knowledge of God in order to be, indicates a correlative two-fold structure of being: receptive (‘passive’) and active.¹¹⁰ An entity *is* its particular reception *and* expression of the divine attributes. We might also say that a being is structured of a combination of receptivity – sometimes mistakenly thought of as ‘passivity’ – and activity or expression. Though in the case of non-human entities, reception and mere reflection, that is, unconscious “testimony”¹¹¹ is sufficient for the act of being, such is not the case for human kind. As the Noonday Prayer demonstrates, conscious and free humans, were created to “know Thee and to *worship* Thee.”¹¹² Thus, humankind also has a two-fold ontological structure, but it is distinguished by a qualitative difference: we must not only be aware of the signs of God but reflect them *consciously* and *freely* in worship.

12) A Hierarchical Ontology: Degrees of Existence

¹⁰⁴ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 178.

¹⁰⁵ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 178.

¹⁰⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a, b.

¹⁰⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 53.

¹⁰⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 200.

¹⁰⁹ Readers familiar with English literature will, of course, recognise ideas analogous to those found in the poetry of William Blake for whom being has a similar “innocence” and “experience” dialectical structure.

¹¹⁰ This differs significantly from Berkeley for whom being perceived is sufficient for existence.

¹¹¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 177.

¹¹² *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 100; emphasis added.

Bahá'í ontology includes the concept of “degrees of existence”¹¹³ or “degrees of being.”¹¹⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the differences in the degrees of existence of creatures is one of the necessities of existence, which unfolds itself in infinite forms.”¹¹⁵ Elsewhere he states that “although the degrees of being are various, yet all are good,”¹¹⁶ meaning that each being and each kind of being has its appropriate place (station) and properly performs its tasks as it “participateth in a coherent whole.”¹¹⁷

Implicit in the concept of “degrees of being” is the concept of a hierarchy, albeit one in which each entity is good and perfect in its own degree and relative to itself. Relative to others, however, “*some beings are higher in the scale than others.*”¹¹⁸ Specifically, humankind is at the top and the mineral at the bottom, an idea emphasised by saying that “the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence.”¹¹⁹ In other words, humankind has a greater degree of being than matter, though in relationship to the “Supreme Being”¹²⁰ any degree of being possessed by humans “is an illusion.”¹²¹

How, we may ask, can one thing can be ‘more real’ or have ‘more being’ than another? One possible answer is that the degree of being is determined by the capacity to receive and express the divine attributes and names. “Each [entity] according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God,”¹²² and humankind possesses this receptive and reflective capacity “[t]o a supreme degree”¹²³ because “in [humankind] are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.”¹²⁴ Thus, humankind possesses a pre-eminent degree of being among created things.

We must also recall that our degree of being or existence has two aspects. First, there is our *natural degree* or station as beings consciously able “to know and worship” the Divine, and as beings “at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light.”¹²⁵ Second, there is our *existential degree* of being, the degree we attain by the free choices we make and our consequent “nearness to God”¹²⁶ which seems to determine how much of the divine bounties or attributes we can receive and reflect. Above all, we must consciously choose to love God, for if we do not, we cannot receive and reflect God’s bounties.¹²⁷ In short, spiritually, we can be as real as we choose to be. Indeed, even the next life reflects degrees or a hierarchy of being. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says

¹¹³ *Some Answered Questions* 225; see also 118.

¹¹⁴ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 190.

¹¹⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 301; see also 206, 213; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 302; *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 146.

¹¹⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

¹¹⁷ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 190. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the human body to illustrate his point, thereby showing yet again that an organic image of creation as an internally connected whole underlies the Writings.

¹¹⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 130; emphasis added.

¹¹⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 278.

¹²⁰ *The Kitab-i-Iqan* 97.

¹²¹ *Some Answered Questions* 278.

¹²² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 178.

¹²³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 177.

¹²⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 177. See also *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 179.

¹²⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 235.

¹²⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 147.

¹²⁷ *The Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh* (Arabic) # 5, 4.

that in the next life those who “fall[] into the lowest degrees of existence”¹²⁸ will be “considered as dead by the people of truth.”¹²⁹

13) A Qualified Relativist Ontology.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s foregoing statement about some beings as “higher in the scale than others”¹³⁰ shows that Bahá’í ontology is a relativist ontology with the degree of existence possessed by any entity being *relative to its position in the hierarchy of being*. At the top of the “scale” of being is God, Who alone is existentially independent or “Self-Subsistent,”¹³¹ and in comparison with Whom, “the existence of beings . . . is but illusion and *nothingness*.”¹³² A similar relationship holds between humankind and matter: “the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence.”¹³³ It is, nevertheless, important to remember that relative to itself, or, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it, “in its own condition”¹³⁴ the mineral possesses complete and adequate existence, though such is not the case vis-à-vis humankind. Similarly, in the Abhá Kingdom, those who are “deprived of [God’s] divine favours”¹³⁵ are “dead” in relationship to the “people of truth.”¹³⁶ Generalizing on this issue, Abdu’l-Bahá states that “existence and nonexistence are both relative.”¹³⁷

The relativity of existence and nonexistence is ontologically important because it denies any form of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of absolute nothing, a key doctrinal point for almost all Christians and Muslims.¹³⁸ Indeed, on this precise issue, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “absolute . . . has not the capacity of existence.”¹³⁹ Consequently, we cannot take literally Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that we were “called into being”¹⁴⁰ by God “out of utter nothingness.”¹⁴¹ Given ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s qualification, the latter phrase obviously intends the phrase “utter nothingness” relative or in comparison to God and does not introduce the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* into Bahá’í ontology. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dismisses the concept of absolute nothingness as “inconceivable.”¹⁴²

In Baha’i ontological relativism, an entity’s degree of being is both absolute and relative – absolute in regards to itself and relative to its place on the hierarchy of being. This is one reason Baha’i ontological relativism is ‘qualified’ not a radical or “totalistic relativism in which all things without exception depend on their relationships to everything else for their existence and degree of being.”¹⁴³ However, the main reason that Baha’i ontology is qualified is that it has an

¹²⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

¹²⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

¹³⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 130

¹³¹ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 34.

¹³² *Some Answered Questions* 278; emphasis added.

¹³³ *Some Answered Questions* 278.

¹³⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 281.

¹³⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

¹³⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

¹³⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 281.

¹³⁸ Thanks to Richard Gravelly and Susan Maneck for providing information and exact Qu’ranic references on Muslim beliefs regarding *creatio ex nihilo*.

¹³⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 281; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 88.

¹⁴⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXVI, 61.

¹⁴¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXVI, 61; see also *Selections from the Writings of the Bab* 196.

¹⁴² *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 88.

¹⁴³ G.R.Lewis, “Relativism,” <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/relativi.htm>.

absolute reference point – God – Whose being is absolute and beyond degrees, and by Whom all other degrees of existence are determined.¹⁴⁴ God gives the hierarchy or “chain”¹⁴⁵ of beings an absolute foundation, just as in physics the absolute speed of light gives relativity an absolute foundation.

14) Substantialist Ontology.

