

# Freedom and the Baha'i Writings

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## I: Introduction

Few subjects in the post-Enlightenment world are as vociferously - and even violently - contested - as freedom. Appeals to freedom permeate modern societies in everything from banal advertisements for personal care products, automobiles and financial services to far-reaching and passionate public debates about the scope of free speech and personal autonomy; freedom of religion; freedom and the community; economic freedom and the existence of human free will. Indeed the enormous importance of freedom can be seen in the history of the twentieth century insofar as freedom and antagonistic concepts of freedom were one of the underlying issues in four major conflicts. World War II (1939 - 1945), and the subsequent Cold War (1945 - 1989) were concerned with rival theories of freedom as espoused by Fascism, Communism and democratic capitalism. In the Korean War (June, 1950 - July 1953) the Communist and democratic capitalist visions of freedom clashed again, this time without a clear victory for either side and with the establishment of two rival states representing the competing theories of freedom.<sup>1</sup> Among other things, that these conflicts show is that differing concepts of freedom are able to incite conflicts that involve countless millions of humans. Following W.W. II, various visions of national, political and social freedom inspired various - often violent - struggles of national decolonization in former African and Asian territories. Depending on what one counts as a national war of liberation, these wars lasted into the 1960's and even 1970's early 1990's.<sup>2</sup>

However, struggles for freedom have not just taken place between different countries but also between them. The American Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa are prominent examples of internal struggles for freedom that have led to widespread change within countries. By contrast, the Tiananmen Uprising in China in 1989 is an internal liberation struggle that - at least in the short term - failed. The defense of individual agency and autonomy against encroachments by established authorities were central issues. Starting in the 1960's and continuing until the present, the counter-culture movement made enormous changes in American and European

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<sup>1</sup> North Korea, China and Russia were engaged for Communism and the United Nations, led by the U.S. fought for a democratic capitalism.

<sup>2</sup> Portugal gave independence to Angola and Mozambique in 1975. Some would count the American Viet Nam War as a war of national liberation (ended 1975) as well the Soviet war in Afghanistan (ended 1989).

culture. It sought greater freedom for alternative individual lifestyles and approaches to social problems. Later, the feminist movement demanded - and still demands - more freedom for women, and the LGBTQ movement actively agitates for the freedom to express alternative sexualities. In the academic world, postmodern philosophy struggles for freedom against the alleged tyranny and "terrorism"<sup>3</sup> of objectivity<sup>4</sup> and objective truth, even in the sciences as well as against the concept of universal and naturally pre-determined human nature. It rejects the 'prison' of the established meaning of any text, be it literary or scientific. Finally, amidst this turmoil, we have the ever-present offers of spiritual freedom from religions and the Manifestations of God Who seek to "awaken [mankind's] spiritual susceptibilities"<sup>5</sup> and encourage the actualization of our divinely given potentials.

While appeals to freedom permeate contemporary societies, there are considerable differences and irresolvable conflicts about what 'freedom' means. These differences are clearly evident in the work of philosophers such as Rousseau who taught that society by its very nature oppressed the individuals; on Kant's theory of the categorical imperative which alone guarantees freedom; Marx who, in effect, denied free will because the individual is completely a product of the economic forces in society and Sartre, according to whom humans are absolutely free - and responsible - for creating themselves. Despite these - and many other - theories of freedom very little has been done to bring intellectual order to this wealth of viewpoints. The notable exception is Mortimer Adler's exhaustive two volume study *The Idea of Freedom* - published in 1958 - which remains the only in-depth systematic analysis and comparative study of concepts of freedom in the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>6</sup> Adler's work is especially useful to studying freedom because he is not intent on proving the superiority of any particular theory but rather to classify, compare, contrast and clarify the views of freedom held by philosophers from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell. This makes Adler's work an essential resource in assessing the concepts of freedom as presented in the Writings.

Rather than engage in conflicts about the meaning of freedom, we shall outline the requisite conditions required for a truly free act. We shall begin with an example. Driving home one dark and rainy night, we suffer a sudden spasm in the left arm. The spasm spins the wheel to the right and in so doing, we avoid a man who has just tripped and fallen in

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<sup>3</sup> Francois Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition*, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 9. 2008 <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan> or at <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Volumes I and II first published in 1958.

front of our car. In our view, this was not an act of free will because it fails to meet the six conditions of personal freedom.

**First, consciousness.** Freedom excludes automatic responses over which we have no conscious control. In addition, freedom requires conscious choice among alternatives.

**Second,** a free act requires *intent* i.e. we must intend to do something and make a conscious choice. In other words, free will requires a conscious purpose. There is no intent in an arm spasm or any other automatic human process.

**Third,** conscious choice requires an *agent* who makes the choice and whose decision is not pre-determined by the law of cause and effect, or any other physical law. Without such an agent whatever is done will be result of causality, and, therefore, is not free.

**Fourth,** free will requires *knowledge and judgment*. A choice of two unknown alternatives is not a choice but a guess since there is no place or evaluation and no place for judgment. Without knowledge and judgment, action is reduced to stimulus-response events.

**Fifth,** is *will or volition*. Without at least the capacity and willingness to act, free will is reduced to stasis. Nothing gets done. This condition requires both a capacity to act and the opportunity to do so.

**Sixth,** the ability to *transcend the law of cause and effect* as well as other natural laws and to act according to moral, intellectual and spiritual criteria instead of being swept along by physical processes. This ability may also be the ability to abstract from concrete natural entities. For example, we abstract universal concepts such as 'duckness' from observing dozens of ducks. This makes mankind an exceptional case in nature.

We must hasten to point out that the transcendence of nature has two aspects: (1) the psychological and spiritual activities of abstraction and understanding and (2) the application of abstraction and understanding to overcome nature or make use of it to our advantage. The transcendence of nature does not mean that we can physically overcome all of nature. Because "Man is, in reality, a spiritual being "whose attributes] belong [ ] to all

men alike<sup>7</sup> they have the psychological capacity to transcend nature by virtue of their special gifts that allow them to “guide, control and overcome nature.”<sup>8</sup>

As we shall see below, neither materialism nor compatibilism allow for free will and freedom. If all things - including humans - are material and ruled by universal causal law, then they cannot meet the foregoing criteria and, consequently, there is no place for free will. No natural phenomena we encounter can meet any of the foregoing seven conditions of free will and freedom.

This study of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom reaches three general conclusions.

**First**, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is rational, coherent and comprehensive. It is rational because its teachings are developed according to the principles of reasoning, specifically, the law of non-contradiction.<sup>9</sup> It is coherent because the principles and teachings are interdependent and mutually supportive. Every teaching builds on its predecessor and sets the stage for its successor. We might also say that that each subsequent deduction is potentially present in its predecessor. Furthermore, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is also coherent because its teachings are all based on certain metaphysical principles that ensure the underlying unity of its philosophy of freedom. This unity will become more apparent throughout our study. Finally, the Bahá'í Writings cover the broad spectrum of issues about freedom such as the metaphysical basis of free will; the body and free will; consciousness, intentionality and freedom; freedom and responsibility; personal freedoms vis-à-vis community rights; legitimate limitations on personal freedom; positive and negative liberty<sup>10</sup>; circumstantial, natural and acquired freedom<sup>11</sup>; and free will and the after-life. This comprehensiveness should encourage Bahá'ís to promulgate the divine teachings about freedom by engaging in constructive dialogue with other viewpoints.

**Second**, the Bahá'í Writings understand freedom as spiritual, teleological and instrumental in nature. Freedom is one of mankind's divinely given spiritual capacities and achieves its highest expression in advancing our spiritual development. It is also teleological, i.e. it exists for a purpose, namely, the actualization of mankind's physical, intellectual and spiritual potentials. Such progress is, after all, the purpose of all the Manifestations of God. Furthermore, in contrast to many other philosophies of freedom,

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<sup>7</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Kluge, “Reason and the Baha’i Writings,” *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013 <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan> or at my philosophy website, <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194 – 203.

<sup>11</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, I. 137 – 148.

the Bahá'í Writings teach that while freedom is a necessary instrument for the achievement of greater spiritual ends, it is necessary but not sufficient for human progress. Freedom is not an absolute end in itself and by itself does not lead to progress that is appropriate to human nature. The Manifestations are must provide the needed spiritual guidance.

**Finally**, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom includes - and possibly originates - at least two original arguments about the basis of free will. These arguments, while somewhat technical, are important because they not only solve two long-standing scientific and philosophical problems but, more important, they further show the untenability of materialist and determinist positions on free will. The first of these provides a new solution to the mind-body problem whereas the second demonstrates the impossibility of mind-brain identity theory there by showing the necessity of invoking non-physical entities to explain certain brain functions.

## II: The Theoretical Foundations

In order to understand, evaluate and appreciate the philosophy of freedom it is necessary to ensure at least some familiarity with the complexity of the subject as well as with the three basic foundational choices all theories of freedom must make either implicitly or explicitly. These foundations determine the answers to many of the essential questions about freedom. We can adopt the world-view of materialism or its sub-type compatibilism or we can accept transcendentalism. Materialism or physicalism asserts that reality is entirely physical and that non-physical entities or processes do not and cannot exist. It also claims that all natural processes can be explained by the law of cause and effect. Compatibilism accepts materialism but contends that free will and causality does not deny freedom. Transcendentalism<sup>12</sup> claims that reality is not entirely physical - or in some cases is not physical at all - and that the law of cause and effect does apply to non-material things. The Bahá'í Writings represent a form of transcendentalism.

One of the best ways to comprehend the complexity of free will and freedom is to examine one of the simplest and most commonly assumed beliefs about freedom as stated by Bertrand Russell: "freedom in general may be defined as the absence of obstacles to the realization of desires."<sup>13</sup> In short, freedom is getting our way or self-determination without external or internal interference. Straight forward appearances notwithstanding, careful analysis reveals the highly problematical of this definition. Does this apply to all desires? Are obstacles necessarily always denials of freedom? Contrary to Russell, the Bahá'í Writings point out that some obstacles and the tests needed to overcome them are not denials of freedom but rather gateways to a new and higher freedom. How does Russell's definition allow us to distinguish worthwhile from worthless freedoms? If so, what are we to make of conscience or the frustration of the desire to beat up an extremely noisy neighbor? Or, what counts as an 'obstacle'? Is an internal attack of conscience about an intended act an 'obstacle'? Are all freedoms appropriate for humans? Few people would assert that the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greek Cynic philosophers Hipparchia and her husband Crates extend human freedom by living publically like dogs even in their intimacies. John Stuart Mill made the point of appropriate freedoms by stating, "It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to be confused with American Transcendentalism as formulated by Emerson among others.

<sup>13</sup> Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays*, p. 118. (Amita Singh)

dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."<sup>14</sup> Already at this point it is clear that Russell's definition is not as straight-forward as it appears and reveals hidden depths.

Russell's views on freedom implicitly assume that the scientific materialist world-view is true. Thus, answers to questions of freedom do not have to consider factors such as the existence of the soul or an afterlife in which we must take responsibility for our free acts. Neither does it require a choice between material and spiritual advantage nor balancing positive and negative liberty<sup>15</sup> nor freedom for the community.

The foregoing issues show that these and other questions about freedom can only be answered in the context of a theory of human nature. However, the philosophy of human nature is embedded in metaphysics which is the study of the nature and structure of reality as a whole. As we shall observe in what follows, a significant number of answers about freedom have their roots in metaphysical viewpoints. In other words, all philosophies of human nature and freedom are implicitly or explicitly based on a fundamental metaphysical choice about the nature of reality. Either we adhere to some form of materialism or to some form of non-materialism.

Materialism or physicalism as it is now called "is the thesis that everything is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes put it, that everything supervenes on the physical. The thesis is usually intended as a metaphysical thesis."<sup>16</sup> It can assume a variety of forms but the common denominator is that reality is exclusively physical and has no non-physical aspects. All real things can be sensed directly or indirectly by the physical senses or their technological extensions of our senses. All physical things or processes are subject to measuring, quantifying (results) experimenting, objective verification and prediction. Any seeming exceptions such as thoughts, feelings, consciousness, subjective experiences and intentions can be reduced to and explained by purely physical explanations. Therefore, souls, spirits, Platonic forms, selves, minds, purposes, intrinsic values, consciousness or deities do not and cannot exist. Matter and material processes cannot give rise to non-material entities such as mind, soul and self, i.e. matter has no potential for the emergence of non-material entities. Claims that matter has such potentials are, in effect, no longer consistently materialist because they accept the existence of at least some non-material entities or processes. For materialism, any entity

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<sup>14</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter Two, "What Utilitarianism Is," <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/11224/pg11224.txt>

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194 – 203.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Stoljar, "Physicalism" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*" <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism/>

or process that appears 'ideal' is either an "illusion."<sup>17</sup> or reducible to a physical process by the scientific method.<sup>18</sup>

According to materialism there is no free will; it is an illusion.<sup>19</sup> This is because everything in the universe is strictly subject to the law of cause and effect.<sup>20</sup> In other words, every action - whether external or internal to us - has a necessary pre-determined and pre-determining cause that can be traced (at least in theory) back to the Big Bang. Hence this view is known as "determinism." There are no uncaused events or events that somehow cause themselves, i.e. no spontaneous events. All events and their attributes can be traced to pre-existing causes<sup>21</sup> which means that no cause can spontaneously, i.e. without a pre-existing cause arise by itself and start a new causal chain. Each event necessarily has an antecedent cause determines its nature which in turn, determines its successor. Consequently, there is no place for free will because every decision and action is the result of an indeterminably long chain of cause and effect that pre-determines what will happen. Philosopher Richard Taylor points out that

it is a consequence of determinism that these [my inner mental, emotional or volitional state] whatever they are at any time, can never be other than what they are. Every chain of causes and effects . . . is infinite.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, regardless of how far back we go, there is no starting point that is free from the pre-determining law of cause and effect. This means that nature - including human nature - has no agency, i.e. no independent power to initiate or terminate action. Everything, including human thought, decisions and acts, is what it is because the laws of causality extend infinitely - or to the Big Bang - and cannot be suspended or eliminated. If either happened, we would be faced with a miracle.<sup>23</sup> Without a belief in miracles, i.e. a suspension or elimination of causality human beings cannot act differently than they do. In a sense, we are organic robots or zombies who are simply particular expressions of the laws of physics.

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<sup>17</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPc9qs7YK1w>

<sup>19</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*,

<sup>20</sup> Shaun Nichols, "Free Will Versus the Programmed Brain," *Scientific American*, August 2008, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/free-will-vs-programmed-brain/>

<sup>21</sup> This is true even in emergence theories. The new phenomena - such as water expanding as it freezes - are unpredictable but that does not mean they are uncaused.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Taylor, "Freedom and Determinism" in *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues*, p. 132.

<sup>23</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, "Miracles." Hume defines a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature.



