

# Some Answered Questions

## A Philosophical Perspective

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify and explore the philosophical positions explicitly and implicitly embedded in *Some Answered Questions* (SAQ) which celebrates the centenary of its publication this year. Such a study of SAQ is valuable for at least five reasons. First, it facilitates a deeper and more precise understanding and appreciation of the philosophical foundations of the Bahá'í Writings. Indeed, SAQ itself clearly invites examination from a philosophic perspective not only by the way it implicitly incorporates philosophical concepts or ideas in its explanations but also by its explicit discussions of such topics as the “reality of the exterior world,”<sup>1</sup> the nature of God, proofs for God’s existence, the difference between emanation and manifestation and the four-fold analysis of causality to name only the most obvious. While these examples all refer to ontological issues, SAQ also deals explicitly with issues in onto-theology, epistemology, personal and social ethics as well as in philosophical anthropology and psychology. Second, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason”<sup>2</sup> also invites a rational, i.e. philosophical analysis of SAQ (and the Writings) in order to make our teaching more effective by meeting people’s need for the “arguments of reason.” Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation to “*be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in*”<sup>3</sup> reinforces our obligations in this regard.

Third, a philosophic understanding of SAQ is extremely useful in conducting rational inter-faith dialogue, not only to discover the foundational similarities we would expect to find since religions are essentially one, but also to give precise formulations and analyses of historically developed doctrinal differences. By putting such dialogue on a rational,

philosophical footing, we are more likely to generate genuine understanding than by mere exchanges of competing views. Fourth, a philosophic understanding of SAQ (and the Writings as a whole) also facilitates the task of apologetics, of explaining and defending the teachings against critique or even outright attack. This is difficult to accomplish without a good understanding of the philosophic foundations of the Bahá'í teachings and the issues they involve. Even if opponents are not convinced, it will at least be possible to demonstrate that the teachings have a rational foundation and form a coherent world-vision or *Weltanschauung*. A philosophically based, rational apologetics will be an increasingly useful, too, as the Faith becomes better known and subject to more sophisticated critiques. Finally, a philosophical understanding of SAQ will help scholars determine the nature of the ideas that inform the Bahá'í Faith, and to identify those philosophical schools with which it shares the greatest affinities. Conversely, it will help us discover which schools are the most difficult to reconcile with SAQ (and the Writings in general) and why this is so. Such understanding also helps us to determine what makes the Bahá'í teachings philosophically unique and uniquely fitted to meet "the needs of the age [we] live in."<sup>4</sup>

In studying SAQ from a philosophic perspective, we shall examine not only the explicitly given philosophical statements but also their wider implications or extensions in order to show their applicability to a wide variety of areas. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes use of Aristotle's theory of four-fold causality — a concept often misunderstood by modern philosophers and scientists — and says that this analysis of causality applies to "the existence of everything."<sup>5</sup> Thus, as we shall demonstrate, it is possible to extend its application to the analysis of the family, society in general or even the Bahá'í community. Moreover, implicit in this causal analysis is an entire ontology of matter and form, essence, substance, essential and accidental attributes and teleology. These terms and categories exemplify a particular way of observing and analysing reality that differs dramatically from other schools of thought such as modern empiricism or postmodernism. Bahá'ís wishing a more complete philosophic understanding of SAQ (and the Writings) should be familiar with this way of analysing reality which has clear affinities to the philosophical tradition begun by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus — what this paper calls 'the Athenian tradition' — and continues most

actively in our time in the work of Whitehead and in the works of the various schools of neo-Aristotelians and neo-Thomists.<sup>6</sup>

This study will also begin the process of extracting implicit philosophical principles and implications from SAQ, such as, for example, a version of intelligent design theory inherent in the teaching that “Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design.”<sup>7</sup> This statement clearly rules out the more militant forms of Darwinism promulgated by such writers as Dawkins<sup>8</sup> and Hitchens,<sup>9</sup> which claim that the universe, and life, especially human life, are merely a result of blind fortuitous accidents. This does not imply that SAQ embraces the Christian versions of intelligent design, but it does imply that SAQ accepts some variation of intelligent design theory. Consequently, in light of the teaching of harmony between religion and science, Bahá’ís are faced with a new philosophic challenge of how to reconcile the acceptance of intelligent design with vehement scientific rejection of any such concept. The resulting investigations will inevitably lead us to further explorations of the Writings and the philosophy of science.

### 1. SAQ’s Ontology: Some Basic Principles

In its simplest terms, ontology concerns our theory of being i.e. what we mean when we say that something ‘is’ or ‘is real’ as opposed to being ‘unreal;’ ontology also explores the nature of real things and how they are related to each other. Doing ontology is unavoidable since, either explicitly or implicitly, every statement about the world contains ontological assumptions that guide our understanding and action. For example, the simple statement, ‘I shall walk the dog’ assumes (a) that ‘I’ exists in some way, (b) that ‘I’ have could make such a decision, (c) the dog exists in some way, (d) that ‘I’ and the dog are distinct and separate entities, exterior to each other, (e) that motion is possible and real and that (f) the city street outside also exists. It is, of course, possible to dig much, much deeper, but this simple example illustrates that we cannot avoid doing ontology even in our simplest thought processes and actions.