In no way does Bahá’í ontology accept the idea that things are unreal in any absolute sense. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá categorically rejects as “erroneous”¹⁴⁶ the belief that “each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence [and that] the existence of beings is like a mirage or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality.”¹⁴⁷ What the mirage or mirror image purports to be is entirely unreal because the image “has no material existence, *no substance*.”¹⁴⁸ This suggests that in Bahá’í ontology to be real means to have a substance of some kind.

‘Substance’ of course does not necessarily refer to material substance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for example refers to the “living substance”¹⁴⁹ from which humankind is created, and says that the rational soul and spirit are the substance whereas the body is the accident.¹⁵⁰ Even God seems to have a substance of some kind, for according to Bahá’u’lláh, the spiritual nature of the Manifestation is “born of the substance of God Himself.”¹⁵¹ Thus we may conclude that in Bahá’í ontology, to be real, to exist means to have or be a substance of some kind. What illusions and mirages represent lacks substance and is, therefore, not real.

We hasten to add that a substantialist ontology is not necessarily static. After all, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining.”¹⁵² What the Writings call ‘substance’ may – except in the case of God – also be thought of as various modes of a process of self-actualization.¹⁵³

The substantialist ontology is also confirmed by Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that while things are known to us by their attributes, their “identity or reality . . . remains hidden.”¹⁵⁴ Elsewhere, using a flower as an example, he notes that the “*underlying reality or intrinsic identity*, is still beyond the ken”¹⁵⁵ of human observers. In other words, in addition to the attributes by which a thing becomes known to us, it also has an “underlying” substrate or substance. The fact that things are more than their perceived attributes also makes it clear that Bahá’í ontology rejects phenomenalism, “the doctrine that physical objects are reducible to

¹⁴⁴ God as the absolute reference point is analogous to light, which is the absolute reference point in physical relativity theory.

¹⁴⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 178.

¹⁴⁶ *Answered Questions* 278.

¹⁴⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 278

¹⁴⁸ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 21; emphasis added. This does not refer to the mirage as atmospheric phenomenon, which is quite real, but to what the mirage purports to represent.

¹⁴⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 90.

¹⁵⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 239; see also 240.

¹⁵¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXVII, 66. See also *Some Answered Questions* 146.

¹⁵² *Some Answered Questions* 233.

¹⁵³ A detailed discussion of this can be found in Kluge’s “Process Philosophy and the Writings” <http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>

¹⁵⁴ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421; see also *Some Answered Questions* 220.

¹⁵⁵ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421; emphasis added

sensory experiences”¹⁵⁶ or that empirical statements correspond only to “mental appearances.”¹⁵⁷ Real things are not only their superficial sensible or mental appearances but also possess an underlying reality, a substrate or substance as an emanation of the divine Will.¹⁵⁸

15) A Qualified Realist Ontology

Reflecting on the examples of substance given in the Writings, makes it clear that the least possible meaning of substance is that which exists independently of a perceiver. Consider the mirage mentioned by Abdu'l-Baha. What it purports to be (a caravan) is completely unreal – not only because it lacks substance but because it is observer-dependent for its existence; another observer might see the caravan as something else and there is no way to prove either person right. However, the fact that mirages exist as atmospheric phenomena is indisputable and independent of any observer. Thus, we must conclude that Bahá'í ontology is realist, that is, what is real does not depend on observers for its existence.¹⁵⁹ This realist is emphasized by the fact that all things are created by God and therefore depend for their existence on Him and not on any human observer.

The claim that Bahá'í ontology is fundamentally realist does not mean that human beings simply perceive reality without interpreting it. The fact that we do interpret reality encourages us to re-introduce a traditional distinction between first nature or reality as made by God and second nature, the personal, social and cultural superstructure which humans have developed from their various interpretations of and work with first nature. For example, a sculptor such as Michelangelo takes a piece of marble – first nature – and interprets it to be the unrealised form of “David” which – the second nature – he then reveals through his labour. Second nature is indeed, man-made reality, and is, therefore, immediately dependent on humankind for its existence and proximately dependent on first nature. Thus, when we say that in Bahá'í ontology reality exists independently of human perception, we refer to first nature as created by God, and not to second nature. For this reason, we have characterized the realism of the Writings as “qualified.”

Although the terms first and second nature do not occur in the Writings, the concept is implicitly present in a number of ways. The concept is analogous to the distinction the Writings make between natural or innate and “acquired capacity”¹⁶⁰ as well as between innate and “acquired character . . . which is gained by education.”¹⁶¹ Innate capacity and character are divine creations and, therefore, “purely good”¹⁶² because “in creation there is no evil; all is good.”¹⁶³ According to the analogy posited by this paper, innate capacity and character correspond to first nature whereas acquired capacity, character and education correspond to second nature. In effect, the distinction between first and second nature simply applies at the larger, collective level a distinction clearly made by the Writings at the individual level.

The importance of the distinction between first and second nature is not to be underestimated. It means, among other things, that the Writings distinguish between ontology *per se*, that is, the study of being vis-à-vis the first divinely created nature and *cultural ontology*, that

¹⁵⁶ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 658; *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 669.

¹⁵⁷ *Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind* <http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/phenomenalism.html> ; see also *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Phenomenalism”.

¹⁵⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, 177.

¹⁵⁹ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 746.

¹⁶⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 214.

¹⁶¹ *Some Answered Questions* 212.

¹⁶² *Some Answered Questions* 212.

¹⁶³ *Some Answered Questions* 215.

is, the study of being vis-à-vis human interpretations of and constructs based on this first nature. This distinction completely undermines the radical constructionist or relativist view that there can be no knowledge of nature as it is because whatever we call ‘nature’ is already a human cultural construct. From the perspective of the Bahá’í Writings, such *may* be the case – as proven by the existence of errors – but it is *not necessarily* so. Thus, we conclude that Bahá’í ontology does not support the view that our understanding of first nature is entirely a human construct.

Additional proof of the realist nature of Bahá’í ontology is found in the existence of the various kingdoms of God, the mineral, vegetable, animal and human. These are real regardless of human perception, that is, they reflect inherent essential differences, the divinely decreed “degrees of existence”¹⁶⁴ that are independent of human observers. They are not the product of human interpretation (second nature) and subsequently developed conventions or constructions.¹⁶⁵ However, the realism is qualified inasmuch as the reality of things is limited in regards to God and higher beings.

16) An Essentialist Ontology: To Be Means To Have an Essence.

Since the various kingdoms possess inherent or essential differences and if each entity has a hidden “reality,”¹⁶⁶ then it is difficult to avoid the judgement that the Bahá’í Writings uphold an essentialist view, or conversely, reject the basic nominalist principle that entities possess no real essences other than humanly constructed ‘nominal essences’ of second nature. The essentialist nature of the Writings can be deduced from Abdul’-Baha’s statement that we know the “hidden”¹⁶⁷ essence of a thing only through its qualities or attributes.¹⁶⁸ It follows that if the essence is hidden from us, it cannot be a human construction or convention and must, therefore, be independent of human perception and action. This would apply primarily to things in the divinely created first nature. Moreover, if we define essence as a thing’s unique capacity to reflect the divine attributes¹⁶⁹ and that “*all things* in their inmost reality”¹⁷⁰ do so, it follows that all things, be they first or second nature, have an essence. Nothing is exempt, a conclusion reinforced by the wide variety of things specifically identified as having an essence in the Writings: God; the human soul; humankind; belief in Divine Unity; justice; “all created things” beauty; species of living things; truth; religion; “this new age”; “existence” and the spirit. These references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realise that such phrases as “inmost reality”; “the realities of” the “inner reality”, and “inner realities” also refer to the essence of things.