The foregoing outline of materialism makes it clear that it cannot even meet the most basic requirements of free will and freedom. As shown above, free will requires consciousness, an agent to make a choice; intention; knowledge of the alternatives; volition or the desire to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential consequences; the ability to transcend causality i.e. spirituality. None of these attributes are connected with matter or physical processes in any way or can be deduced from them. We shall see more about this below.

The practical consequences of the materialist and scientific metaphysics are startling. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá states that "sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor . . . *but of their own free will*, and not because the poor have gained this end by force."<sup>24</sup> In effect, the materialist view asserts that my decision to buy a homeless man a meal has already been pre-determined at a nano-second after the Big Bang. It is only a matter of the causal chain from then to the moment of my offer to play itself out. All the events leading from the initial explosion to my paying for his meal made 'my' action inevitable. There is no such thing as free will, my act really has no intrinsic and objective value since I am no more than a robot, a zombie or a puppet. In short, with materialism, ethics evaporates.

To salvage free will - and value and virtue - from scientific materialism and determinism, some thinkers adopt a position known as 'compatibilism' or "soft determinism"<sup>25</sup> which claims that materialism and causal determinism are compatible with freewill. Compatibilism agrees with the scientific view that causality operates everywhere - including our brains. Our "inner causation" based on our "beliefs and desires give us the in-put - and thereby, at least a share - in decision making. According to compatibilists, mankind still has freedom because

human actions can be caused but still free. Free actions are not uncaused actions but are actions that are closely *linked with an agent's inner causation through one's own beliefs and desires . . . For freedom is in contrast with coercion or constraint rather than with having a cause. That my action is causally constrained does not entail that I am constrained to do it [and] that I am not causally free.*<sup>26</sup>

Compatibilism argues that causes - unlike coercion and constraint - are not intrinsically opposed to freedom. From this it follows that in some way, causality can lead to free

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<sup>24</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 115; emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> Bunin and Yu, *The Blackwell's Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, p. 123.

<sup>26</sup> Bunin and Yu, *The Blackwell's Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, p. 123.

actions because the causal process based on our beliefs and ideas can actively intervene and 'make our personal mark' on the causal process unfolding within us.

There are at least three major problems with this attempt to save free will in the scientific world-view:

**First**, an idea or belief is either a part of a pre-existing causal chain or it is a spontaneous, i.e. uncaused event. Scientific materialism denies the spontaneous causes since every event comes from a pre-existing cause; there are no uncaused events. In other words, beliefs are part of an 'infinite' causal chain like all other things and processes, and, consequently, there is no reason to believe that our ideas are any different. The fact that they pass through our brains does not endow them with the six conditions for free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. In other words, the causal chain associated with beliefs and ideas is not really 'ours.'

**Second**, if humans are really to have free will there must be a suspension of the necessary causal laws so that a free act that is not pre-determined by a previous cause can come into existence and influence or direct the whole process. This extremely anomalous concept of causality, is impossible to harmonize with scientific theory and practice - and for good reason. The implications can be startling. For example, if we accept this non-necessary concept of causality, it will be difficult to deny the possibility of miracles which are precisely such momentary suspensions of causal laws. Such violations of natural law were the core of Hume's argument against miracles.<sup>27</sup>

The **third** problem was already noted by Kant, who wrote that compatibilism "wretched subterfuge" and "petty word-jugglery"<sup>28</sup> His point is that replacing 'causality' with 'coercion' or 'constraint' achieves nothing because, in effect, they all mean the same - compulsion. Saying that causality allows freedom but that coercion does not explain why and how causality is able to 'leave room' for spontaneous, i.e. undetermined events.

Over the last three decades, a new form of compatibilism - 'quantum compatibilism' - has developed <sup>29</sup> to solve the problem of spontaneous cause events. Its basic argument is

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<sup>27</sup> David Hume,

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chp. 3, "Of the Motives of Pure Practical Reason."

<sup>29</sup> George Musser, "The Quantum Physics of Free Will," in *Scientific American*, February, 2012, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/quantum-physics-free-will/>

that the strict laws of cause and effect apply to individuals and groups at the macroscopic, i.e. the daily levels of reality and, thereby, forbid freedom of the will. However, at the sub-atomic, i.e. quantum realm this is not the case. At the sub-atomic level, scientists can only describe the probability of a particle behaving in a certain way at a particular time but they cannot make an exact prediction of any specific particle. They can only calculate the probability of a particle doing one thing or another. In other words, this 'quantum behavior' is non-deterministic or 'random.' For some scientists and philosophers this randomness provides 'wiggle room' for consciousness and free will.<sup>30</sup> However, this idea creates at least serious problems with understanding free will.

The **first** problem with quantum compatibilism is that free will is not in itself randomness. Free will, as shown above, requires consciousness, an agent to make a choice, an agent to make a choice; knowledge of the alternatives; intention or teleology; a capacity to transcend causal laws; volition or the desire to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential consequences. The randomness of some sub-atomic particles cannot even meet the most basic requirements for free will and freedom nor can we derive the attributes of free will from randomness. None of the qualities of consciousness can be conjured out of the mere absence of causal laws and there is nothing about the nature of sub-atomic particles that suggests they could be. Neither can these qualities be derived from unpredictability. Indeed, if these qualities were present, we would no longer be dealing with the scientific concept of matter.

The **second** problem of the quantum free will proposal is raised by quantum compatibilist Ching-Hung Woo:

In quantum physics the so-called probability amplitude evolves according to deterministic laws but the transformation from many possible outcomes to one actual outcome takes place purely by *chance*. The statistical distribution for such *chance* events follows strict rules, but the outcome of an individual chance event is unpredictable and *cannot be controlled by will*. Thus any decision is either the predictable result of earlier causes (which may include quantum chance events) and is not free from determinism, or is itself a quantum *chance* event and is *not willed*. Either way, the free will we commonly take for granted is absent. What then is the

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<sup>30</sup> E.H. Walker, *The Physics of Consciousness*. He tries to join quantum theory and neuroscience by explaining how quantum effects can affect the macroscopic world especially the brain. The problem is that these effects are still material and cannot explain the attributes of free will as explained below.

freedom to choose that we so cherish and which politicians like to invoke at every opportunity?<sup>31</sup>

This passage identifies another difficulty with quantum compatibilism: random events happen only by chance and chance "cannot be controlled by will." This means there is, in effect, no free will<sup>32</sup> since the whole point of free will is to achieve control and achieve certain desired goals. `Abdu'l-Bahá points out that humans are different from - and above - nature precisely because they have free will, i.e. control over nature. He points out,

according to natural law these mysteries [of nature] should remain latent, hidden; but man has proceeded to break this law, free himself from this rule . . . Therefore, he is the ruler and commander of nature.<sup>33</sup>

The **third** problem raised by quantum compatibilism is that there is no reason to identify impersonal random processes with a person or agent or self who can make free decisions. Quantum randomness has no attributes that allow identification with a self or "rational soul"<sup>34</sup> and its personal freedom. Without the active capacity of an agent or self, there are only bare events and no intended personal actions. Consequently, without a necessary connection to personal free will, the quantum concept of free will cannot refer to us as individuals.

Finally, it bears repeating that random quantum processes are no less material than the macrocosmic variety. From the perspective of contemporary science, no matter how they are described, physical processes do not have the potentials for the emergence of non-physical entities or processes such agents and consciousness. As noted above, if it is claimed that matter has such non-physical aspect it is clear that the kind of matter we are referring to is not the matter of modern physics.

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<sup>31</sup> Ching-Hung Woo, "Free Will is an Illusion, But Freedom Isn't," *Philosophy Now*, Aug-Sept. 2017, Issue 121. [https://philosophynow.org/issues/112/Free\\_Will\\_Is\\_An\\_Illusion\\_But\\_Freedom\\_Isnt](https://philosophynow.org/issues/112/Free_Will_Is_An_Illusion_But_Freedom_Isnt)

<sup>32</sup> As a compatibilist, Ching-Hung Woo does not see the denial of free will as a denial of freedom.

<sup>33</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 66:2,

The remaining world-view related to the free will issue is what we shall refer to as 'transcendentalism' which can exist in a variety of forms.<sup>35</sup> Whatever their other differences, they all share certain fundamental principles. The first is the existence of non-material entities or processes are part of or all of or originators of reality. This leads to the second fundamental principle that scientific materialism cannot provide adequate explanations of the phenomenal world. To understand the phenomenal world we will inevitably need to refer to non-material entities such as God or a ground of being, Platonic Ideas, Aristotelian Forms, potentials,<sup>36</sup> teleology or mind. Some forms of transcendentalism, like Plato's, assert that the physical world has a lesser degree of reality and is only a shadow of an ideal supersensible world which is the origin of reality. Aristotle - and the Writings - maintains that all things are composed of matter and form which gives the matter its particular attributes.<sup>37</sup> Form transcends matter. This form of transcendentalism is found in the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>38</sup> Plotinus taught that the entire phenomenal world was the result of the overflow of God's goodness.<sup>39</sup> Other forms of transcendentalism such as Berkeley's subjective idealism assert that reality is entirely mental<sup>40</sup> since all our experiences and knowledge are mental. Kicking a rock does not prove the existence of the rock but only our personal sensation or 'idea' of the rock.

From a transcendental view point, non-physical entities as souls, minds, spirit, mind, forms and values are real whereas in scientific materialism they are not and can be reduced to physical processes. Transcendentalism is obviously compatible with belief in a superior being and with teleology both in mankind and nature. It also forms the basis for belief in values and morals as real, independent entities and not merely personal or collective opinion. Most important perhaps, is its compatibility with the concept of a non-material 'self' which by its very nature is not totally enmeshed in the causal law of nature. This also establishes the basis for belief in immortality and spiritual progress after death.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, subjective idealism (Berkeley), objective idealism (Hegel), Platonism. Neoplatonism (both of which have many affinities with the Baha'i Writings. See "Neoplatonism and the Baha'i Writings" Parts I (*Lights of Irfan* 11, 2010) and Part II, *Lights of Irfan* 12, 2011 II <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan>;

<sup>36</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 51: 4 – 5.

<sup>37</sup> See Bahá'u'lláh, "I Was a Hidden Treasure" (provisional translation) for a discussion of substance and form in the Bahá'í Writings. See also *Some Answered Questions*, 18:2.

<sup>38</sup> Ian Kluge, *The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings*, in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 4, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Kluge, *Neoplatonism and the Baha'i Writings*, Parts I and II in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 11. 2010, Vol. 12. 2011

<sup>40</sup> Bishop Berkeley *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, 1710. Since we only know our internal personal impressions of things, there no evidence for the external existence of matter.

### III: The Ontology and Psychology of Freedom

The Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is grounded in the metaphysical and psychological teachings found in the Writings. Human free will is based on the teaching that the "rational soul" which is the essence of mankind<sup>41</sup> is a substance in the Aristotelian sense.<sup>42</sup> In other words, it is not an attribute, property or quality of anything else and that it ontologically separate and distinct from other things and in that sense is independent from them. Moreover it can take action, i.e. it has agency.<sup>43</sup> For example, we do not see qualities like 'fluffy,' 'white' and 'hopping' just by themselves; they do not exist independently. However, we do see them as attributes or qualities in my pet rabbit, Hopper. In short, Hopper is a substance that possesses several attributes that identify it; he is separate and distinct from other things and can take action. Hopper himself is not a quality but a substance. He is ontologically independent, i.e. separate and distinct. Neither can he be changed or reduced into an attribute or quality.

Because the Writings embody transcendental metaphysics, they also recognize the existence of non-material or spiritual substances. `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that mankind

even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, *intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities* such as the *mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities*, love and sorrow—all of which are intelligible realities.<sup>44</sup>

They are also called "intellectual realities."<sup>45</sup> Materialist metaphysics, of course, cannot recognize these "intelligible realities" as non-material substances or processes because the materialist paradigm requires all things to be reducible to physical things or events. In contrast, `Abdu'l-Bahá shows that the rational soul as a substance - and more - it is a spiritual substance that survives the death of the body. He says,

Some hold that the body is the *substance* and that *it subsists by itself*, and that the spirit is an accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that *the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists*. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—the spirit—remains.

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<sup>41</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 55:5.

<sup>42</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 4, 2003 or at my website <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>43</sup> There are degrees of agency or ability act - but all things do so. (*Paris Talks*, p. 89 - 90) The mineral or elements power of action is limited to simple existence (*The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 88)

<sup>44</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 48:4; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, I, p. 208; See also SAQ,

There are several important steps in this argument. First, there is the fact that the rational soul is a substance that "subsists by itself" or is ontologically independent, which is to say, it is separate and distinct. Not only is each rational soul substance separate and distinct from every other but it is also a spiritual substance which in itself is free from the vicissitudes of nature. That is why it is not dependent on the body to exist but rather has the body as an attribute while living in the material realm. Indeed, the body is an 'accidental' attribute, which means that it is not necessary for the rational soul to exist in itself though it is necessary for rational soul's life in the material world. Precisely because the rational soul has the body as an accidental attribute or quality, the soul is able to continue existing - and evolving - despite the body's demise.

Shoghi Effendi also support the soul's existence as a substance. He says that the human spirit or rational soul "continues after death in another form [and that] the human spirit is capable of infinite development."<sup>46</sup> In other words, the rational soul does not depend on its natural and social environment to exist. Its identity and existence are constant features in any settings. Shoghi Effendi re-enforces this point by adding "Man's identity or rather his individuality is never lost. His reality as a person remains intact throughout the various states of his development."<sup>47</sup> The embryo itself is a substance insofar as it is separate and distinct from other beings because (among other things) it has a unique genetic make-up, a different blood type from the mother and its own neural system.

Because the rational soul is a spiritual substance or "intellectual reality" it is inherently endowed with free will which cannot be lost or destroyed in the physical world. This means that humankind is, at least in principle, intrinsically free and is able to make choices. Only mankind is able by his spiritual power, has been able to *free himself, to soar above the world of matter* and to make it his servant."<sup>48</sup> In other words, mankind's ability to 'transcend' or "soar above the world of matter" is one of the foundations of free will and freedom.

At this point we shall take a brief detour to answer an objection to Bahá'u'lláh's teaching on this subject. It may be argued that the rational soul which is man's substance is, contrary to the foregoing explanation, not necessarily free from material limitations.

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<sup>46</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 536.

<sup>46</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 536.

<sup>47</sup> Shoghi Effendi, "To an individual believer," Nov, 26, 1939 in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 536.

<sup>48</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 21.