This highly diverse list, along with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s references to the real but hidden, “intrinsic identity,”¹⁷¹ or “essence”¹⁷² of things as well as to “the essential reality *underlying any given phenomenon*”¹⁷³ makes it clear that in Bahá’í ontology, all things have an essence whose attributes appear in the world. Because there is no such thing as being without an essence, being and essence are absolutely correlated. To be is to have an essence since the act of being can never be separated from the act of being something in particular.

¹⁶⁴ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 208; see also *Some Answered Questions* 129; 286;

¹⁶⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 301.

¹⁶⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421,

¹⁶⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 220.

¹⁶⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 220.

¹⁶⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XC, 177.

¹⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XC, 177; emphasis added.

¹⁷¹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421.

¹⁷² *Some Answered Questions* 220.

¹⁷³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421, emphasis added.

Essentialism is reinforced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insistence that “the essence of things does not change,”¹⁷⁴ an idea also reflected in his belief that the essence of humankind undergoes no change despite changes of outward appearance¹⁷⁵ and that species do not change.¹⁷⁶ The immutability of essences is, of course, one of the pillars of any form of essentialism since the ‘purpose’ of essences is to provide order, that is, continuity of identity through various transformations.

Essentialism does not mean that Bahá’í ontology is static. Instead, we must bear in mind that the essence of an entity is only an aspect of its whole being. The other, equally necessary aspect is the ‘becoming’, that is to say, the manifestation of that particular essence in the external, contingent and “visible world”¹⁷⁷ whereby it can display in ever-more adequate measure the bounties of God. Without this ‘becoming’ or actualization, the essence remains wholly on the “plane of the invisible”¹⁷⁸ and, thereby, without effect and unknown. That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Praise be to Him Who hath made the world of being . . . and hath made the invisible world to appear on the plane of the visible.”¹⁷⁹ In this view, evil is simply a by-product of the greater good of the quest for self-actualization; it is a failing, a shadow or “absence of good”¹⁸⁰ without real existence of its own.

16.1) Being and Essence

On the far-reaching issue of whether being or existence is identical to essence, The Writings side with Ibn Sina and St. Thomas Aquinas in distinguishing the two except in the case of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes this clear when he writes that “all things are subject to transformation and change, save only *the essence of existence itself*.”¹⁸¹ The phrase “the essence of existence itself” – is a philosophical description of God, Who, as the only non-contingent being, exists necessarily. His essence is to exist which is why He needs no creator. From this it follows that in God, existence and essence are one. This is emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he speaks of “the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God)”¹⁸² indicating thereby that God’s essence and existence are identical.

In God, we cannot even conceive of a difference between the two, but such is not the case with other things. Intellectually we can distinguish between the essence, ‘what’ a thing is, and whether or not it actually exists, as for, example, with unicorns and moose. Thus, in Bahá’í ontology, whatever exists in creation has two correlated aspects: a divinely bestowed act of existence by which it negates nothingness and an essence which makes it the particular kind of thing or negation it is. It is also evident that the distinction between being or existence and essence allows us to understand with difference with greater precision the difference between Creator and created. In God, unlike all other beings, this distinction does not exist.

16.2) Knowledge and Essence

¹⁷⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 100.

¹⁷⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 184.

¹⁷⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 193.

¹⁷⁷ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 8.

¹⁷⁸ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 30.

¹⁷⁹ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 13.

¹⁸⁰ *Foundations of World Unity* 78.

¹⁸¹ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 157; emphasis added.

¹⁸² *Some Answered Questions* 180.

A key feature of Bahá'í ontology is the principle that human beings cannot know essences directly but can only know *about* them by means of their attributes. Thus, Bahá'í essentialism is an epistemically qualified essentialism. On this issue 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, that “phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes,”¹⁸³ that “the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities,”¹⁸⁴ and that Even more precisely, he says, “the *essence* of a thing *is known through* its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.”¹⁸⁵

What exactly does this prohibition of knowing essences mean? It is the opinion of the present writer that this is one of the ‘continental divides’ in the interpretation of the Writings: how we understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks will lead Bahá'í ontology into wholly two different directions with profoundly different implications for a number of important issues. If we go in a Kantian direction, the Bahá'í world-view is divided not only between Creator and created but also between unknown essence or noumenon and perceived attribute.

On the basis of Abdu'l-Baha's statement that “the *essence* of a thing *is known through* its qualities,”¹⁸⁶ the present author takes a non-Kantian view. The Master's statement shows not that there can be no knowledge of essences but rather that this knowledge be gotten in a specific way – through the qualities. The knowledge about essences may not be obtained by direct, immediate intuitive or ‘mystical’ knowledge of the essence itself. Knowledge about essences is indirect and ‘second-hand,’ and it is inherently incomplete for which reason essence are bound to remain mysterious. Nonetheless, we can rest assured that whatever knowledge we do possess from the qualities, that knowledge is not just about the appearance of something but is ‘connected to’, corresponds to the inner nature of that particular thing.

17) Disconnected, Phenomenal ‘Knowledge’

If there were a *complete ‘disconnect’* between the qualities and the essence, Baha'í ontology would postulate a *strongly ‘Kantian’ universe* in which we remain absolutely isolated from the noumenal or essential realm and enclosed in a world of superficial phenomena or appearances.¹⁸⁷ There are three problems with this position. First, such a limitation denies any knowledge of ‘depth.’ Not only does this conflict with Abdu'l-Baha's claim that essences can, in fact, be known albeit through attributes, but it also out of harmony with such statements as, “The power of the rational soul can *discover the realities of things, comprehend* the peculiarities of beings, and *penetrate* the mysteries of existence”¹⁸⁸ and “For this reason we say that the spirit of man can penetrate and discover the realities of all things, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects.”¹⁸⁹ These statements, with their references to knowing the “realities of things” and solving “secrets and mysteries” clearly indicate that human knowledge goes deeper than phenomena or appearances.

The second problem follows from the first. If there is a complete disconnect between our knowledge and “the realities of things”, then in fact, there is no knowledge of things at all. This opens the way for a profound philosophical skepticism that undermines the Revelation. A

¹⁸³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 421.

¹⁸⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 220.

¹⁸⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 220; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 220; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁷ Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, tried to solve this problem by using the universal will of which all things are made as the means to obtaining more than phenomenal knowledge.

¹⁸⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 217; emphasis added.