Among other things it is subject to death, sleep and various ailments.<sup>49</sup> However, Bahá'u'lláh assures us that

the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, *for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments*. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power.<sup>50</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that soul "remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments" which is to say that in itself, the soul transcends the physical world. In itself, the soul is not subject to the laws of cause and effect or any other laws of nature. However, manifesting its spiritual and intellectual powers in the physical world requires a body - and the imperfections of the body may diminish or even prevent the soul from manifesting its capacities. Thus, *in itself*, the soul is not affected by the physical body but *in relationship* to the material world its expressions may be affected. This leads to a significant question: can the body restrict the soul's expressions in the physical world? What happens to free will then? Insofar as the Bahá'í Writings recognize the effects of illness and inherent physical inadequacies, there is, in our view, little question that under certain circumstances some persons may not be able to manifest their best intentions. A brain tumor may suppress our free will. In one case, a longtime teacher with an exemplary record suddenly began showing signs of pedophilia. Once his brain tumor was removed, his behavior returned to normal.<sup>51</sup> In other words, the brain tumor (which was removed) prevented his soul from manifesting its natural care for children in the material world.

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<sup>49</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70:3.

<sup>50</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXX, p. 153; emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Choi, "Brain Tumour Causes Uncontrollable Paedophilia," in *New Scientist*, 21 October, 2002, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn2943-brain-tumour-causes-uncontrollable-paedophilia/>



### IIIA: Ontological Basis of Freedom

According to the Bahá'í Writings "Man alone has freedom"<sup>52</sup> and, therefore, is an exceptional and unique being in the natural world; humans have a unique place in the order of the phenomenal world. There are foundation stones for mankind's freedom - one is ontological and the other is epistemological. Although it is advantageous to distinguish the two intellectually, in reality the two are inter-related.

In the Writings, we observe that free will is based on a substance-attribute ontology<sup>53</sup> which analyzes all things as being either a substance or an attribute (quality). Attributes or qualities are either essential attributes which a thing must have to be the kind of thing it is, or accidental attributes which a thing may or may not have. For example, wheels are an essential attribute of a car but the color is accidental; my truck 'Hercules' is still a truck whether it is orange or green.

Before we examine how `Abdu'l-Bahá explicitly uses this substance-attribute ontology to prove the immortality of the soul, we must look at it in more detail. As shown in previous papers,<sup>54</sup> this passage uses the Aristotelian terminology and concepts of 'substance,' 'accident' and 'attribute.' In the Writings, substance - as in Aristotle - does not always refer to physical matter. It is a philosophical term used in the Bahá'í Writings for things that (1) are not a quality or attribute of anything else; (2) possess attributes; (3) are independent and can "subsist"<sup>55</sup> by themselves; (4) have potentials to actualize. Each substance possesses certain attributes or qualities that identify it as a certain kind of thing and as a particular example of a certain kind of thing. 'Substance' is such an important concept in the Writings that even God is a substance: according to the Writings, the spiritual aspect of the Manifestations "is born of the substance of God Himself."<sup>56</sup> Of course, this cannot mean that God is material but rather that He is absolutely separate and independent from everything<sup>57</sup>, that He has certain attributes, that He is not an attribute of anything else, i.e. no one comprehends Him. Unlike other substances, God has no potentials, i.e. He is complete as He is and does not change.<sup>58</sup> Here is a natural example of 'substance.' My pet ducks Jack and Jill each have wings and a bill that identify them as

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<sup>52</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> Ian Kluge, "Baha' Ontology," Parts I and II in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 6, 2005 and Vol. 7, 2006.

<sup>54</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Baha'i Writings," in *Lights of Irfan* 4, 2003.

<sup>55</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 66:2, p. 276.

<sup>56</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVI, p. 66.

<sup>57</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 65.

<sup>58</sup> God has no unactualized potentials because that would mean God is incomplete and subject to change which He is not. However, some process theologians, most famously Charles Hartshorne, hold the view that God changes.

ducks but each also has certain mottling patterns on the bill that identify them as unique and particular ducks. The unique mottling patterns are "accident[s] that could be changed without Jack and Jill ceasing to be ducks. Both of them exist as a separate and independent beings; one could die without the other one dying too. Furthermore, both have potentials that can be actualized; Jill can lay eggs and hatch a new brood of ducklings and Jack can father a new brood and protect it from predatory crows and the occasional rat.

Speaking of the "rational soul" `Abdu'l-Bahá, says

Some hold that the body is the substance and that it subsists by itself, and that the spirit is an accident which subsists through the substance of the body. The truth, however, is that the *rational soul is the substance* through which the body subsists. If the accident—the body—is destroyed, the substance—the spirit—remains.<sup>59</sup>

In other words, the human essence, i.e. rational soul is a spiritual and not physical entity and the body is a temporary accidental attribute in the material realm. Accidental attributes can be changed without negating the substance itself which is why the human substance, the rational soul is immortal and the body is not.

`Abdu'l-Bahá also refers to the rational soul, human spirit and mind are what `Abdu'l-Bahá calls "intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. He states,

the power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes. These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive them . . . Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the *human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality.*<sup>60</sup>

"The power of the soul is free."<sup>61</sup> Unlike animals it is not necessarily subject to nature - unless of course, mankind uses its freedom to enslave itself to nature.

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<sup>59</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 66:2, p. 276.

<sup>60</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 16:3, p. 93; emphasis added.

<sup>61</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p 8.

The animal creation is captive to matter, God has given freedom to man. The animal cannot escape the law of nature, whereas man may control it, for he, containing nature, can rise above it.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, the "rational soul" is not subject to natural cause-and-effect and, therefore, is not part of the physical natural world and not subject to its laws. In other words, the Writings reject both the determinist and compatibilist claim that humans - and their brains - are simply stimulus-response machines doing whatever the laws of nature require. Since the self is the brain and the brain is physical and obeys the laws of physics and bio-chemistry, there can be no deviation from these laws and therefore, free will is a delusion.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 38.

<sup>63</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*.

## IIIB: The Epistemology of Freedom

The Writings say,

*Among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom: that through the Ideal Power he should be emancipated and free from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal.*<sup>64</sup>

This statement asserts that if humans cannot free themselves from the trammels of nature, they will not be able to actualize their uniquely human features<sup>65</sup> and behave like animals according to their unrestrained instincts. However, God has endowed humans with a special power that enables their rational souls to free themselves from captivity to nature. `Abdu'l-Bahá notes that

*In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof. For instance, all minerals, plants and animals are captives of nature . . . Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature.*<sup>66</sup>

He adds,

*The animal is the captive of nature and cannot transgress the rules and laws thereof. In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof.*<sup>67</sup>

In other words, mankind's essentially spiritual nature transcends or surpasses physical creation and, therefore, has "mastery over creation."<sup>68</sup> This means that physical nature does not intrinsically rule over mankind's spiritual aspects including the "rational soul" - unless, of course, mankind chooses to let our physical, animal nature do so. To help humans avoid making this mistake,

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<sup>64</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to the Hague*, p. 7; emphasis added.

<sup>65</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 309.

<sup>66</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 9; emphasis added.

<sup>67</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> This is not, of course, a license to abuse the natural world in which humans are embedded for their earthly tenure since the phenomenal world is also one of God's creations. Humanity's "mastery" is the basis for responsibility for the well-being of the phenomenal world and is not an excuse for predatory environmental attitudes and practices.

The Manifestations of God have come into the world to free man from these bonds and chains of the world of nature. . . .The purpose of Their coming, Their teaching and suffering was the freedom of man from himself.<sup>69</sup>

## IIIC: The Power of Abstraction

To help explain mankind's exceptional nature and the "Ideal" or "discovering Power" that provides humanity with freedom, `Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that "the animal . . . only knows that which is perceived by his animal senses, he cannot imagine anything in the abstract,"<sup>70</sup> and that animals "have no power of abstract reasoning and intellectual ideals."<sup>71</sup> This means that animal intelligence is enclosed or imprisoned in what is available to their senses, either immediately in the present or through memories of the past. They cannot transcend their completely sensible life-world or *Lebenswelt* just as humans cannot transcend the *Lebenswelt* imposed by our God-given human nature.<sup>72</sup> Unlike animals, mankind is "distinguished above them [animals] by his conscious power of penetrating abstract realities."<sup>73</sup>

The ability to abstract enables mankind to "transcend" nature and discover the essence of things (as revealed by their attributes<sup>74</sup>) because abstraction allows us to go beyond the individual, concrete examples - such as a flock of ducks - and abstract their common attributes to arrive at the class or concept or essence of 'duckhood' by which we can identify ducks wherever we encounter them. Everything in nature is an individual - cars, stars daffodils, chairs and lobsters - and animal perception is limited to these individual things. However, each thing is also a member of a class or kind of things and abstraction enables us to identify the kind or class and understand it as far as human capacities permit. The power of abstraction allows mankind to "penetrate the mysteries of existence" so that "matters of the intellect may be deduced from and conveyed through the sensible."<sup>75</sup> In short, "the animal perceives sensible things but cannot perceive conceptual realities"<sup>76</sup> such as ideas or essences.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Abdu'l-Bahá states that mankind "discovereth the inherent properties of things that are the secrets of nature . . .

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<sup>69</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 186.

<sup>70</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 42.

<sup>71</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 309; emphasis added.

<sup>72</sup> *Lebenswelt* refers to the way in which each kind of being - and even every individual of that kind - experiences the world in which they live. A flower does not experience a lion as predator but the lamb does. Humans can exp

<sup>73</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 260.

<sup>74</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 59: 4.

<sup>75</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 3:10.

<sup>76</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 48: 6.

<sup>77</sup> Animals do not need to conceptualize classes of things; they only need to recognize certain physical attributes.

and transfereth these hidden secrets from the invisible to the visible plane."<sup>78</sup> In other words, with abstraction humans are able to draw general conclusions about natural phenomena that are not directly available to the senses, such as the spherical shape of the earth.<sup>79</sup> The animal lacks "the reasonable perception . . . [and] cannot apprehend the ideal realities. The animal cannot conceive of the earth as a sphere."<sup>80</sup> By "reasonable perception" `Abdu'l-Bahá means that human perception can apply the laws of reason to what they observe to make inferences, anticipate events and plan responses.<sup>81</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá summarizes this teaching

Although man shares the same outward powers and senses in common with the animal, there exists in him an extraordinary power of which the animal is deprived. All sciences, arts, inventions, crafts, and discoveries of realities proceed from this singular power. This is a power that encompasses all created things, comprehends their realities, unravels their hidden mysteries, and brings them under its control. *It even understands things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow—all of which are intelligible realities*<sup>82</sup> 5

Because humanity is not necessarily subject to nature, it has the freedom to evolve intellectually, socially and spiritually and to "to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization"<sup>83</sup> as commanded by Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, the entire project of progressive revelation depends on mankind's free will, as do individual and collective ethics, creativity in the arts and objectivity in the sciences and humanities.<sup>84</sup> Without free will we cannot exist as humans.

The second reason mankind has free will is the rational soul or human spirit which no other species possesses and, therefore, is the identifying feature or essence of the human race. "The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one and the same thing."<sup>85</sup> This spirit or soul identify humanity's essential exceptionality in the phenomenal world. In the words of `Abdu'l-Bahá, "Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings."<sup>86</sup> `He

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<sup>78</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 357.

<sup>80</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 357.

<sup>81</sup> Ian Kluge, "Reason and the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013 or at <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>82</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 49: 5.

<sup>83</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 214.

<sup>84</sup> The Writings are in foundational disagreement with the extreme subjectivism of Post-modernism See "Post-modernism and the Baha'i Writings" in *Lights of Irfan*, 9, 2008 or at <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>85</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 55: 5; emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 22.

elaborates this theme by adding that "The human spirit consists of the rational, or logical, reasoning faculty, which *apprehends general ideas and things intelligible and perceptible*.<sup>87</sup> "General ideas" are abstractions from numerous particulars such as the concept of 'chairs' or 'dogs' or 'empiricism.' It should be recalled that "apprehend[ing] general ideas" is part of the process of abstraction which frees mankind from entrapment in nature. Furthermore,

This spirit . . . *discovers their realities and becomes aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things*. But the human spirit, unless it be assisted by the spirit of faith, cannot become acquainted with the divine mysteries and the heavenly realities.<sup>88</sup>

The foregoing observations show the close connection between free will, the human spirit or rational soul, the power of abstraction and our spiritual capacities. Without the human spirit and its ability to abstract, humankind would remain a prisoner of nature and, like other beings, lack freedom. Of course, the rational soul requires assistance from "the spirit of faith" to comprehend spiritual truths that are not available from a study of nature alone. These truths are trans-rational, i.e. they require ways of knowing other than inferential reason along with the "awakening [of our] spiritual susceptibilities."<sup>89</sup>

The inherent freedom of the rational soul has several important consequences for the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom. First, it means that without freedom, humans cannot truly be themselves and are, therefore, condemned to live inauthentically. This situation distorts their natural God-given character insofar as humans develop an image of themselves as weak, unfree victims 'fated' or compelled by their nature and living as mere instruments of superior forces. This encourages a passive or victim mind-set and denial of personal responsibility. These negative attributes directly hinder "carry[ing] forward an ever-advancing civilization"<sup>90</sup> because they create more obstacles to overcome. However such hindrance is exactly the logical consequence of a materialist meta-physics which see mankind as totally embedded in and controlled by natural forces and laws like a puppet or a (philosophical) zombie.<sup>91</sup> This, in turn, obstructs the intellectual and spiritual progress of the individual and his/her society. Furthermore, without freedom and especially freedom from nature, people are not living as God intended them to, or, conversely, they are living against God's will for humankind and, therefore, inauthentically. Without authenticity or at least the struggle for authenticity spiritual development is impossible.

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<sup>87</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, I, p. 115; emphasis added.

<sup>88</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 55: 5; emphasis added.

<sup>89</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 214.

<sup>91</sup> A philosophical zombie is a model of mankind in which people lack consciousness, a self or ego, and all acts are automatic and dictated by natural laws or a program. There is no individual initiative.

## IV: Free Will and Moral Agency

The capacity for free will and exercising agency is essential to the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature and freedom. Because the "rational soul" is a substance with free will, it requires no antecedent physical stimulus to act, which is to say, it can cause its own action. Causing its own action is precisely what materialist philosophies deny insofar as in their view, no events

have free will or agency. All events are the results of pre-determined external causes and lead to pre-determined consequences. There can be no alternatives to what actually happens. The law of cause and effect is supreme.

In the following statement, `Abdu'l-Bahá points out some of the ways humans may choose to initiate action (agency) without a foregoing physical stimulus.

*.It is evident therefore that man is ruler over nature's sphere and province. Nature is inert, man is progressive. Nature has no consciousness, man is endowed with it. Nature is without volition and acts perforce whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is incapable of discovering mysteries or realities whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not in touch with the realm of God, man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God, man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues, nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices, nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts. *Altogether it is evident that man is more noble and superior; that in him there is an ideal power surpassing nature. He has consciousness, volition, memory, intelligent power, divine attributes and virtues of which nature is completely deprived, bereft and minus; therefore man is higher and nobler by reason of the ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in him.*<sup>92</sup>*

Mankind cannot possess these attributes passively; instead, they are potentials until we choose to actualize or activate them. For example, ruling nature does not just happen - it is the result of choices and actions. Being progressive does not just happen to us - it is something we must actively choose. Mysteries are uncovered by the choice to explore and divine virtues do not attach themselves to us like limpets but must be actively sought after. In other words, each one of the attributes listed by `Abdu'l-Bahá is a human

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<sup>92</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 178; emphasis added.



potential which must be actualized by free will. The six conditions of free will can only be activated by choice and cannot be compelled to activate by others.<sup>93</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings are primarily concerned with ethical free will since human morality and spirituality are the foundations of progress. `Abdu'l-Bahá states that

[c]ertain matters are subject to the free will of man, such as *acting with justice and fairness, or injustice and iniquity—in other words, the choice of good or evil actions*. It is clear and evident that the will of man figures greatly in these actions. But there are certain matters where man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, failing powers, misfortune, and material loss.<sup>94</sup>

Mankind is not omnipotent in the material world and vis-à-vis events like death, illness or bad luck, mankind is practically powerless. However, in regards to ethical issues, the capacity to act ethically is always there - though doing so is not always easy. In a similar vein Bahá'u'lláh decrees that "the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself"<sup>95</sup> which is say the rational soul has agency in regards to belief in God. Even in countries like Soviet Russia with an ideologically enforced atheism it is still possible to have a silent but heart-felt faith in God. `Abdu'l-Bahá adds that "all the doings of man are sustained by the power of divine assistance, but *the choice of good or evil belongs to him alone*."<sup>96</sup> He adds that "*the choice of good and evil belongs to man*, but that under all circumstances he is dependent upon the life-sustaining assistance of Divine Providence."<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, he says, "he [man] is free in the choice of good and evil actions, and it is of his own accord that he performs them."<sup>98</sup> In other words, we 'make ourselves' by our choices.

By their guidance, the Manifestations remind us that spiritual choices are necessary for progress.

No matter how much man may acquire material virtues, he will not be able to realize and express the highest possibilities of life without spiritual graces. God has created all earthly things under a law of progression in material degrees, but He has created man and endowed him with powers of advancement toward spiritual and

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<sup>93</sup> The six conditions of free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend physical cause and effect.

<sup>94</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 3.

<sup>95</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXV, p. 143.

<sup>96</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 7.

<sup>97</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 3.

<sup>98</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 3.

*transcendental kingdoms. He has not created material phenomena after His own image and likeness, but He has created man after that image and with potential power to attain that likeness. He has distinguished man above all other created things.*<sup>99</sup>

Making non-spiritual choices our development as individuals and collectives is retarded and distorted. The challenge is to activate the “potential power” to re-make ourselves in the spiritual image of God. To help us meet this challenge Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us “*Release yourselves, O nightingales of God, from the thorns and brambles of wretchedness and misery, and wing your flight to the rose-garden of unfading splendor.*”<sup>100</sup> The call to “Release yourselves” emphasizes our capacity to use our free will and take action.

In other words, we must remember that freedom and the exercise of free will are, by themselves, not sufficient for an advancing civilization. Without spirituality, progress would remain on the material level and, thereby, be incomplete and incapable of raising mankind above the animal level. This is because both the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature and the embedded philosophy of freedom are based on mankind's essential spiritual nature. `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that “Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. This spiritual longing and perception belongs to all men alike.”<sup>101</sup> If nothing else, that “spiritual longing[s]” are an integral part of human nature and must be satisfied in one way or another if we are to live authentically or devise a genuinely workable philosophy of freedom. Without the genuine freedom to fulfill our God-given “spiritual longing[s],” mankind's existence would be irrational and, as Sartre says, “a useless passion.”<sup>102</sup> The Writings also teach that human nature, i.e. our inherent capacities and potentialities is bestowed by God on all human beings regardless time, place or historical circumstances.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, human nature is teleological, i.e. is part of a personal and collective evolutionary and progressive process. This provides mankind with intrinsic goals to attain.

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<sup>99</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 302; emphasis added.

<sup>100</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLI, p. 319; emphasis added.

<sup>101</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73.

<sup>102</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Part 4, Chap. 2, III.

<sup>103</sup> Ian Kluge, “The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature” in *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Spring-Summer 2017.

## V: Freedom and the Manifestations, Progressive Revelation and Ethics

The Bahá'í Writings require free will in order to support at least five of its foundational teachings. First, free will is necessary for human beings to be human. As shown above, it is an intrinsic aspect of the rational soul which is capable of transcending nature. On this issue at least the Writings agree with of Jean-Paul Sartre who writes, "there is no determinism - man is free, man is freedom . . . man is *condemned to be free*."<sup>104</sup> If humans try to escape from their freedom, i.e. the lack of free will would reduce them to the status of animals. They would become bio-chemical robots<sup>105</sup> totally subjected to the laws of nature. Without free will, cleverly programmed robots might be able to imitate what looks like free action but true *willingness* to do anything including self-transformative change is beyond them. This is because willingness requires purpose and intention, i.e. two attributes that, according to science, matter does not have.<sup>106</sup> In short, the denial of free will undermines a crucial feature of the Bahá'í revelation, namely, the capacity to make spiritual and moral progress.

Second: without human free will, there is no need for Manifestations of God since Their guidance would not be able to initiate any voluntary changes in thinking and behavior. Why exhort people to change and improve themselves when they lack the ability to do so? Manifestations would be no more than puppet masters and the whole point of awakening "spiritual susceptibilities"<sup>107</sup> and advancing mankind's spiritual development would be lost. The same holds true for the Manifestations' teachings about societies, nations and empires. Why prophesy and warn that the Rhine will twice run red with blood if the Kaiser and Germans cannot act otherwise than they did?

The third doctrine that requires human free will is the command to teach the Faith to assist mankind. Bahá'u'lláh proclaims,

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<sup>104</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "*Existentialism is a Humanism*," in Walter Kaufmann, editor, *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, p. 295; emphasis added.

<sup>105</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*; Patricia Churchland, *Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain*. Both are well-known neuro-scientists.

<sup>106</sup> Purpose, or teleology and intention are completely rejected by the scientific concept of matter.

<sup>107</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 7.

The whole of mankind is in the grip of manifold ills. Strive, therefore, to save its life through the wholesome medicine which the almighty hand of the unerring Physician hath prepared.<sup>108</sup>

‘Abdu'l-Bahá adds, “Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head cornerstone of the foundation itself.”<sup>109</sup> The problem is that without free will it is pointless to engage in teaching efforts to inspire seekers with Bahá'u'lláh's message. If they cannot change, how can people develop a willingness to convert to new ways of thinking, acting and interpreting the world? Furthermore, public proclamations, firesides and Holy Day celebrations serve no purpose. Moreover, it also suggests that those who have seemingly chosen to become Bahá'í have only been *pre-determined* or *caused* to make this 'choice' - which makes the 'choice' morally worthless. An enforced virtue is not really a virtue at all. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says, only *free* choices are ethically significant: “Man reacheth perfection through *good deeds, voluntarily performed*, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him.”<sup>110</sup> Coerced changes cannot meet any of the six criteria of free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. Moreover, in coerced actions, the motivating force is external to the supposedly 'free' subject. This, in turn, negates the whole concept of progressive revelation as individual and societal spiritual growth in the historical process.

Progressive revelation<sup>111</sup> - one of the signature teachings of the Bahá'í Faith - is the fourth major doctrine to be negated by the denial of free will. According to this doctrine, human history is teleological, i.e. evolving towards the future goal of “commonwealth of all the nations of the world”<sup>112</sup> as part of a “world federal system.”<sup>113</sup> Humanity's spiritual and historical development is guided by the Manifestations of God Who provide guidance that is appropriate to the needs of a particular stage of human evolution. There is, of course, no end in the succession of Manifestations because human potentials are infinite. By freely accepting the teachings of the Manifestations, we evolve as individuals and as individuals evolve, so do their societies as well as the human race.<sup>114</sup> In

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<sup>108</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXIV, p. 80.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Will and Testament*, p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 115.

<sup>111</sup> The term “progressive revelation” is used in various places by Shoghi Effendi, e.g. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 102, p. 143; Bahá'u'lláh in *Gleanings*, p. 75; Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 4. The context in each of these examples makes it clear that ‘progressive’ is meant in the sense of ‘advancement’ and ‘improvement’. This is a vision of history which does not see all stages of human development as equal at all times.

<sup>112</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 40.

<sup>113</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 204.

<sup>114</sup> Foreign aid programs are a good example of mankind's moral and spiritual progress. A century ago, such policies were inconceivable but now they are part of foreign policy of all advanced nations in which both individuals and national governments make sacrifices to assist strangers in desperate circumstances.

short, progressive revelation includes both individual and collective moral advancement towards a unified "world commonwealth."<sup>115</sup>

Free will is essential to progressive revelation - and its correlate, the historical process leading to world unity. The reasons are given by `Abdu'l-Bahá :

*Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him . . . sharing is a personally chosen righteous act:*<sup>116</sup>

This statement leads to two conclusions. First, if an act is to have any moral value it must be the result of free will. We might also say that the freedom with which an act is done is the basis of its moral value. "[G]ood deeds voluntarily performed" are morally positive and bad deeds "voluntarily reformed" are morally wicked. In both cases, the acts have moral value whereas the pistons propelling an ambulance to save a life are amoral. The second conclusion is that moral acts must be "personally chosen," must be the result of a free choice by an agent or self, i.e. by a rational soul that can generate motivation and action on its own without any external stimulus. The third conclusion is that genuine moral acts are "personally chosen" and, thereby connected to the agent or rational soul. Dependent acts, however, are not personal insofar as the impulsion to act comes something that is external to them. It is difficult if not impossible to explain why the rational soul should take responsibility - credit or blame - for acts that are forced upon it.

Fifth, without free will there can be no ethics<sup>117</sup> because ethics consists of making moral decisions and explaining why they are good, bad or indifferent. If these decisions are not freely made, i.e. coerced by natural laws or by other external forces, there is no decision being made and consequently, there are no ethics. There is nothing to evaluate - except a mechanical event performed by a human robot or zombie. In addition, there is no agent, self or rational soul to point out as the originator of an act; nor is there consciousness; an agent to make a choice; intention; knowledge of the alternatives; volition or the desire to carry out an action; and judgment to know the potential consequences; the ability to transcend causality i.e. spirituality. None of these qualities are attributable to the material world.

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<sup>115</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. X.

<sup>116</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 115; emphasis added.

<sup>117</sup> Ian Kluge, "Baha'i Ethics: A Meta-Ethical Excursion," in *Lights of Irfan*, 15, 2017, <http://bahai-library.com/> or at [www.bahaiphilosophy.com](http://www.bahaiphilosophy.com)

Ethics requires an intrinsic connection between an agent or rational soul and a certain action done by *the agent* - an external force. The concept of ethics has no meaning without an explicit or implicit foundation in free will - which is why we do not charge machines with evil intentions and crimes. This is exactly where ethics based on materialism crumble because they only recognize causality and pre-determination which in turn deny free will which depends on an intrinsic connection between the agent and the act. Showing such an intrinsic connection between agent and act is the basis of assigning responsibility and of moral judgment. Without the ability to assign responsibility, i.e. without the ability to show why a particular agent is necessary and sufficient to start an event, mankind would be unable to establish ethical codes that allow or forbid certain things.

The existence of free will leads to an emphasis on individual responsibility without which ethics and societal life are impossible because no social organization is viable without (1) knowing why we did something; (2) acknowledge the act as our own; and (3) accepting the positive or negative consequences of the act. Bahá'u'lláh refers to these positive or negative consequences as "reward" and "punishment." He declares that the "structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment."<sup>118</sup> Elsewhere He says that

Justice hath a mighty force at its command. It is none other than reward and punishment for the deeds of men. By the power of this force the tabernacle of order is established throughout the world, causing the wicked to restrain their natures for fear of punishment.<sup>119</sup>

The principle of responsibility is illustrated at the spiritual level, by God's rejection of the atheist's attempt to blame others and the zeitgeist for his disbelief in God.<sup>120</sup> Bahá'u'lláh decrees that "the faith of no man can be conditioned by anyone except himself"<sup>121</sup> which is say we are personally responsible for our belief or disbelief in God. All societal and legal arrangements require responsibility for our actions in our personal lives, in our work and in the practice of citizenship. Attempts to evade free will and responsibility are in effect, attempts to abandon and/or betray the human nature has given us.

The emphasis on individual responsibility also requires us to embrace an "ethics of authenticity" i.e. we must seek to be what we' actually are, i.e. humans with a spiritual

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<sup>118</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXII, p. 218.

<sup>119</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*. p. 164

<sup>120</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 143.

<sup>121</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXV, p. 143.

nature and not animals. We cannot be authentic human beings if we do not accept the responsibilities entailed by our nature. In the words of Bahá' u'lláh,

To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth."<sup>122</sup>

Because we are obligated to live in a way that is appropriate to our human nature there is no real freedom - only its simulacrum - in trying to be something we are not and cannot be no matter how hard we try. Self-betrayal is not self-actualization. That is why arguments seeking to justify human behaviors such as a multiplicity of mates or homosexuality are logically invalid; they assume humans and animals are the same kinds of creatures which is not the case. In logic, this is known as a category mistake,'

Because free will, responsibility, intention and authenticity are individual in nature, it follows logically that the Bahá'í teachings reject the concept of collective guilt, i.e. the notion that an individual member of an entire group can be made responsible for the misdeeds of a few or even his/her ancestors. Such blanket condemnations violate the basic principle of justice of which Bahá' u'lláh says,

*Justice, which consisteth in rendering each his due, dependeth upon and is conditioned by two words: reward and punishment. From the standpoint of justice, every soul should receive the reward of his actions, inasmuch as the peace and prosperity of the world depend thereon*<sup>123</sup>

The key to justice is giving *each* individual "the reward of *his* actions" not the reward or punishment for someone else. Collective guilt is also an invalid concept because it renders free will useless: if we can be made responsible for things others did, then what is the purpose of using free will to make good choices? Moreover, as Bahá' u'lláh points out, this 'principle of individual responsibility' helps keep society in "peace and prosperity" because it does not undermine social unity. The proof of His wisdom is readily seen in the burgeoning of identity politics which often pit various groups against one another.

In addition, responsibility for the appropriate use of free will does not end at the personal level. We also have collective responsibilities. `Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that

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<sup>122</sup> Bahá' u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá' u'lláh*, CIX, p. 214.

<sup>123</sup> Bahá' u'lláh, *Tabernacle of Unity*

*Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation*<sup>124</sup>

Having "responsibility in the creative plan of God," which is to say, responsibility for the good of society and the advancement of humankind, requires all persons to make the correct ethical choices in their own lives. In other words, we must be aware that we not only create our own second nature with our choices but also bear some responsibility for the spiritual progress of mankind: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."<sup>125</sup> In short, our responsibilities in using free will stretch beyond ourselves.