¹⁸⁹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 264.

complete disconnect between phenomenal knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh and His reality, then how can Bahá'ís use this phenomenal knowledge of the history of Bahá'u'lláh to attain certainty about Him and His mission? Any efforts to know His phenomenal history would be pointless since such knowledge would not necessarily connect in any way to His reality. In that case, why bother?

The third problem is that if there were no intrinsic connections between the entities and its qualities, how could we know to associate a particular set of qualities with a particular entity? Qualities with no intrinsic connection with entities are simply free-floating qualities not much different from the mirages and illusions mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They have no intrinsic or necessary connection with any underlying reality, or substance and this – in Bahá'í ontology – deprives them of reality. Here too, we arrive at an all-corroding skepticism.

Though it rejects a strong Kantianism, Baha'í ontology does, in fact, embrace a weak Kantianism insofar as it posits a distinction between attributes and essence, between the knowable and not completely knowable, between inherently mysterious essences and the emanated attributes perceived by us. However, we must not press this distinction too far, lest we end with a strong Kantianism and its attendant difficulties.

In the case of God, matters stand somewhat differently, since “all these *attributes*, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation”¹⁹⁰ rather than to God-in-Himself. However, here too as we shall see, this doctrine contains more nuances than meet the eye at first glance.

18) The Problem of Nominalism.

Another problem with positing a complete disconnection between attributes and essence is that it can lead to at least one form of nominalism. If essences are completely unknown, they can be discounted and, therefore, objects can be reduced to the qualities we select and bundle together – in whatever way suits us. This easily leads to the conclusion that what we call particular things – ‘chairs’, for example – are only a conventional (and basically arbitrary) selection of attributes bundled together under one name or heading, ‘chair.’¹⁹¹

The Writings show at least three additional problems with nominalism. First, they assert that the “the reality of things, the mysteries of beings and the properties of existence [are] *discovered.*”¹⁹² Nowhere do they even remotely suggest that reality is merely a construct or convention. Second, the degrees of existence – mineral, plant, animal and human are the results of divine creation and not arbitrary human conventions. Second, the differences between the degrees are inherent, that is, essential. The same made be said of Abdu'l-Baha's three-fold division of reality in God, the Manifestation and the rest of creation. These distinctions are not constructs or conventions. Third, nominalism is implicitly rejected in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's acceptance of the concept of species and his emphatic denial of the modification of one species into another.¹⁹³ Since the differences among species are inherent and real, the existence of species is not simply a matter of constructing and conventionalizing.

¹⁹⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 149, emphasis added.

¹⁹¹ Nominalism may be defined as follows: “The view that things denominated by the same term share nothing except that fact: what all chairs have in common is that they are called ‘chairs’. . . Our common classifications are merely *flatus vocis* or breath of the voice.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* 264.

¹⁹² *Some Answered Questions* 9; emphasis added.

¹⁹³ *Some Answered Questions* 178 – 184.

19) God and the Problem of ‘Disconnected Knowledge.’

Vis-à-vis God, the issue of disconnected knowledge takes a different turn. It seems that on this issue the Bahá’í Writings try to steer a middle course between absolutely denying any and all knowledge of God on one hand and the direct acquisition of immediate, comprehensive and adequate knowledge of God’s essence on the other. This is at times a difficult pathway.

According to the Writings, it is “absolutely impossible”¹⁹⁴ for the human mind to know the divine reality. God’s essence is “above all comprehension”¹⁹⁵ and for this reason we categorically reject any direct human knowledge of God. This, however, leaves the question of whether our knowledge of God’s attributes – known only indirectly via the Manifestation¹⁹⁶ - is completely disconnected from God. This paper contends that even though this knowledge is scaled down, and, in absolute terms, wholly inadequate to comprehending completely the divine nature, it is, nonetheless, knowledge of God that we can rely on as being true, though limited and obtained indirectly. We learn to expect mercy from God, for example, because He is “the All-Merciful.”¹⁹⁷ Deficient as it may be, this knowledge tells us something about God. At one point, Abdu’l-Baha says that such knowledge is given negatively: we assert God’s perfection to deny imperfection.¹⁹⁸ This, however is still knowledge connected to God. Finally, we must keep in mind Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that “no tie of *direct* intercourse”¹⁹⁹ joins God to His creation for which reason a Manifestation is needed. This statement must not be misread to mean that no tie or connection of any kind can exist between humankind and God.

19.1) The Problem of Ethical Nihilism and the Deus Absconditus

The issue of ‘connected knowledge’ is important because denying such a connection leads to two problems. First, if the knowledge given us by the Manifestation is not connected to God in some way, what is the soteriological relevance of the Manifestation? What authority does He have? Second, if such names as the “Most Merciful”²⁰⁰ have no real connection to God, what is the ethical relevance of God? Without real grounding in God, our ethical values are all mere matters of opinion. Such a position leaves us open to an ethical nihilism since without God, ethical injunctions lose their imperative character.

Finally, disconnected knowledge can also engender the problem of the ‘disappearing God’, the deus absconditus. An absolutely unknowable God will simply become irrelevant and, for practical purposes, be ‘replaced’ as an ‘object’ of worship by the Manifestation. This, of course, violates the very *raison d’être* and message of the Manifestation, but the danger is nonetheless real because it is hard, if not impossible for humans to maintain a sense of connection with something we cannot know in any way.

19.2) An Alternative View

¹⁹⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 147.

¹⁹⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 148.

¹⁹⁶ ¹⁹⁶ *Some Answered Questions* 222.

¹⁹⁷ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 12.

¹⁹⁸ *Some Answered Questions* 148.

¹⁹⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’ah* XXVII, 66.

²⁰⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 63.

It must be noted that the concept of faith provides us with an alternative view of the issue of connection between the God and the attributes given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh. We might say that these descriptors provide no knowledge of God because knowledge implies a degree of rational and intellectual certainty – which in turn suggests surrounding the object of knowledge²⁰¹ – whereas faith has no such implications. Faith is simply a positive existential response that is not dependent on rational or external evidence. In other words, we take it on pure faith that the attributes of the Manifestation apply to God, but we make no actual knowledge claims on this issue.

Although further research is needed to make a final determination whether the Writings favor the ‘faith’ and ‘knowledge’ approaches to God’s nature, there seems little question that superficially at least, the ‘knowledge’ approach is favored. For example, the Writings seem to praise both equally, saying, of the “two wings of the soul . . . one is the wing of knowledge, the other of faith.”²⁰² Both are necessary for the ascent of the human soul to the lofty station of divine perfections.²⁰³ On the other hand, we cannot ignore ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s declaration that “it is *first* ‘to know’ and then ‘to do’ ” and that “By faith is meant, *first, conscious knowledge*, and second, the practice of good deeds.”²⁰⁴ These words seem to give knowledge a certain primacy, making it not superior but rather a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá even puts it ahead of good deeds. This idea seems in keeping with the affirmation that “for God, knowledge is the most glorious gift of man and the most noble of human perfections.”²⁰⁵

20) What Else Does It Mean ‘To Be’?

In exploring other questions, this paper has provided parts of the answer to the question, What does it mean ‘to be’? We shall now continue this exploration. Rather than start with an abstract discussion of this issue, let us begin with an inventory of the kinds of things that exist according to the Writings. This allows Baha’u’llah and Abdu’l-Baha to determine the inventory which is, in effect, a ‘world-map’ of reality.

According to the Writings, human beings inhabit a ‘*Lebenswelt*’²⁰⁶ or ‘life-world’ that is made up of the following kinds of ‘things’: “sensible realities” or physical phenomena; “intellectual realities” or ideational phenomena; spiritual realities such as the “Holy Spirit,” “human spirit” and the “rational soul”; God, the Creator; Manifestations, the mediators between God and creation; the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and their members; the human kingdom and its members; the Abhá Kingdom and its inhabitants; “spiritual beings” or entities who are the “angels of holiness . . . Thine invisible hosts” also called “the angels of Abha.” In addition there are essences, and attributes or qualities, as well as potentials – also referred to as “capacities” or “potency” “powers” and substances, “material forces,” “spiritual forces” four kinds of time²⁰⁷, the reality of “limitless space” and the reality of cause and effect.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, they recognize “the absolute order and perfection of existence,” “natural order,” natural laws²⁰⁹ and processes of growth, evolution, decline²¹⁰ and constant regeneration.²¹¹

²⁰¹ *Foundations of World Unity* 46.

²⁰² *Baha’i World Faith* 382.

²⁰³ *Baha’i World Faith* 382.

²⁰⁴ *Baha’i World Faith* 383; emphasis added.

²⁰⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 137. See also *Baha’i World Faith* 242;

²⁰⁶ The term originated with Edmund Husserl in his *Phenomenology of the Life-World*.

²⁰⁷ *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys* 25.

²⁰⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* LXXXIII 162

²⁰⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 3.

In the *Lebenswelt* of Bahai ontology, all of these things are not absolute non-existence that take on various modes of being. Examination of this list suggests that we can classify all the items as existing in one of five ways: either as a substance (which includes processes), as an essential attribute, as an accidental attribute, or as the form of a substance.²¹² Finally, there it location, be it physical, temporal or ontological as in the hierarchy of being. Essential attributes are those that a substance needs to be the kind of substance it is; in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example, it is an “essential requirement”²¹³, or the “inherent nature”²¹⁴ of fire to burn. Accidental attributes are those which a substance may have but are not necessary to be the kind of substance it is. For example, Abdu’l-Baha states that the body is an accident of the soul which he says, is the substance.²¹⁵ The form of a substance is the structure, or organization of the parts. Each of these things has a different way or mode of existing. Substances, be they material or spiritual, exist independently; accidental attributes exist contingently and dependently but not necessarily in a substance; essential attributes exist dependently but necessarily with a substance, and form also exists dependently and necessarily with a substance. Location tells us time and place as well as ontological location in the hierarchy of being.

Examining this inventory shows that each of the items fits into one of the five categories that seem to define the minimal requirements of Bahá’í ontology. In the category of substance, we find first of all, God, Who is, strictly speaking, the only true substance because only God is completely independent of anything else. That God is a substance is confirmed by Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that the Manifestation is “‘born of the *substance* of God Himself’,”²¹⁶ meaning not that God is material but that He is a totally independent being. Lest this statement be misinterpreted in an ‘incarnationist’ manner, we hasten to add that the Manifestation is emanated or “born of” God, and resembles God formally (though not substantially) in the way a mirror image resembles the original formally. The relationship 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, *raison d’être*, of the other. All created entities are, therefore, substances only in a relative sense. As we have already seen, the rational soul is also a substance as are as are minerals, plants, animals, “spiritual beings,” “material forces,” “spiritual forces,” “sensible realities,” some “intellectual realities,” the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, various physical and non-physical processes and the members of the Abhá Kingdom.

In the category of essential attributes, we find the visible essential attributes and “powers” that any substances has along with “capacities” or potentials. All non-essential attributes are, by definition, accidental. Within the category of form – that is, the category of how things are organized – we find the “natural order,” and “natural laws” whereas within the category of location we find time, “limitless space” and the “degrees of being.”

From the foregoing discussion we may conclude that in Bahá’í ontology, to be is to fit into one of these categories: everything that is a negation of absolute non-existence, everything

²¹⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 233.

²¹¹ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 141. For a detailed study of process thought in the Writings see Ian Kluge, “*Process Philosophy and the Bahá’í Writings*.” (see <http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>)

²¹² ‘Substance’ of course is not material substance but rather Aristotle’s substance of anything that does not exist as an attribute (essential or accidental) of anything else or as a form.

²¹³ *Some Answered Questions* 233,

²¹⁴ *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 27.

²¹⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 239.

²¹⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXVII, 66; emphasis added.

that is in some way a ‘reality’ finds a place somewhere in this schema. Refinements or even changes may eventually be required, but it is difficult to imagine how any list of categories based on the Writings could fail to include these in some way or another. In other words, with these categories, Bahá’í ontology provides us with a basic map of reality that allows us to understand (within certain limits) the kinds of things we encounter. Thus, the foregoing discussion also supports the conclusion that there exists some kind of underlying order in the Writings’ vision of reality.

22) A Non-Kantian, Realist Ontology Vis-à-vis the Categories.

Our inventory of the Bahá’í *Lebenswelt* reinforces, from yet another side, the conclusion that our knowledge of first nature is not entirely a human construct. It shows that Bahá’í ontology is not a Kantian ontology inasmuch as the Writings recognize the independent reality of time, space, “natural order”²¹⁷ as well as cause and effect.²¹⁸ According to Kant, time, space, causality and other categorical attributes are imposed upon the unformed external data – Kant’s noumena – by the human mind and, thereby shaped into the phenomena we experience. The cosmic order as we know it is an invention, a construction or, collectively, a convention of the human mind and, to this extent, truth is something that we have made rather than found. The Writings reject this view. Time, space, causality, the categorical attributes – in short, the cosmic order – are inherent in the phenomena themselves and are not human constructs. The bottom line is that we know the real world though we do not know it perfectly. This reinforces the earlier conclusion that the Writings, promulgate a realist ontology insofar as the divinely created first nature exists as a result of God’s action and, therefore, exists independently of human perception or thought.

However, this does not mean Bahá’í ontology espouses a completely ‘naïve’ realism in which the world is necessarily always as it appears to superficial inspection. On the contrary, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is perfectly aware that the senses and the rational mind can be deceived as, for example, with images in a mirror or in a mirage.²¹⁹ He does, however, agree that it is possible to penetrate these illusions, to cut through the appearances and illusions we have constructed to get to the underlying reality. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “we say that the spirit of man can *penetrate and discover the realities of all things*, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects.”²²⁰ The notion of *discovering* realities suggests they exist independently of the knower.

23) The Rejection of Classical Empiricism and Positivism

Another conclusion we can draw from our inventory or *Lebenswelt* is that Bahá’í ontology rejects positivism and “classical empiricism,”²²¹ that is, “any view which bases our knowledge, or the materials from which it is constructed, on experience through the traditional five senses.”²²² This is not to say that the Writings altogether reject sense knowledge – for they do not – but rather that they present reality as made of intellectual²²³ and spiritual²²⁴ as well as “sensible realities.”²²⁵ Consequently, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bahá’í ontology

²¹⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 201.