## **VA: A Note on Free Will and Evil**

There is so much to be said on the subject of free will and evil - and related subjects inevitably brought into the discussion - that we can only draw attention to some of the salient points. What is obvious that if free will is to have any meaning is that without the ability to choose evil, free will is meaningless. If mankind can only choose and do good things, then there is no moral choice and free will would not exist since there is no need for it. Furthermore, there would be no mankind since, as we have seen, free will is one of its essential attributes. However, mankind is necessary for another reason:

If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the purpose of existence is the revelation of the divine perfections. We cannot say, then, that there was a time when man was not. At most we can say that there was a time when this earth did not exist, and that at the beginning man was not present upon it.<sup>126</sup>

Thus, humankind and its intrinsic free will are necessary to the cosmic order. Of course, justice also requires free will because without choices, there is no basis for assigning reward and punishment. Nor, as we have noted, can there be progressive revelation and personal spiritual progress be possible without free will.

One question about free will concerns its compatibility with progressive revelation i.e. God's plan for humanity's historical development to a federal global commonwealth. If humans are free to do evil, how can this goal be achieved? How can free will be compatible with the Bab's prayer, "All are His servants and all abide by His bidding"?<sup>127</sup> If all are

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<sup>124</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 292; emphasis added.

<sup>125</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 214.

<sup>126</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 50:4

<sup>127</sup> The Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 214.



God's servants, how can they carry out God's will? In our understanding, part of the answer lies in progressive revelation itself through which Manifestations - and humans if properly guided - will produce new good from previous evil. In this way, free choice is preserved for the individuals but progress is still made. That is also what we accomplish when we return good for meanness or evil. A bad act becomes the basis of a new good act.

There is much more to be said on this subject but that requires a new study dedicated to this subject alone.

## VI: Free Will, Justice and Society

Without individual free will, there is no rational basis for justice, i.e. applying the appropriate consequences to actions. Bahá'u'lláh states that "Justice . . . consisteth in rendering each his due, dependeth upon and is conditioned by two words: *reward and punishment*."<sup>128</sup> Without free will, i.e. conscious and intentional actions there is no point to applying rewards and punishments. No one punishes machines 'misbehaving' - we repair them instead. They cannot meet any of the six criteria for free will: consciousness; intent; an agent; knowledge and judgment; will or volition; and the ability to transcend cause and effect. To say we are 'rewarding' a car with an oil change is to speak metaphorically and not factually.

Bahá'u'lláh adds, "The structure of world stability and order hath been reared upon, and will continue to be sustained by, the twin pillars of reward and punishment."<sup>129</sup>

No society, nation or international union can function without the ability to encourage or reward positive actions and sanction or punish destructive ones. One of the major reasons for this is that humankind is constituted by a struggle between our higher, spiritual nature and our lower animal nature. According to `Abdu'l-Bahá,

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone . . . In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tabernacle of Unity*; emphasis added.

<sup>129</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tabernacle of Unity*.

<sup>130</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.

The threat of punishment is necessary to restrain our lower, animal natures and keep actions and words within limits that safeguard the well-being of society and to encourage actions that benefit all. Moreover, without individual free will, there is no point to reward and punishment and, therefore, no justice. "[R]endering each his due" is based on the principle that individuals are able to make real and meaningful choices and, therefore, must take personal responsibility for their actions. As we have already seen above, such concepts do not apply to machines.

Bahá'u'lláh's and `Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statements makes it clear that in the Bahá'í Writings, free will and freedom are not ends-in-themselves, i.e. final values by which other, subsidiary values are justified. The exercise of free will should not be pursued for its own sake and become its own justification. When the exercise of free will becomes its own goal and its own justification, humans find it easier to indulge irrationality and then rationalize it as the pursuit of free will even though the actions are unworthy of human nature. Celebrations of freedom for its own sake is what we find in anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin, Max Stirner and 'Red' Emma Goldman. Contemporary groups like "Free Men on the Land" are attempts to put such absolute unnuanced libertarian concepts into practice.

In the Bahá'í Writings, the exercise of free will is an instrumental value that is justified and judged by its contribution to mankind's spiritual and material evolution. We evaluate the use of free will by its support for the actualization of our spiritual, intellectual, social and creative potentials and not simply for its exercise for its own sake. In other words, free will is subsidiary to the good - and most people understand this at least in their daily lives. 'The good' in the Writings is based on the recognition of God (see the Noonday Prayer) and the subsequent positive values of actualizing individual and societal potentials. Freedom is an important aspect of the Bahá'í outlook but it is not the ultimate value. For example, most people will voluntarily restrain their freedom of speech instead of hurting a child's feelings with a frank critique of its art work.

One of the most important - and challenging - questions about freedom is - 'What is mankind free for?' It seems clear that the most fundamental choice we have is between authenticity as "spiritual beings"<sup>131</sup> and non-authenticity as slaves to our animal proclivities; between "becoming what [we] are" to paraphrase Nietzsche<sup>132</sup> and living a self-deceptive

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<sup>131</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.73.

<sup>132</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), Part 4, "The Honey Offering", p. 252.

life of "bad faith"<sup>133</sup> between living up to our true potentials and living a life ruled by our animal nature. `Abdu'l-Bahá states,

when man does not open his mind and heart to the blessing of the spirit, but turns his soul towards the material side, towards the bodily part of his nature, then is he fallen from his high place and he becomes inferior to the inhabitants of the lower animal kingdom . . . if the spiritual qualities of the soul, open to the breath of the Divine Spirit, are never used, they become atrophied, enfeebled, and at last incapable; whilst the soul's material qualities alone being exercised, they become terribly powerful -- and the unhappy, misguided man, becomes more savage, more unjust, more vile, more cruel, more malevolent than the lower animals<sup>134</sup>

`Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that we must not only choose but choose correctly if we wish to actualize the specifically human potentials that are in the essence that is given to us a priori by God. This is the only way to be authentic both as a member of the human species and as an individual. In other words, the Bahá'í Writings agree with the principle that "authenticity should be taken seriously as a moral ideal"<sup>135</sup> and that they embody an "ethics of authenticity."<sup>136</sup> Our task is to make the choices and take the actions that enable us to "become what we are,"<sup>137</sup> i.e. spiritual beings: "Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy."<sup>138</sup>

His statement also reminds us not to fall into the relativistic trap of thinking that all free choices are equal in nature, consequence and validity. It seems clear that the Writings advocate the 'spiritual choice,' the choice to actualize our higher potentials, is the only correct one because it alone is appropriate for our divinely given spiritual nature and rational soul. This concept is the basis of the statement by the Universal House of Justice that

The Bahá'í concept of human nature is teleological; that is, *there are certain qualities intended by God for "human nature", and qualities which do not accord*

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<sup>133</sup> Maurice Cranston, *The Quintessence of Sartreism*, p. 31.

<sup>134</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.95.

<sup>135</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 22.

<sup>136</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 6

<sup>137</sup> "Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Hollingdale), Part 4, "The Honey Offering", p. 252.

<sup>138</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.73.

*with these are described as "unnatural" This does not mean that such aberrations may not be caused by the operations of "nature."*<sup>139</sup>

Although the denial of relativism may be rejected as 'triumphalism,' it must be remembered that

Bahá'u'lláh recognizes that not all religions - and by extension man-made systems of thought - are worthy of recognition. He says, "All of them religions], *except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.*"<sup>140</sup> In other words, Bahá'u'lláh knows there are bad choices for us and to guide us away from them is one of the reasons Manifestations appear.

## **VII: Some Challenges to the Bahá'í Philosophy of Freedom**

The concept of personal free will has been challenged as untenable from four perspectives: theological, ethical, scientific and philosophical. Each of these critiques can also be applied to the Bahá'í Writings and have doubtlessly been encountered by Bahá'í teachers especially in universities and colleges. Well known new atheist authors such as Richard Dawkins,<sup>141</sup> Sam Harris<sup>142</sup> and Christopher Hitchens<sup>143</sup> make use of them, albeit often in a mangled form.

One of the major theological and philosophical challenges to the Bahá'í advocacy of free will is that God's foreknowledge of our actions prevents us from choosing freely because God's omniscience and omnipotence guarantees that His foreknowledge is correct. Our choices cannot prove God wrong because then He would be neither omniscient nor omnipotent. His infallible foreknowledge and power destroy free will. There are at least four serious difficulties which invalidate this challenge. First, as `Abdu'l-Bahá states,

The knowledge of a thing is not the cause of its occurrence; for the essential knowledge of God encompasses the realities of all things both before and after they come to exist, but it is not the cause of their existence. This is an expression of the perfection of God.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1993, June 05, *Homosexuality*, p. 2; emphasis added.

<sup>140</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXI, p. 217.

<sup>141</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

<sup>142</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*.

<sup>143</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *god Is Not Great*.

<sup>144</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 35: 2, p. 156.

There are two to note here. Most obviously, the foreknowledge critique confuses and conflates two different orders or aspects of reality - the order of knowledge and the order of action.

Knowing something is not a cause, i.e. is not a necessary determinant because knowledge is receptive, it is received from an object and is about it. The object determines what we know about it, as, for example, a logging truck coming at us down the highway. Clearly, this knowledge does not cause the truck to crash into us - even if we have scientific instruments taking measurements that clearly predict a crash must happen according to the laws of physics. In short, knowledge itself is not causal. On the other hand, a cause is active, not receptive, it extends beyond itself to make events - like truck crashes - happen. In other words, knowledge travels *from* the object to the perceiver while action travels *from* the cause to the object.

Second, knowledge and action are essentially distinct in another way. To use `Abdu'l-Bahá's example, all other things being equal, our knowledge that the sun will appear to rise in the east in the morning does not cause the sun to rise. A surgeon's detailed knowledge of a procedure does not actually perform the procedure - nor can it even make her want to perform the operation. An accountant may know exactly how to 'cook the books' to cheat the government, but without intention, no crime takes place. What is missing, in each of these cases is intention which knowledge alone does not and cannot provide. Intention is that which bridges knowledge and action and without it, the development of action from knowledge is impossible unless, of course, humans are robots or (philosophical) zombies. The same distinction between knowledge and action applies to thinking and doing which are also ontologically distinct.

A commonsense way to illustrate how foreknowledge does not cause an action is to imagine a man on a high hilltop observing a hiker in the valley below. From his elevation, the spectator knows what kind of terrain the hiker will be crossing a few hours from now - regardless of which direction the hiker chooses to take. If the hiker, is travelling along a path, the observer can even know a lot of details about what s/he is going to go through. Of course, this example has variations but they all illustrate that foreknowledge is not necessarily causation.

Third, in the foregoing quotation `Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that "God encompasses the realities of all things both before and after they come to exist." In other words, because He knows the essences or "realities of all things," He knows their potentials and capabilities, their proclivities, their weaknesses and so on, but this does not create and

mobilize the actual intention to perform good or bad deeds. God leaves that to our free will.

One of the unintended philosophical consequences of conflating knowledge and thinking with cause and action is the collapse of ethics because it ignores the essential role of intention. If we have an involuntary arm spasm and spill a cup of coffee in someone's lap, we may be responsible in an accidental sense but are not guilty of wrongdoing. Without this distinction, every accident whether major or minor would be a misdeed - as was very often the case in Stalin's Russia where an unlucky trucker could be shot as a saboteur. In such situations, ethics vanishes and is replaced by luck.

The fourth problem with the argument that God's foreknowledge (and omnipotence) destroys free will is that the concept of 'foreknowledge' is relevant only to human beings who live in time and not to God Who is beyond time. `Abdu'l-Bahá states, "For God the beginning and the end are one and the same."<sup>145</sup> He adds,

*God's knowledge in the contingent world does not produce the forms of things. Rather, that knowledge is freed from the distinctions of past, present, and future, and is identical with the realization of all things without being the cause of that realization.*<sup>146</sup>

As `Abdu'l-Bahá points out, God's knowledge is out of time and, therefore, exempt from foreknowledge. His knowledge is "identical with the realization of all things" which is to say, that God's knowledge occurs as a human action is "realized" or carried out. This suggests that God 'is' in an eternal present and therefore His knowledge is contemporary with the act. In that case, God's knowledge is also not causal, i.e. He does not coerce our free will.

The subject of God's foreknowledge brings up the issue of predestination and fate. The Bahá'í Writings explicitly reject the concept that God predestines our spiritual lives. In "I Was a Hidden Treasure" `Abdu'l-Bahá states that

by means of rational and traditional proofs it is established and proven that [the concept of] *Predestination is erroneous and would require that the Absolute cause*

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<sup>145</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 38: 4, p. 172.

<sup>146</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 35: 4, p. 157.

oppression and compulsion in Its Creation whereas the complete justice of God is firmly established.<sup>147</sup>

He rejects predestination because it implies that God is an oppressor who overrides our free will and, thereby, turns us into puppets, robots or (philosophical) zombies. This would be unjust because it fails to treat human beings appropriately vis-à-vis their nature as free beings. More explicitly, it contradicts God's own action of endowing mankind with free will. In addition, it also undermines God's order in creation by eliminating one of the features distinguishing mankind from animals and with it His purpose in establishing humankind as the acme of cosmic development.<sup>148</sup>

While the Writings deny that any of our freely made moral decisions are predestined or fated, they do recognize that some aspects of our lives and of nature will inevitably happen, i.e. are fated. `Abdu'l-Bahá states that Fate is of two kinds: one is decreed, and the other is conditional or impending.<sup>149</sup> "Decreed fate" refers to the processes of the natural world such as a lamp in `Abdu'l-Bahá's example, being extinguished when the oil is finished. Elsewhere, he cites the example of the sun and its effects on the earth.<sup>150</sup> But there are countless other examples decreed fate - the inevitability of aging, the motions of the planets, the moon's gravitational effects on the sea and the water's unique trait of expanding when frozen. This kind of fate or decrees or laws of nature cannot be changed. Of course, as the creator of the laws of nature, God is ultimately in control of these natural processes which is why `Abdu'l-Bahá states that "will is the active force"<sup>151</sup> that commands them. By way of contrast, "conditional fate" is changeable by appropriate; it refers to the vicissitudes that we can foresee and prepare for such as covering the lamp before a high wind. By means of free will we can guard against conditional events, i.e. those that may or may not happen.

From these examples, it appears that predestination and fate apply to the natural and physical world but not to the spiritual world, i.e. to the "rational soul" and mind. Our body is fated to die but our but our souls and can even decide on actions that turn nature's laws against itself to do the seemingly impossible - such as fly, travel underwater, replace hearts, and invent new elements.<sup>152</sup> (This should remind us that actions impossible from the

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<sup>147</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, "*I Was a Hidden Treasure*," (provisional translation) in *Ocean*; emphasis added.

<sup>148</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 50:4.

<sup>149</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 68: 2, p. 283.