²¹⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* LXXXII, 162.

²¹⁹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 21.

²²⁰ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 264; emphasis added.

²²¹ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 226.

²²² *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 226.

²²³ *Some Answered Questions* 83.

²²⁴ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 138.

²²⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 83.

is fundamentally incompatible with any philosophical system or epistemic methodology that confines valid knowledge to knowledge gathered and verified by the five senses.

24) The Equivocal Application of ‘Being’

The ontological inventory also shows that the term ‘being’ is applied equivocally in the case of God. In other words, the term ‘being’ does not apply to God in the same way as it does to created things. How could it? God is – among other things – uncreated, Self-subsistent, beyond time, has no spatial location yet is omnipresent and omniscient. Indeed, the difference is so great we might wonder if the term applies to Him at all. Its self-evident virtues notwithstanding, this argument is rejected by the Writings which on a regular basis refer to God in terms such as “the Divine Being,”²²⁶ “the unchangeable Being,”²²⁷ “the Ancient Being,”²²⁸ and ‘the sacred Being.’²²⁹ (It must immediately be noted that these descriptors for God should not be confused with the references to the Manifestation as the “Great Being.”²³⁰) Given these descriptions of God, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Writings intend us to associate God with being in some way. However, in light of the overwhelming differences between God and creation, it is clear that ‘being’ can only be attributed to God in an equivocal or analogous way. Like all other things, God has being insofar as He is not absolute nonexistence and because it is His essence to exist²³¹ as the only self-subsisting or necessary being.

This analogous knowledge of God’s being is entirely negative – He is ‘not absolute non-existence’ – and thus lacks any genuine positive content. Knowing what a thing is not tells us nothing about what it actually is. Thus, we are not ascribing any predicate to God beyond what the Writings Themselves do by referring to Him as the “Divine Being.”²³² This is simply a positive way of saying that God is not absolute non-existence. Of course we must recall that although this predication indicates a truth about God – His being or existence – this does not mean that humankind understands this truth to its fullest measure. Our knowledge is correct but incomplete.

25) The Tension of Being and Nothingness.

Since “ the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence” leaves all created things in a highly paradoxical or contradictory situation: they both are and are not at the same time. Their very existence is constituted by a tension between being and non-being, a tension that cannot be escaped or resolved in favor of one side or the other. Were it resolved in favor of being, the created thing, would in effect become an absolute being like God; were it resolved in favor of non-being, it would become absolute non-existence, and that, as we know from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is impossible. Thus, all created, finite things are situated so to speak, in the middle, between being and nothingness, a situation manifesting itself most obviously in the inescapable anxiety that accompanies all life and especially the lives of human beings.

²²⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XIX, 46; XXII, 53; XXVII, 70; LXXVIII 151; LXXXIV, 166-167; XCIII, 191; *Foundations of World Unity* 68.

²²⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XIX, 47.

²²⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XXI, 49; LXXVIII, 151.

²²⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XCIII, 192.

²³⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* CXVII, 250.

²³¹ The essence and existence of God are equated in *Some Answered Questions* 180: “. . . the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God . . .)”

²³² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XIX, 46.

This living creatively with the tension, with the thesis and antithesis of being and non-being, structurally constitutes our being; we are not here to escape the tension by various means but to use it for our individual and collective growth. Moreover, this thesis and antithesis constituting the situation of all finite being highlights our need for God and the Manifestation and thus becomes the basis of a positive relationship between the believer and God.

26) Non-Being and Being-not-Yet.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that “nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable”²³³ and that “no sign can come from a nonexisting thing”²³⁴ lead to the conclusion that in Bahá’í ontology there is another kind of non-being – ‘being- not-yet. The classical name for such incipient being-not-yet is ‘potentials’, which we have noted earlier as part of the *Lebenswelt* in Bahá’í ontology. Of course, from the point of view of actually existing things, such potentials do not exist and are, therefore, a kind of non-being but they are a relative non-being with a capacity for actualization. As such, like all other finite entities, potentials have a paradoxical existence: depending on viewpoint they both are and are not though they are as real “in [their] own condition”²³⁵ as any other degree of being.

The Writings admit the existence of potentials when They note the virtues “potential in the seed,”²³⁶ of the sun awakening “all that is potential in the earth,”²³⁷ of the “virtues potential in mankind,”²³⁸ of the inventions “potential in the world of nature”²³⁹ and of the embryo progressing until “that which was potential in it--namely, the human image—appears.”²⁴⁰ Of similar import are the passages referring to the “mysteries latent in nature”²⁴¹ which are actualized by humankind, the “latent talents”²⁴² hidden in human beings, the “divine perfections latent in the heart of man,”²⁴³ the “latent realities within the bosom of the earth,”²⁴⁴ and the “the greater world, the macrocosm [] latent and miniature in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man.”²⁴⁵ The same idea is implicit in Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that we are to “[r]egard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,”²⁴⁶ which is to say that humankind possesses invaluable potentials that must be actualized through education. Perhaps most fascinating passage in this regard is Abdu’l-Bahá’s rhetorical question, “*Before we were born into this world did we not pray . . . Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?*”²⁴⁷ Combined with the previous quotes, this passage strongly suggests that we had some degree of existence as potentials before we actualized on the physical plain. This matter needs further exploration.

27) Platonic and Aristotelian Elements in Bahá’í Ontology.

²³³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 88.

²³⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 225.

²³⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 281.

²³⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 91; see also

²³⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 74.

²³⁸ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 70.

²³⁹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 309.

²⁴⁰ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 359.

²⁴¹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 51.

²⁴² *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 52

²⁴³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 53.

²⁴⁴ *Foundations of World Unity* 70.

²⁴⁵ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 69–70.

²⁴⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* CXXII, 260.

²⁴⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 246; emphasis added.

The passages quoted above suggest that Bahá'í ontology recognizes that the material plane has two distinct, though not actually separable levels, the invisible plane of potentials and the visible plane of actualized things.²⁴⁸ Quotes such as the following suggest the same idea: “through an ideal inner power man brings these realities forth from the invisible plane to the visible.”²⁴⁹ Such quotations leave a strong impression Bahá'í ontology has a Platonic slant, an impression reinforced by statements such as, “The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven.”²⁵⁰ Elsewhere we read “For physical things are signs and imprints of spiritual things; every *lower* thing is an *image* and *counterpart* of a higher thing.”²⁵¹ These, combined with the statement that “the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out”²⁵² and that the Kingdom is a more perfect world,²⁵³ – much like Plato’s world of Ideas – shows that Baha’i ontology has strong Platonic features.