<sup>150</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 198,

<sup>151</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 198,

<sup>152</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 127.

view point of one level of reality and not necessarily impossible when viewed from a higher perspective.)

Bahá'u'lláh, of course, says the same as `Abdu'l-Bahá but adds an absolutely essential codicil. He says that

decrees as related to fate and predestination, are of two kinds. Both are to be obeyed and accepted. The one is irrevocable, the other is, as termed by men, impending. To the former all must unreservedly submit, inasmuch as it is fixed and settled. God, however, is able to alter or repeal it. *As the harm that must result from such a change will be greater than if the decree had remained unaltered, all, therefore, should willingly acquiesce in what God hath willed and confidently abide by the same.*<sup>153</sup>

"Impending" fate is what `Abdu'l-Bahá calls "conditional" (and "impending") fate" which may be avoided if appropriate action is taken but "irrevocable" decrees cannot be changed. Indeed, according to Bahá'u'lláh, they should not be changed and humans must accept them. He appears to be offering comfort for the death of a loved one. Removing death per se - or the death of the loved one - from the natural order would indeed, as He says, create an enormous and unjustifiable upheaval in nature. The reason is clear: changing them would cause harmful disorder in creation. For example, few people if any are happy about the death of a parent but if God uses his power to reverse the "decreed" fate of death, the "harm" on the cosmic order will be greater than any good resulting from reversing the law(s) of nature. Most obviously, countless other beings would be denied the opportunity for existence. The entire inter-connected cosmic order would fall apart and replace order with chaos.

For all beings are linked together like a chain; and mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development, and growth. It is established through numerous proofs and arguments that every single thing has an effect and influence upon every other, either independently or through a causal chain.<sup>154</sup>

Because of this interconnection of all things, humans should not ask that God should exempt them from "alter[ing] or repeal[ing]" His "decrees." In other words, we must

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<sup>153</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXVIII, p. 132; emphasis added.

<sup>154</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 46: 6, p. 205.



evaluate whether or not the negation of natural law by God's intervention is justifiable given the other - potentially harmful - results such interventions will cause.

A major critique of the Bahá'í philosophy of free will - which applies to religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism as well - concerns divine sabotage of the exercise of free will. In effect, humans are obligated to make the right 'choice' or face negative consequences after death. It is argued that there is no real choice, i.e. coercion when one choice has positive consequences while the other has negative consequences. We are, in effect, coerced into one choice and so there is only the appearance of freedom. Plainly put, the promise of freedom is fraudulent.

There are at least three problems with this argument. First, there is the assumption that genuine free should require the same outcomes for whatever choices we make. This assumption is odd because nowhere else in life is there such an expectation because it violates the principle of cause and effect. ? The choice to own a store is not the same as the choice to rob it. Why would we expect different causes to lead to the same effects? Why should the life-choices made by Josef Mengele lead to the same outcome as the choices made by Mother Teresa? The notion of equivalent outcomes implicitly involves injustice to those who have followed the path laid out by the Manifestations.

Second, this critique is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the Abhá Kingdom in which there is no punishment but rather a continued growth on the basis of one's choices in life. Thus, the Bahá'í Writings ensure that all people get the afterlife they have chosen for themselves. After they have died, "all men shall, after their physical death, estimate the worth of their deeds, and realize all that their hands have wrought."<sup>155</sup> They will judge themselves and make spiritual progress in keeping with their self-estimation of their choices. Those who choose to ignore or deny God and His Manifestations will have an after-life that reflects the choices they have made for themselves. However, all will make progress in the kind of existence they have chosen for themselves. The Manifestations and Prophets exist to educate humanity, that "this lump of coal may become a diamond."<sup>156</sup> This means that there is spiritual progress in each case in the afterlife on the basis of one's character. It will not be the same for everyone.

In other words, according to the Writings, there is no punishment in the sense of a wilful infliction of retributive pain but rather spiritual progress from whatever low or high level of character development we have attained by our choices. In short, everyone attains the level which they have worked for, i.e. in effect, desired. Consequently, there is no

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<sup>155</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXVI, p, 169.

<sup>156</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 64: 5, p. 273.

coercion since those who freely chose to live without awareness of God get their wish. From their perspective, there is nothing deficient or unworthy about their condition, although there may be times of awareness of the absence of the divine since such an awareness and longing is an innate part of human nature.<sup>157</sup> However, as they ignored these pangs during life, they will ignore them in the future.

The last critique of free will we shall consider here is the argument that humankind's free will is incompatible with God's omnipotence. It is argued that if God has all power, then, ultimately, the creatures can have none - and this includes the power of free will. This argument ignores the fact that while nothing external to God can limit God's power, God Himself can limit the expression of His power. Indeed, He very clearly does so by bestowing free will on mankind while withholding it from all other beings. By making free will an inherent part of universal human nature, God chooses to restrain His own power and allows humans to act for themselves not vis-à-vis our bodies but in ethical choices, in the arts and the sciences, in intellectual and creative pursuits and above all in spiritual affairs.

## VIII: Applying Free Will in Society

In addition to individuals, free will and freedom are also vitally important for Bahá'í social philosophy. After all, since all people have free will, it is necessary to have basic principles and guidelines to manage free will among millions of individuals. Without such guidelines, life in cities and even small towns will easily become impossible. The first principle of these guidelines is moderation.

The principle of moderation requires that free will, agency and social freedom are not appraised strictly for their own sake but rather in the context of other values and for their contribution to mankind's spiritual and material progress. The Universal House of Justice writes,

In his summary of significant Bahá'í teachings, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'u'lláh "inculcates the principle of 'moderation in all things'; declares that whatsoever, be it 'liberty, civilization and the like', 'passeth beyond the limits of moderation' must 'exercise a pernicious influence upon men'.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73.

<sup>158</sup> The Universal House of Justice, *1988 Dec 29, Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4.

Furthermore, it asks,

*Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom? For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another; these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?*<sup>159</sup>

With these provocative questions, the Universal House of Justice asks us to adopt a reflective, analytical and critical attitude towards the theory and practice of freedom. Too often, these questions and others like them, are not even asked and the result is inadequate analysis, confusion and contradiction.

From a Bahá'í perspective incomplete and inadequate analysis is a fault of every theory of freedom that does not take account of mankind's spiritual nature as well as the short and long term consequences of any proposed freedom. For example, we observe increasing social pressure to legalize certain mind-altering drugs for recreational use even though their long-term effects are not known. Such 'freedom' "limits our possibilities for progress" and that prohibitions in fact provide more freedom to actualize our spiritual, intellectual and creative potentials. In other words, all freedoms are not necessarily beneficial for individuals and societies and, not all restrictions are necessarily harmful.

Critical analyses of freedom are also necessary because concepts of freedom evolve:

The models [of freedom] of the old world order blur vision of that which must be perceived; for these models were, in many instances, conceived in rebellion and retain the characteristics of the revolutions peculiar to an adolescent, albeit necessary, period in the evolution of human society. The very philosophies which have provided the intellectual content of such revolutions -- Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, Mill, come readily to mind -- were inspired by protest against the oppressive conditions which revolutions were intended to remedy.<sup>160</sup>

In this message, the Universal House of Justice presents the idea that because of former historical circumstances, former philosophies of freedom may no longer be fully appropriate in the new Bahá'í world order. Above all, global inter-connectedness has changed the world and this requires newly re-formulated concepts of freedom, especially in regards to balancing freedom with other societal values. In recognizing the significance

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<sup>159</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4; emphasis added.

<sup>160</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 5.

of this change in the world situation the Writings take an evolutionary approach to individual free will and societal freedom.

The Bahá'í approach to free will and societal freedom is echoed Isaiah Berlin, one of the foremost political thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> CE. He makes it clear that "Liberty is not the only goal of men."<sup>161</sup> He also recognizes that sometimes "the freedom of some must at times be curtailed to secure the freedom of others."<sup>162</sup> He adds,

The extent of a man's, or a people's, liberty to choose to live as he or they desire must be weighed against the claims of *other values, of which equality, or justice, or happiness, or security, or public order* are perhaps the most obvious examples.<sup>163</sup>

Like the Bahá'í Writings, Berlin recognizes that freedom cannot be an end-in-itself that consistently overrides all other values but rather must play its role among other necessary values. In this regard, we might think of society as a juggler keeping various values in motion to create the whole 'performance.' Maximum freedom for everyone is beyond human capabilities.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that the Writings advocate what `Abdu'l-Bahá

calls "moderate freedom," saying,

Similarly, with regard to the peoples who clamour for freedom: the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the universal relationships, is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>164</sup>

Nowhere is this teaching of "moderate freedom", including freedom of speech, more clear than in Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions about the limits of freedom or, as He calls it, "liberty." His essential message is that individual free will and social liberty have must have limits placed on them; they cannot be allowed to be their own standard and justification of action. He states,

Consider the pettiness of men's minds. They ask for that which injureth them, and cast away the thing that profiteth them. They are, indeed, of those that are *far*

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<sup>161</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 197.

<sup>162</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 198.

<sup>163</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 240.

<sup>164</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 305.  
*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 52.

astray. We find some men desiring liberty, and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance.<sup>165</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that individual freedom or liberty is not an unalloyed good in itself. Those who think it is an unqualified good under any circumstances are "far astray" i.e. they misunderstand their own nature and what benefits it, and they misunderstand the nature and good of society. In our view, Bahá'u'lláh calls such demands for liberty "pettiness" because it represents short-term thinking with immediate pleasure or convenience blinding us to its long-term destructive effects. For example, since the 1960's drug use has grown from immediate personal pleasure into a massive multi-dimensional societal problem for which there are no easy solutions.<sup>166</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh adds,

Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance . . . *Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness . . .* Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection.<sup>167</sup>

This teaching about liberty shows two aspects of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom. The first is that an excess of liberty often allows mankind's lowest animal features to manifest themselves and thereby allows mankind to degrade its noble station in the created world. We become unworthy of ourselves. Such freedom not only threatens individual well-being but also the well-being of society which can easily be undermined by all kinds of conflicting causes demanding ever more 'freedom.' Social life becomes increasingly anarchical and is in danger of becoming - in Hobbes' memorable phrase - a war of all against all. Indeed, just as the Bahá'í Writings teach that the Manifestations are necessary to lift mankind out of its animal condition, so Thomas Hobbes states that

it is manifest that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in the condition of awe; and such a warre as is of every man against every man . . . the nature of War, consisteth not [only] in actual fighting;

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<sup>165</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 335; emphasis added.

<sup>166</sup> Even `Abdu'l-Bahá seems to suggest an extreme solution: death. "In this, the cycle of Almighty God, violence and force, constraint and oppression, are one and all condemned. It is, *however, mandatory* that the use of opium be *prevented by any means whatsoever*, that perchance the human race may be delivered from this most powerful of plagues. And otherwise, woe and misery to whoso falleth short of his duty to his Lord.[1] *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 148.

<sup>167</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 335.

but in the known disposition thereto, during all this time there is no assurance to the contrary.<sup>168</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings have a similar view, about too much freedom for mankind's animal nature, about the war of all against all and about war being not only battle but the continuous disposition to being willing for battle. One of the ultimate goals of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation is evolve mankind away from this willingness.

Bahá'u'lláh then goes on to declare that "Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench."<sup>169</sup> Liberty, by which He seems to mean unrestrained liberty is seditious insofar as absolutely unrestrained speech or conduct undermines legitimately established systems of government, law and social order. He does not approve of sedition because undermining government and social order often unleashes as much misery as it was intended to cure. In part, this is because of mankind's animal nature which seeks to satisfy its desires at the expense of everyone else. Without order, life soon becomes a struggle of all against all and society begins to fragment. This, in turn, weakens the quality of life for every individual.

In contrast to these excesses of liberty, Bahá'u'lláh states that

True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven.<sup>170</sup>

This passage shows that "true freedom" is not so much based on the possession of individual free will but is also acquired by personal effort to "awaken spiritual susceptibilities"<sup>171</sup> and to recognize the need for submission to God. In other words, free will is a divine gift given along with the rational soul but its full development depends on our struggles to free ourselves from enslavement to our lower animal nature and the resulting individual and collective "intellectual maladies"<sup>172</sup> that distort our thinking and

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<sup>168</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Part 1, "Of Man", chp. 13, p. 185 - 186

<sup>169</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 335.

<sup>170</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 335.

<sup>171</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 7.

<sup>172</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 205.

behavior. The capacity for free will and freedom is given, but keeping it alive and pure depends on us. It can be lost.

The second lesson we learn about liberty is that humans need protection from not just from enemies but all too frequently, from "[their] own ignorance" i.e. from themselves. Therefore, they need the guidance of the Manifestations of God. While some, such as most humanists, may regard this as an example of divine paternalism, others will point to history as illustrating the need for such guidance. While 'paternalism' has negative connotations for many, we must recognize not all paternalisms are the same. While in most cases paternalistic rule is practiced for the interests and advantages of the rulers, this is not so in the case of God Who has no interests and personal advantages to pursue. In His essence, God lacks nothing, and, therefore has nothing to gain. His rule over mankind is motivated by His love and the communicative nature of His love which desires the creation and well-being of man.<sup>173</sup>

Unlike Thomas Hobbes, the Bahá'í Writings reject tyranny as a way to restore and/or maintain social unity and order they agree that an excess of freedom can lead to social disharmony, fragmentation and disorder in the struggle of all against all. Bahá'u'lláh demonstrates His opposition to dictatorship in His declaration "*It ill beseemeth the station of man to commit tyranny; rather it behoveth him to observe equity and be attired with the raiment of justice under all conditions.*"<sup>174</sup> For both the tyrant and the oppressed, tyranny violates mankind's lofty station as the acme of the created world.<sup>175</sup> It also suppresses the progressive development of humanity's divinely bestowed capacity for justice, reason, good will, honesty and trustworthiness. This damages and distorts the actualization of human nature in both the rulers and the ruled. This offends against God's law which wants us to actualize our inherent capacities.

Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the rejection of tyranny in his statement that if a person direct his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, this too would be most praiseworthy. But should he display these qualities under other conditions, this would be deserving of blame.<sup>176</sup>

In other words, he approves of opposition to tyranny and, by implication, rejects a passive attitude towards "bloodthirsty tyrants." His word choice displays the strength of his feelings on this point: "anger," "wrath," "ferocious beasts" and "most praiseworthy."

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<sup>173</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Arabic Hidden Words*, # 3.

<sup>174</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 170.

<sup>175</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 50: 4.

<sup>176</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 57: 10, p. 249.

However, this statement does not touch on the means of such opposition which must conform to certain guidelines.

Expressions of free will must also be moderated by considerations of mankind's spiritual nature which requires us to act in accordance with equity, good will, rationality, humility and kindness among other virtues. Action or speech that does not harmonize with these or other spiritual virtues should be avoided. When humans forget their essentially spiritual nature and speak and act against it, individuals and societies suffer. For example, there are those like John Stuart Mill, who view free will as unassailable under virtually any circumstances and who would defend the right to choose drug addiction and prostitution as a way of life. He does not approve of them, but, in his lack of spiritual understanding, finds such choices are a legitimate use of free will. Another immoderate use of free will can be seen in destructive and violent public demonstrations that prevent others from going about their lawful business, and go from protesting which is a right of free speech to disrupting which is not. In regards to excesses of free will in speech, "Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and *needeth moderation*."<sup>177</sup> In our understanding, this admonition should not be interpreted as support for essentially untruthful, mealy-mouthed and euphemistic speech which hinders and distorts communication and understanding but rather that speech should avoid bombast, *ad hominem*s, and excessive rhetoric.

As we have shown, there are two distinct but logically related aspects of freedom, one focusing on the sources of individual free will which is the foundation of societal freedom and the other focussing on how the teachings on individual free will can be applied in society and correlated with other values and the practical necessities of ensuring the common good. Society is where the issue of freedom gets complicated or 'messy' because other values and necessities besides freedom have to be taken into consideration. Most notable among these is the concept of the 'common good' which limits the scope of individual action.

Perhaps the most basic feature of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is that it sees "man's freedom in his conformity to an order of being incomparably greater than himself."<sup>178</sup> In other words, in thinking about freedom it is necessary to recall that mankind exists in a universe that is both spiritual and physical, is teleological and evolutionary and is a divine creation in which mankind is the highest form of life. We must also remember that mankind itself is a teleological being whose goal is to actualize not only its physical but above all its spiritual potentials during earthly existence in preparation for continued evolution after death. This has numerous implications. First, it means that

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<sup>177</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143.

<sup>178</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 137.



individual free will and freedom exist to fulfill the goal of actualization of mankind's highest capacities; they have an inherent purpose and are not intended to uncritically enable the pursuit of any goal whatever. Second, this means there exists an objective standard i.e. human nature, by which we can evaluate our actions vis-à-vis self-actualization. Our teleological nature 'expects' us to achieve certain things and if we do not. We cannot help but distort our nature. Third, vis-à-vis personal free will and societal freedom, this means that only looking at the physical consequences of freedom is insufficient to form a complete and accurate assessment. For example, anti-addiction strategies must not only include the physical but also the psychological and spiritual well-being of the addict. This includes the welfare of his/her soul through the adoption of world-views more aligned with the nature of the soul.

The existence of human nature with specific capacities suggest that a 'common good' can be defined for human societies which, after all, are made up of individuals. In other words, on the basis of our understanding of what humans are, what they can be and were intended to be, it is possible to identify - in broad terms - the attributes required for a society and its members to thrive, to "be all [we] can be." The Bahá'í concept of the common good is based on the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature which is based on two principles. The first is that "Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy. This spiritual longing and perception belong to *all men alike*."<sup>179</sup> The second is that the "rational soul"<sup>180</sup> is what "distinguishes man from the animal."<sup>181</sup> Virtually everything we can say about personal free will and societal freedom must be in harmony with the Bahá'í philosophy of human nature. Human nature and, therefore, the common good are universal to i.e. true of all human beings in the past, present and future.<sup>182</sup> These principles provide a set of specific criteria by which to determine what is a valid concept of free will and societal freedom. For example, it can never be for the common good to suppress individual or collective spirituality - as was programmatically done in virtually all Communist countries - because this violates and necessarily distorts human nature and inevitably hurts everyone.

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<sup>179</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 73; emphasis added.

<sup>180</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208. In the new translation, p. 241.

<sup>181</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

<sup>182</sup> Ian Kluge, "The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature," in *Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Vol. 27, Spring-Summer, 2017.

## IX: Freedom of Expression

The Bahá'í Writings view freedom as an instrumental value and not as an end-in-itself; nor is it the only value we need to take into consideration. However, it is instrumental as well as essential insofar as individual free will and societal freedom are necessary for human advancement. `Abdu'l-Bahá makes this clear when he asserts that

*When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail -- that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs -- development and growth are inevitable.*<sup>183</sup>

Since "development and growth" of mankind are a task assigned to all people by Bahá'u'lláh, the means to that development cannot help but be essential for mankind. Without freedom of thought and speech we would be unable to obey Bahá'u'lláh's declaration that "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."<sup>184</sup> Freedom may be instrumental value but it is, nonetheless, essential insofar as it is necessary to achieve the advancement of both individuals and civilizations.

Further emphasizing the importance of freedom of expression, Shoghi Effendi adds,

*Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views.*<sup>185</sup>

Without consultation and debates, without free exploration of ideas, the independent investigation of truth is obstructed and with it, human progress. The "freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views," is necessary to make the process of consultation effective as `Abdu'l-Bahá's statement makes clear:

*The members thereof [1] must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions.*<sup>186</sup>

Especially noteworthy in this pronouncement is the recognition that clashes of opinion are a normal and healthy part of the consultation process. Indeed, he makes "the clash of

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<sup>183</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197; emphasis added.

<sup>184</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 214.

<sup>185</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 63-4; emphasis added.

<sup>186</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 87; emphasis added.

differing opinions" a pre-condition for discovery of the truth. That is inevitable when people present their true, sincerely held opinions on serious issues - although this does not excuse such rudeness as ad hominem attacks, sarcasm and monopolizing discussions. Furthermore, this declaration implies that holding back one's opinion for the sake of 'peace' is not necessarily a virtue because it deprives the consultation process of a necessary opinion. Equally significant is that `Abdu'l-Bahá forbids hurt feelings over differences of opinion. In consultation, there are no 'safe spaces' from having one's viewpoints challenged or hearing diverse opinions. We are expected to at least listen to a variety of opinions and are implicitly forbidden to use hurt feelings as leverage to limit the discussion. `Abdu'l-Bahá's encouragement of freedom of speech in consultation becomes especially significant when we realize that consultation is not only for LSA's but also for all Bahá'ís, and eventually for the entire world. The clear implication is that freedom of speech is a universal value meant for all nations and cultures.

One of the key features of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom concerns the means by which the teachings about freedom are applied. The manner in which rules are implemented are as essential as the rules themselves.<sup>187</sup> On the issue of freedom, Shoghi Effendi makes clear that the Bahá'í methods are essentially spiritual, that they rely on consultation and are aimed at the growth of insight and understanding:

*The unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice, and the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.*<sup>188</sup>

Shoghi Effendi adds,

*at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views . . . Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the*

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<sup>187</sup> Stalin's 1936 constitution was the most liberal on earth – and launched during the Great Terror which killed millions.

<sup>188</sup> Shoghi Effendi, From a letter dated 3 June 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the delegates and visitors at the Convention of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in "Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932" pp. 87-88); emphasis added.

*sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other.*<sup>189</sup>

The first part of this declaration vigorously re-asserts the fundamental importance of freedom of thought and expression and firmly rejects "dictatorial authority" and "arbitrary power" as counter-balances or moderators of free speech. That goal must be achieved by consultation.

The second part of Shoghi Effendi's guidance points out the need to "reconcile" or balance freedom and "submission," or restraint for the personal and common good. An important characteristic of the Bahá'í revelation is that such reconciliation is to be achieved by consultation not by *diktat*, and by growth in understanding the mission of the Bahá'í Faith. These methods are completely incompatible with any kind of repressive rule. While these guidelines must be taken into consideration, it is also important to recall the decision of when and how to apply these principles rest with the individual.

The third part of Shoghi Effendi's statement refers to the "undoubted right of the individual to self-expression." In other words, free expression is a right, i.e. an entitlement that does not have to be earned but is given by virtue of being human. While it is clear that the principle of moderation also applies here, it is equally evident that by making "self-expression" an "undoubted right" gives self-expression priority, i.e. this right is the basis to which moderation is applied as a modifier is applied to a subject. In the philosophical language of `Abdu'l-Bahá, "self-expression" is the substance and "moderation" is the accident. Our purpose in pointing this out is to illustrate once again, as we have with consultation, that the Writings are strongly inclined towards individual freedom and that fears for individual rights in the new world order are groundless. This also applies to the review provision which is sometimes misrepresented as an abrogation of free speech. In reality, it is nothing more than an insistence on accuracy of information about the Bahá'í Faith which is to say, nothing that a responsible editor or publisher's fact checker would not do.

The Writings provide various guidelines for deciding when and when not to limit freedom of expression. The principle of moderation seen in Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawh-I-Ittihad* which points out a specific limitation to free speech:

For example, consider that if two of the chosen ones of God should come to a town and should speak about the same matter and disagree, this would be the cause of

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<sup>189</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 63-4.

disunity. It would cause them and those around them to be deprived and debarred from the bounties of unity<sup>190</sup>

In a teaching situation, giving precedence to unity is a matter of common sense; this is not a situation where it is appropriate to advocate for one's own viewpoints and confuse the seekers about the teachings. However, it is important not to over-generalize this specific example and remember that this example does not forbid having differing opinions or even expressing them - in other situations. In our understanding, there is no warrant for applying what is true of free speech in teaching situations to all other kinds of situations such as debates, the independent investigation of truth and consultation. Doing so would lose the moderation the Writings require. Furthermore, in our understanding, the rights of free speech and the requirements for unity are balanced insofar as individuals are entitled to speak their minds freely - as guaranteed by Shoghi Effendi<sup>191</sup> - but not in a manner that disunifies the community, e.g. by persistent harassing, encouraging factions and igniting inter-personal friction. Such behaviors are, in effect, a kind of campaigning within the community and a sort of intellectual politicking which may even distract from the goals of the Faith.

By now it is clear that in the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom, and especially freedom of speech, there is no basis for imposing "dictatorial authority" over its adherents let alone non-Bahá'ís. Since "the keynote of the Cause of God"<sup>192</sup> is consultation, any arbitrary silencing of free speech is simply incompatible with the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. That is why the Universal House of Justice says, "*Thus there is a balance of freedom between the institution, whether national or local, and the individuals who sustain its existence.*"<sup>193</sup>

Requiring moderation of speech helps build the capacity for self-critique and the ability to evaluate whether or not our ideas vis-à-vis worthiness of utterance. The Universal House of Justice states,

Bahá'u'lláh's assertions clearly call for an examination of current assumptions. *Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom?* For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another;

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<sup>190</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Lawh-I-Ittihad*, provisional translation and commentary by Dr. Moojan Momen, Issues Raised, # 1.

<sup>191</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>192</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 63-4.

<sup>193</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4.

these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?<sup>194</sup>

Without a practiced capacity for self-critique, i.e. investigating the truth for oneself, human thought can easily go awry as we become intellectually lazy - and careless - enough to "believe everything we think."<sup>195</sup> That is a certain way to mislead ourselves.

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh points out that we must be self-aware, i.e. self-critical in regards to occasions on which to speak:

Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it.<sup>196</sup>

However, it is important to note that this is a guideline for us to consider and not a blunt instrument for suppressing speech we disagree with. It is the individual who must assess the appropriateness of the content, the time and the audience. It cannot be otherwise since it is individuals who usually find themselves in the situations in which these guidelines must be applied.

## X: Three Types of Freedom

At this point, we shall pause to draw some general conclusions about the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom. Mortimer Adler points out, there are basically three types of freedom.<sup>197</sup> The first is "circumstantial freedom" which is free will without external coercion either by individuals, society, legal or economic factors or accidental external circumstances such as blizzards or car accidents. The Universal House of Justice points out that

*A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to the high importance of these freedoms to constructive social processes. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of His Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it*

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<sup>194</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988 Dec 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4; emphasis added.

<sup>195</sup> One of my favorite philosophy professors used to say, "Don't believe everything you think!"

<sup>196</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXIX, p. 175.

<sup>197</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 107.

not indicate an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man such as has not yet been attained?<sup>198</sup>

This passage makes clear that external freedom from tyrannical governments or tyrannical economic practices and systems closely connected. It is, for example, impossible to pursue the independent investigation of truth under a tyranny like Stalin's where all aspects of private and public life were under surveillance and liable for harsh punishment. Similarly, it is impossible for a society to make progress if a good education is limited to the wealthy and resistance is punished by economic deprivation. "[C]onstructive social processes," i.e. societies intent on making progress must recognize the "high importance" of providing freedoms that are conducive to external as well as internal or spiritual freedoms for mankind.

However, while external circumstantial freedom is necessary for progress at the social level, we must not forget that individuals have "rational souls" that are not entirely subservient to external circumstances. As already noted, Bahá'u'lláh says that we cannot blame others i.e. external circumstances, for our disbelief in God<sup>199</sup> and `Abdu'l-Bahá says we are always free to make a moral decision, meaning, thereby, that moral decisions are always possible<sup>200</sup> - though not easy. Humanity's spiritual nature provides some freedom from external circumstances. A contemporary example of such moral independence is the positive behavior of Bahá'ís in Iranian captivity. A historical example are those who risked their lives to save Jews from the Nazis or even those who simply kept silent about the presence of a Jew. Thus, while positive external circumstances are necessary for societal freedom, they are not

The second type of freedom is "natural freedom," i.e. freedom "with which all men are innately or inherently endowed."<sup>201</sup> As previously shown, this kind of freedom is an aspect of the "rational soul" which enables mankind to free itself - at least partially - from domination by the natural world. "Natural freedom" is potential and, therefore, humans must consciously and willfully actualize it by their choices. The belief that "natural freedom" is universal is foundational to at least four Bahá'í teachings: (1) the essential unity of humankind vis-avis capacities and potentials; (2) the core ethics or "eternal verities"<sup>202</sup> passed on by successive Manifestations; (3) progressive revelation and the individual and societal choices it requires; (4) the eventual unification of mankind in a federal commonwealth in which

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<sup>198</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1988, Dec. 29, *Individual Rights and Freedoms*, p. 4; emphasis added.

<sup>199</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIX, p. 143.

<sup>200</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 3, p. 287.

<sup>201</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 157.

<sup>202</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 13.

All men will adhere to one religion, will have one common faith, will be blended into one race and become a single people. All will dwell in one common fatherland, which is the planet itself.<sup>203</sup>

From this it is clear that a significant number of signature beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith are closely associated with the concept of "natural freedom." It is an aspect of the "rational soul" which is common to all mankind at all times and under all conditions.

The third type of freedom is "acquired freedom"<sup>204</sup> which according to Adler,

depends upon a change or development in human beings whereby they have a state of mind or character or personality which differentiate them from other men . . . these differences represent . . . a superior condition.<sup>205</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings agree that "acquired freedom" comes through our own freely willed efforts and represents a state of being superior to immersion in our animal nature. . The transcendental spiritual freedoms must be earned not by choosing to will as we desire<sup>206</sup> but by choosing to will as we ought<sup>207</sup>, i.e. to choose the challenges of actualizing our spiritual and intellectual potentials as innately given in our human nature by God. We follow the divine law, not our preferences. This transcendence of nature - especially, our animal nature - opens up new possibilities or freedoms for our evolution as human beings. In acquired freedom we realize our specifically human potentials. In contrast, we have very limited and often no control over "circumstantial freedom," i.e. the external circumstances that contextualize our use of free will. Moreover, we have no control whatever over "natural freedom" or free will with which all humans are endowed by God. This "natural freedom" is not only a divine gift but is also an obligation to use and use wisely.