The fact that the material world has a ‘level of potentials’ and an a ‘level of actualization’ which are distinct though not actually separable, reveals the Aristotelian features of Bahai ontology. According to Aristotle, each thing – except God – is in the condition of being actual and being-not-yet or being-in-potential, of being and being-in-development, of being whole and being-not-yet-whole. If we ask where these potentials are, the answer seems to be that they are enfolded²⁵⁴ within the particular things. For example, the Writings speak of the “latent realities *within* the bosom of the earth,”²⁵⁵ “the potential *in* the seed,”²⁵⁶ the “virtues potential *in* mankind”²⁵⁷ and the “virtues latent *within* the realities of the phenomenal world.”²⁵⁸ This suggests that the invisible plane is not a physical place but rather the unactualized and, therefore, to us, invisible, condition inherent in all things. From this we conclude that ‘to be’ includes being and being-not-yet.

28) Implications for Existential Ontology.

Everything of which we are aware has a visible and hidden aspect – a fact which has tremendous implications for existential ontology. Due to limitations of space, we shall refer only to two of them briefly. The first, and perhaps most obvious is that humankind lives in a world that is essentially and irremediably mysterious. Not only is the world an endless mystery for us –

²⁴⁸ The Writings also refer to the “human plane” (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 114), the “animal plane” (Ibid., 182), the “vegetable plane” (Ibid., 69), the “physical and intellectual plane” (*Foundations of World Unity* 59). However, inasmuch as these are specific planes of things already actualized, they are part of the visible plane in general.

²⁴⁹ *Foundations of World Unity* 70; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 50, 81, 178, 241; *Paris Talks* 175.

²⁵⁰ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 10; see also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London 46.

²⁵¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*; emphasis added. Original Tablet in *Makatib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp 13-32. Anonymous translation. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih.html

²⁵² *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 178.

²⁵³ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 4; 90.

²⁵⁴ The allusion to quantum physicist David Bohm’s concept of ‘enfolding’, ‘unfolding’ and the ‘implicate’ and ‘explicate’ order is quite intentional. See Bohm’s *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

²⁵⁵ *Foundations of World Unity* 70; emphasis added.

²⁵⁶ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 91; emphasis added.

²⁵⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 70; emphasis added.

²⁵⁸ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 91; see also “latent mystery” in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 360; “latent force” (Ibid., 417) as well as the numerous references to “latent” throughout the Writings.

“how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop”²⁵⁹ – but we are mysterious to ourselves as well: in each of us is “are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. . . Man is My *mystery*, and I am his *mystery*.”²⁶⁰ The essential mysteriousness within and around us leads in some existential ontologies to the establishment of a sense of estrangement, ‘uncanniness’ or ‘unheimlichkeit,’ and anxiety or Angst²⁶¹ as constitutive features of human existence, and in others, such as Marcel’s, to a more positive appreciation of the role of mystery in our lives. Like the Bahá’í Writings, Marcel sees the inescapable mysteriousness of life as a structurally constituted sign of the presence of the divine and, therefore, as something that brings value into human existence.

The second implication of the double visible and invisible aspect of things relates to humankind’s role in the universe. According to the Writings, humankind has a clearly defined role in cosmic evolution, namely, to transfer phenomena from the plane of the invisible to the visible. Humankind “discovereth those hidden secrets of nature . . . transfereth them from the invisible plane to the visible.”²⁶² Thus, humankind plays a role in the unfolding of creation’s otherwise hidden potentials and, thereby, makes its contribution to the evolution of the cosmos at large which is to say, human and cosmic evolution are inter-related as aspects of a unified whole. Without this intervention of humankind, the being of the cosmos would remain in an ontologically diminished state and for this reason humankind is a necessity – not, as modern evolutionary theory teaches, an accidental development – for the ontological completeness of cosmos. Without man, the cosmos would also lack value,²⁶³ being incomplete and imperfect.²⁶⁴ Quantitatively insignificant at the cosmic scale, humankind is qualitatively of supreme value.

29) An Ontological Fall?

Because of the Platonic elements in Bahai ontology, we cannot avoid asking whether or not the transition from the Kingdom to the visible world and from the potential to the actual constitutes a ‘fall’? The question arises because the potential or essential has a certain perfection insofar as it is not determined or limited by the conditions of actual existence. It also arises because of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s characterisation of the world of creation as being as “shadow[s]”, “fantas[ies]”, “images” and “pictures” in contrast to “the real world”²⁶⁵ of the Kingdom. From a Platonic point of view, this transition constitutes a fall.

However, from the Aristotelian viewpoint also evident in the Writings, the ‘fall’ into actual being in the world of creation, to the plane of the visible, is an opportunity for real growth and the actualization of latent potentials. Thus, what is a ‘fall’ in one sense is the beginning of progress in another. One recalls in this connection, Bahá’u’lláh’s prayer, “O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine.”²⁶⁶ Without the tests of existence, there can be no progress, no

²⁵⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 177.

²⁶⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XC, 177; emphasis added.

²⁶¹ Heidegger and Kierkegaard for example.

²⁶² *Bahá’í World Faith* 339; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 30; 81;

²⁶³ This is not to be interpreted as a contradiction with the statement that creation is perfect (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 80. The apparent contradiction is removed by recalling that creation as a whole, includes both the actualized and unactualized potentials. However, strictly from the point of view of actualized nature is incomplete and, in that sense, imperfect, because other potentials remain to be actualized or made manifest. `

²⁶⁴ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 310; see also 309, 330, 400. See also *Some Answered Questions* 201.

²⁶⁵ *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 178.

²⁶⁶ *Bahá’u’lláh, Prayers and Meditations* 220.

actualization and making visible. The situation is analogous to what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says about the innocence of children: their “purity is on account of weakness and innocence, not on account of any strength and testing.”²⁶⁷ From this vantage point, the fall is a ‘felix culpa’, a ‘fortunate fall.’

30) To Be and Becoming.

Since all things are a combination of being and non-being in the form of being-not-yet, all things are, therefore, in a constant condition of change as various potentials strive to actualise themselves. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “nothing which exists remains in a state of repose . . . Everything is either *growing* or *declining*; all things are either *coming from nonexistence into being*, or going from existence into non-existence.”²⁶⁸ He adds that “motion be an *inseparable concomitant* of existence, whether inherently or accidentally, spiritually or materially.”²⁶⁹ Indeed, he says motion “cannot be separated from beings because it is their *essential requirement*,”²⁷⁰ to which he adds, “this movement is *necessary to existence*, which is either growing or declining.”²⁷¹ Since motion and change are essential attributes of all entities, then it follows that in Bahá’í ontology to be is to be in the condition of becoming. It is not a static ontology.

31) The Correlation of Being and Becoming.

This leads to a subtle but important question: Is there a difference between saying that ‘For an entity to be means to be *in the condition of becoming*’ and saying ‘An entity’s being *is the process* of its becoming’? One possible difference is that the first implies that there is a continuing substance that is in the condition of changing, that is, actualising its potentials, whereas the second suggests that the changing process itself *is* the entity. Put into its larger context, this question deals with whether Bahá’í ontology is an ontology of being as represented by Plato and or an ontology of becoming as represented by Heraclitus or perhaps a hybrid as represented by Aristotle and some interpretations of Whitehead. At this stage in our research, it the last alternative seems the most capable of doing justice to what we find in the Writings.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “This state of motion is said to be essential--that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings.”²⁷² In this statement, ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are absolutely correlated with one another, that is, they are mutually interdependent, complementary and reciprocal relationship. In his words, they are “inseparable concomitants of existence.”²⁷³ Like two sides of a coin, they are distinguishable by intellectual abstraction but are not separable in actual fact which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms when he says, “an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself.”²⁷⁴ For this reason, it is our contention that Baha’i ontology upholds the correlation – as opposed to the identification – if being and becoming in all things except God and the Manifestations in their station of “pure abstraction and essential unity.”²⁷⁵

31.1) What is “Becoming”?