"Acquired freedom" has two important implications. The first is the necessity of accepting the fact that while all humans have the capacity to acquire freedoms, not all of them choose to do so. Instead, to their own detriment in this world and the next, and to the detriment of society, some choose to remain captives of the material world and of their animal natures and to reject the challenges of actualizing their full range of potentials. They are self-enslaved. For this reason acquired freedom is beyond the grasp of those who lack morality and good will. To obtain it, they must advance to a higher moral state. However - and this is essential - the tragic refusal to actualize cannot be met with

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<sup>203</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 12: 7, p. 75.

<sup>204</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 134.

<sup>205</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 135.

<sup>206</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 87.

<sup>207</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, Vol. I, p. 143.



coercion of any kind; true freedom is not just the opportunity to succeed but also the opportunity to fail. This tragedy requires a special spiritual discipline from us, namely, accepting this choice and realizing that nothing in the Writings justifies coercing individuals on these matters. Even in this we must accept their right to do as they will.

## **XIA: Freedom and Coercion**

Prohibiting coercion even when people are damaging their own well-being is the Bahá'í answer to the long-debated question of whether humans can be forced to be free. Rousseau, for example, maintains that obedience to the "general will" for the common good is what makes us free; consequently, by being coerced to think and act according to the "general will" we can be forced to be free. Communists make the same claim. Freedom means accepting material and historical necessity which is represented by the will of the Communist Party. For this reason when coercion is used it is being used to help us be free. The secret police are agents of freedom! The Bahá'í Writings reject such "intellectual maladies"<sup>208</sup> as essentially dishonest. On this point, the Writings agree with John Stuart Mill who also rejects coercing people to pursue their own advantage. Paternalistic pressure may compel outward compliance but it cannot create genuine willingness and commitment. Indeed, doing so is nothing less than an attempt to reduce a human into a will-less robot, and, thereby, is an attack on God's given human nature.

Broadly speaking the Bahá'í view opposes paternalistic impositions on free will: the Universal House of Justice states that because "Every human being is ultimately responsible to God . . . conscience is never to be coerced, whether by other individuals or institutions."<sup>209</sup> ` Abdu'l-Bahá - and the Universal House of Justice - prefer to lead by pointing out the way and letting personal spiritual understanding and growth actualize the necessary changes. This applies even to large scale issues of needed economic reform:

*The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit . . . The Bahá'ís will bring about this improvement and betterment but not through sedition and appeal to physical force -- not through warfare, but welfare. Hearts must be so cemented together, love must become so dominant that the rich shall most willingly extend assistance to the poor and take steps to establish these economic adjustments permanently.*

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<sup>208</sup> ` Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 204.

<sup>209</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10, *Issues Related to Study Compilation*.

If it is accomplished in this way, it will be most praiseworthy because then it will be for the sake of God and in the pathway of His service.<sup>210</sup>

Two points stand out here. First, there is no 'techno-fix' to mankind's economic problems, no set of rules that we can manipulate to make plans to diminish extreme income inequality or remedy poverty. The reason why is clear - although largely ignored - people, their values, decisions, ambitions, goals and good will are the basis of economics. No fundamental economic improvement can be expected as long as individuals, societies and researchers operate in a purely materialistic framework which leave out the 'human factors.' Real economic change requires real change in people. Second, paternalism, i.e. external compulsion will not create deep psycho-spiritual changes needed for future material and spiritual evolution. Economic changes must come willingly. He re-emphasizes this, saying,

among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is *voluntary sharing* of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. *But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it.* Nay, rather, man should *voluntarily and of his own choice* sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor, just as is done in Persia among the Bahá'ís.<sup>211</sup>

In other words, diminishing the gap between extreme wealth and poverty will work better by the insight and good will gained from "acquired freedoms" of spiritual development than by paternalistic compulsion. Obviously, if economic reforms come from willing inner commitment, there will be fewer people trying to manipulate laws and systems to their own advantage. Soviet Russia is a telling example. Legally, all people were economically equal but in truth it did not take long for the nobility and wealthy classes to be replaced by countless party member commissars, bureaucrats and managers<sup>212</sup> who accumulated enormous personal wealth. This is why the Writings recommend freely willed conviction over compulsion.

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<sup>210</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 238.

<sup>211</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 302.

<sup>212</sup> Richard Lourie, *Russia Speaks: An Oral History From the Revolution to the Present*.

## XIB: Two Concepts of Liberty

One of the most influential theories in the last seventy years is Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958). Berlin's wide-ranging essay is famous for clearly identifying and naming "negative freedom"<sup>213</sup> which is freedom from deliberate external interference by individuals and/or governments and "positive freedom" which is the capacity to actualize our free will. The first is *freedom from* and the latter is *freedom for*; the first refers to external coercion and the second to the capacity and opportunity to attain our goals.

As we have just demonstrated, generally, the Bahá'í Writings balance negative and positive liberties. As shown above, the Writings display strong preferences towards negative liberty, i.e. non-interference in others' lives to the greatest degree feasible. Their condemnation of tyranny; the preference for spiritual growth over compulsion both in this world and the next; especially their rejection of compulsion in religion; the emphasis on balancing unity and diversity; the independent investigation of truth; the equality of men and women; and the prohibition of compulsion in fund raising illustrate this basic preference for abolishing and/or not imposing restrictions and interfering in people's lives.

"Positive freedom" concerns what we *free for*. Nigel Warburton points out that just because no one is preventing you from doing something, it does not follow that you are genuinely free. Positive freedom is a matter of achieving your potential, not just having potential.<sup>214</sup> For example, we may be free to paint without any external interference but we are not really free to do so if we lack the money to buy paint.<sup>215</sup> Practical freedom requires not just capacity but also genuine opportunity. However, these opportunities do not only come from the outside - they also come from within. As Isaiah Berlin points out, we are not free if we are slaves to our physical nature, to extreme gullibility or outbursts of temper. "The positive conception of freedom as self-mastery with its suggestion of man divided against himself"<sup>216</sup> and a higher self often identified with reason or a higher self<sup>217</sup> leads into dangerous waters. This, according to Berlin, is the latent dictatorial potential in positive freedom, i.e. the temptation to compel others to be free by forcing them to develop their 'higher' natures. He approvingly quotes Kant's statement, "Paternalism is the greatest despotism imaginable."<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194.

<sup>214</sup> Nigel Warburton, *Arguments for Freedom*, p. 18.

<sup>215</sup> Whether or not it is appropriate for government to remedy this situation is a matter of political philosophy.

<sup>216</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 206.

<sup>217</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 204, p. 206.

<sup>218</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 208.

Paternalism is despotic not because it is more oppressive than naked, brutal, unenlightened tyranny . . . but because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being determined to make my own life.<sup>219</sup>

This is precisely what the Bahá'í Writings seek to avoid because paternalism holds back individual and societal evolution in spiritual growth and, thereby, our arrival at the unification of mankind. Infantilization does not foster maturity.

Notwithstanding the inclination towards negative freedom, the Writings also recognize that people cannot be free if oppressed by body-and-mind grinding poverty, lack of education or injustice - all of which are required for freedom to be meaningful. For this reason, the Writings prescribe a major re-thinking of mankind's economic principles, such as the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty.

## **XII: Conclusion**

This overview of the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom provides the basis for three major conclusions.

First, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is rational, coherent and comprehensive. It is rational because its teachings are developed according to the principles of reasoning, specifically, the law of non-contradiction.<sup>220</sup> It is coherent because the principles and teachings are interdependent and mutually supportive. Every teaching builds on its predecessor and sets the stage for its successor. We might also say that that each subsequent deduction is potentially present in its predecessor. Furthermore, the Bahá'í philosophy of freedom is also coherent because its teachings are all based on certain metaphysical principles that ensure the underlying unity of its philosophy of freedom. This unity will become more apparent throughout our study.

The Bahá'í Writings cover the broad spectrum of issues about freedom such as the metaphysical basis of free will; the body and free will; consciousness, intentionality and freedom; freedom and responsibility; personal freedoms vis-à-vis community rights; legitimate limitations on personal freedom; positive and negative liberty<sup>221</sup>; circumstantial,

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<sup>219</sup> Isaiah Berlin, *A Value Pluralist and Humanist View of Human Nature*, p. 67.

<sup>220</sup> Ian Kluge, "Reason and the Baha'i Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, 14, 2013 <http://bahai-library.com/series/Irfan> or at my philosophy website, <https://www.bahaiphilosophy.com/>

<sup>221</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, p. 194 – 203.

natural and acquired freedom<sup>222</sup>. There, of course many other issues to be explored but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

Second, the Bahá'í Writings understand freedom as spiritual, teleological and instrumental in nature. Free will is one of mankind's divinely given spiritual capacities and achieves its highest expression in advancing our spiritual development. It is also teleological, i.e. it exists for a purpose, namely, the actualization of mankind's physical, intellectual and spiritual potentials. Such progress is, after all, the purpose of all the Manifestations of God. Furthermore, in contrast to many other philosophies of freedom, the Bahá'í Writings teach that while freedom is a necessary instrument for the achievement of greater spiritual ends, it is necessary but not sufficient for human progress. Freedom is not an absolute end in itself and by itself does not lead to progress that is appropriate to human nature. The Manifestations are must provide the needed spiritual guidance.

Finally, the philosophy of freedom includes - and possibly originates - at least two original arguments strengthening the basis of free will by showing the untenability of materialist views of human nature. By showing the untenability of materialist determinism in its various forms, the Bahá'í Writings further undermine the materialist understanding of human nature and problematic conclusions that follow for the value of individuals; the basis and application of ethics; the nature and purpose of social interactions; and the purpose and meaning of human existence including suffering.

Abdu'l-Bahá's arguments, while somewhat technical, are important because they not only solve two long-standing scientific and philosophical problems but, more important, they further show the untenability of materialist and determinist positions on free will. The first of these provides a new solution to the mind-body problem whereas the second demonstrates the impossibility of mind-brain identity theory there by showing the necessity of invoking non-physical entities to explain certain brain functions. Because of their somewhat technical nature, these are in the appendix to this paper and not in the main text.

### **XIII: Appendix: Brain and Mind**

The Bahá'í Writings provide at least two decisive insights to the problem of the relationship between brain and mind. Descartes formulated the classical dualist position by claiming that mind (or non-extended substance) and brain (material, extended substance)

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<sup>222</sup> Mortimer Adler, *The Idea of Freedom*, I. 137 – 148.

are essentially different and, therefore, cannot communicate. Which of these two is the basis of free will?

In our view, the Bahá'í Writings present a simple and elegant solution to the dualism problem: the problem is chimerical, an illusion caused by Descartes' faulty analysis in identifying both the non-extended spirit and the extended body as distinct, separate and wholly incompatible substances. The dualism problem is an artefact of this confused analysis. How can completely distinct, separable and incompatible substances be connected let alone compose a third substance, i.e. an individual human nature?

One of the major arguments against any spiritual understanding of free will is that soul or mind and body cannot interact. This argument is famously formulated by Descartes - although it exists with other philosophers as well. `Abdu'l-Bahá points out Descartes' error while presenting his argument for the immortality of the soul.

Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident -- that is to say, the body -- be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains.<sup>223</sup>

The solution to the Cartesian dilemma is `Abdu'l-Bahá's identification of the spirit or soul as the "substance" and the body as "accidental." Being "accidental" makes the body into an attribute of the spirit substance; indeed, it is an "accidental" attribute, i.e. one that is not even essential to the existence of the substance. Thus spirit and body are not necessarily eternally connected and spirit will eventually leave the body behind.

As we recall from foregoing discussion, accidental attributes depend on the substance to exist. When the accidental quality disappears, the substance still remains. Indeed, the substance i.e. the rational soul, is the basis for the mental and spiritual processes. There is no incompatibility between a substance and its attribute. An action is not incompatible with the person who acts; the red color is not incompatible with the tomato itself.<sup>224</sup> In other words, Descartes - and those who use his argument - make the mistake of identifying both rational soul and body as independent substances even though the body is an accidental attribute. This error has misdirected thinking on this subject, and with it the interpretation of research results. A good example of this is Sam Harris's

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<sup>223</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

<sup>224</sup> For a detailed explanation, see "The Baha'i Philosophy of Human Nature" in *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, Vol. 27, Spring-Summer 23017.

misinterpretation of the Libet experiments in physical confusing reflex reactions with deliberative thought.<sup>225</sup>

The determinist rejection of free will requires that brain and mind or soul be identical. This is untenable as `Abdu'l-Bahá shows when he says,

reflect that the vibration of the air, which is an accident of no importance, attracts and *exhilarates* the spirit of man and has great effect upon him: it makes him *weep* or *laugh*; perhaps it will influence him to such a degree that he will throw himself into danger.<sup>226</sup>

Qualia refer to the subjective qualitative experiences of our own conscious states of mind. These states of mind include each person's unique experiences of sensations such as 'blue' or real and/or imaginative experiences; and events. Qualia refer to the 'what it is like'<sup>227</sup> to be particular individual in a specific situation. In other words, qualia make up the whole of our subjectively experienced 'life-world' which is why they are so incredibly important to humans. Much of human life is driven by the quest for certain qualia or subjective experiences as seen in the pursuit of beauty, friendship, love, poetry, stories, pleasure, music, ritual, humor, justice, truth, God and meaning among other things.

Qualia and subjective experience pose difficulties for brain-mind identity theory because qualia are not physical things - there is no way to 'scoop up' or measure someone's subjective experience. None of the criteria of scientific evidence - physicality, measurability, objective and external observability, and falsifiability among others - can be applied to qualia and subjective experience. How can there be brain functions which h cannot be measured? According to -

`Abdu'l-Bahá, physical measuring devices only provide "knowledge of things perceptible to the senses"<sup>228</sup> - which excludes qualia and subjective experiences. Consequently, they are not appropriate targets of scientific study. Furthermore, because qualia and subjective experiences are not physical, their actions and interactions cannot be explained in terms of physical cause and effect. The non-physical nature of qualia creates a conundrum for the brain-mind identity theory: how can a physical organ like the brain accommodate a class of non-physical qualia and subjective experiences? This is self-contradictory. How, for example, can there be aspects of brain function that cannot be measured? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the existence of qualia and

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<sup>225</sup> Sam Harris, *Free Will*, p. 7 – 14.

<sup>226</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 246.

<sup>227</sup> Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" in *The Philosophical Review*. October, 1974.

<sup>228</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 83.

subjective experience is incompatible with brain-mind identity theory and, therefore, is incompatible with any form of hard determinism.

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