²⁶⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 53.

²⁶⁸ *Some Answered Questions*

²⁶⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*. Original Tablet in *Makatib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp 13-32. Anonymous Translation. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih.html

²⁷⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 233; emphasis added.

²⁷¹ *Some Answered Questions* 233; emphasis added.

²⁷² *Some Answered Questions* 233.

²⁷³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*.

²⁷⁴ *Some Answered Questions* 171.

²⁷⁵ *The Kitab-I-Iqan* 152.

At this point, however, we still face the question of how Bahá'í ontology defines becoming or change. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there are "different degrees of motion"²⁷⁶: "motion in transit", "motion of inherent growth", "motion of condition", motion "of spirit", "motion of intellect" and "motion of eternal essence."²⁷⁷

Reflecting on this passage, 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. Next, we see that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explicitly adopted Aristotle's definition of change as the motion from potentiality to actuality²⁷⁸, 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, explicitly present and active. It is evident that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has confirmed Aristotle's concept of motion as self-actualization in one or more of three areas: quantity, quality and place. Like Aristotle, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies growth as a kind of motion, being a positive change in quantity and quality which is more complex than what Aristotle calls "locomotion" or "transit . . . from place to place." 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 is evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sixth form of motion, the movement from non-existence to existence.

When we keep in mind 'Abdu'l-Bahá's oft-given assertion that nothing derives from absolute nothing,²⁷⁹ it becomes obvious that at the most fundamental level, change involves the actualization of a potential inherent in a particular entity. In other words, change is the outward realization or manifestation of inner potentials. From this, two conclusions follow. First, no thing can be subject to change for which it has no potential, or, to paraphrase Lewis Carroll, a raven cannot actually become a writing desk even though it shares some of the desk's attributes such as materiality. There are limits to transformation and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated vis-à-vis organic life, these limits fall along the lines of kingdoms and species. These limits help keep the world an orderly cosmos instead of mere uncontrolled chaos. Second, from this principle enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we can deduce that the essence of every entity must include, so to speak, a bundle of potentials awaiting actualization as the necessary and sufficient conditions arise. This bundle or complex of potentials is at least part of the enduring aspect that identifies a thing as the kind of thing it is and as a particular example of that kind. We hasten to add that in making these statements, we are not violating the Bahá'í epistemological principle that essences cannot be known. These statements do not involve particular claims about particular essences, nor do they constitute anything but external knowledge based on an appreciation of emanated, and therefore, available, attributes.

Given the emphasis on change or the actualization of potentials – and further – evolution, progressive revelation and human progress after death, it seems clear that Bahá'í ontology has a strong affinity for process ontologies, though it does not fit neatly into the Heraclitean mode. That would require an identification of being and becoming. Nor would the belief – describable as Aristotelian – in change as the actualization of potentials fit easily into the philosophy of Heraclitus since the inherent potentials of a thing do not change in themselves but rather help form a thing's essence which is manifested over time. Furthermore, because Bahá'í ontology also has Platonic elements – the "nether world" as the shadow of the Kingdom – it would appear that

²⁷⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá *On Divine Philosophy*, quoted from Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God* 57.

²⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá *On Divine Philosophy*, quoted from Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God* 57.

²⁷⁸ *Physics*, III, 1, 201a.

²⁷⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 180.

Bahá'í ontology bears likeness to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead which, in the concept of “eternal objects,” also combines Platonic and Aristotelian elements with a process ontology. Of course, this is not to suggest that Bahá'í ontology is completely assimilable to Whiteheadian philosophy, but the fact remains that, despite some important differences, they share a number of essential features.²⁸⁰

From the foregoing discussion, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology is neither a pure ontology of being as best illustrated by Parmenides and Plato, nor a pure ontology of becoming as illustrated by Heraclitus, but rather a hybrid of the two as represented by Aristotle and Whitehead. It does not claim that only static being is real and valuable, nor does it claim that only becoming has reality. Instead, both are real and essential features of the universe. Because neither can be without the other, neither is to be derogated for that reason. As already noted, the apparent derogation of this world in the Writing is there only for spiritually therapeutic reasons, that is, to remind us that this world is not the only world we shall ever inhabit and to use that fact to keep our earthly actions in perspective. This is required to balance the human tendency to over-value this world as if it were the only world we shall ever inhabit.

32) To Be Continued . . . an Unconclusion.

This brings us to an end of our initial reconnaissance of the ontology explicitly or implicitly present in the Bahá'í Writings. Although our scouting the territory was necessarily cursory and leaves many questions unanswered and others answered only in outline, it is possible to see the general ‘landscape’ or nature of Bahá'í ontology. Notwithstanding its various unique features, we find it difficult to resist the conclusion that, philosophically speaking, Bahá'í ontology generally resembles the ontology found in the tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, moves through Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Aquinas, Scotus and Hegel and currently has its strongest proponents in neo-Thomism, the neo-Aristotelianism of Mortimer Adler and the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. This is not to say that Bahá'í ontology agrees with every one of these on every issue – for that is a clear impossibility. However, it shares with them three important factors.

First and most important, Bahá'í ontology and this tradition share a similar conceptual framework for analysing reality; in other words, they understand reality and solve philosophical problems by means of similar concepts or categories. Even in the existentialist aspects of Bahá'í philosophy, it bears its strongest affinities to Heidegger and Marcel, two existentialist most heavily influenced by this tradition. In regards to contemporary process thought, Bahá'í ontology bears striking resemblance to the work of Whitehead and de Chardin, two philosophers and scientists on whom the tradition exerted enormous influence. Only with great difficulty could one imagine an argument by which these pervasive and far-reaching similarities could be explained away as mere coincidences and denied as signs of a deep underlying intellectual resemblance.

Second, with this tradition, Bahá'í ontology shares as commitment to a moderate rationalism, that is, a rationalism that recognises its own limits and – at least in the case of the Writings – knows the importance of revelation. However, recognising the limits of rationality does not open the door to irrationality and the rejection of reason but rather to a recognition of the supra-rational, to that which is rational and more not to that which is less than rational. Nowhere in the Writings are irrationality, unreasonableness and illogicality given any positive associations.

²⁸⁰ See Ian Kluge, “*Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings*” in *Lights of Irfan V* (2004) or at <http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>

Third, there is a commitment to including and doing justice to all aspects of human experience, both the natural and the supra-natural, without rejecting the latter out of hand or necessarily reducing them to physiological – often pathological – human states. In this sense, the tradition with which Bahá’í ontology has such strong affinities is inclusionary.

This finishes our initial reconnaissance of Bahá’í ontology.

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