This certainly applies to religious texts. For example, if a religion teaches that there is a transcendent God Who is the source or ground of the material world, it has made several ontological claims. The most obvious is that reality contains two different kinds of entities. On one hand we have a

contingent, material world that depends on something else for its existence and on the other, an entity which is non-contingent, independent and not material. It follows therefore that ontologically speaking, existence has at least a dualistic, two part structure involving two radically different kinds of entities and that the existence of one 'part' i.e. God, is a logically necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of the other, i.e. creation. This, in turn, has implications for our relationship to non-contingent, independent source as well as its contingent and dependent world this Source created. At this point, ontology reveals practical implications for our lives because how we conduct our lives is a determined by how we understand reality. Ontology begins to show its onto-theological and ethical implications.

We shall begin our exploration of the ontology embedded in SAQ by asking a fundamental question: is the exterior world real or is it unreal i.e. a dream, illusion, fiction or construction created either by Descartes' demon, Maya or even by ourselves? The belief that the exterior world is a mere fantasy may be called 'maya-ism' after the veiling or illusion creating power (sometimes portrayed as a goddess) in the Hindu religion. In SAQ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá flatly rejects the view that reality is a phantasm.

*Certain sophists think that existence is an illusion, that each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence – in other words, that the existence of beings is like a mirage, or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror, which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality.*

*This theory is erroneous.*<sup>10</sup>

It is noteworthy that 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to those who maintain that the world is an "absolute illusion" as "sophists," a term traditionally associated with flawed and deceptive reasoning. Use of this term signals His rejection of maya-ism which is confirmed by His statement that "[t]his theory is erroneous." Consequently, for any Bahá'í-based philosophy, the unqualified assertion that "existence is an illusion" is not an option for understanding reality. This limitation is significant because it helps establish the view that SAQ contributes to laying out guidelines within which any Bahá'í-based philosophy must work.

## 2. Ontological Realism

Three closely related far-reaching consequences follow from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement. The first and most obvious is that "each being"<sup>11</sup> in the exterior world is real, i.e. possesses some "principle, foundation, or reality"<sup>12</sup> which give it some degree of existence "in itself." In other words, "each being" has at least some degree of innate existence, is individual, is distinct and possesses some detachment or independence from other beings and is, in that sense, unique. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says in a later section of this passage, "in their own degree they [things in the exterior world] exist."<sup>13</sup> Each thing "in the condition of being [] has a real and certain existence."<sup>14</sup> They are not mere "appearances" of something else, i.e. epiphenomena, passive side-effects or by-products that possesses no "principle, foundation or reality" of their own. This idea is re-enforced by the following statement:

*for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this. For example, the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence ... but the mineral has existence in the mineral world ... Then it is evident that although beings in relation to the existence of God have no existence, but are like the mirage or the reflections in the mirror, yet in their own degree they exist.*<sup>15</sup>

This statement makes it unequivocally clear that according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá while degrees of reality differ, every being is, in its own degree, undeniably real. It is worth noting that He flatly rejects any contradictory viewpoint: "It is futile to deny this," He says, thereby foreclosing any argument to the contrary. He emphasises the reality of creation elsewhere by stating "Now this world of existence in relation to its maker is a *real* phenomenon."<sup>16</sup> In other words, it has its own, undeniable degree of reality. The reason for this will be discussed in the section on "Existence and Nonexistence."

'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that each thing has its degree of existence provides a realist foundation for Bahá'í ontology and epistemology. If "each being" has its own "principle, foundation or reality" and reflects one of the names of God in its own way, it is, therefore, not only genuinely distinct from all other things but also independent from them, i.e. has its

own principle or foundation of existence “in itself.”<sup>17</sup> Having this principle or foundation “in itself” establishes a basis for the ontological independence of “each being” (except, of course, from God) including independence from human observers, which is to say, the ontological status of “each being” is does not depend on being observed by humans or on human beliefs or linguistic practices. As we shall have occasion to discover in later discussions, the realist orientation to reality has enormous implications for epistemology especially in regards to the concept of ‘essence.’ It also has far-reaching implications for the relations between Bahá’í philosophy and contemporary postmodernism.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. Ontological Pluralism

The second major consequence is that in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement we find the ontological basis for ontological pluralism, i.e. the belief that reality is made up of a multiplicity of individual things each of which “proclaims to us one of the names of God”<sup>19</sup> in its own way and to the limits of its capacity. In other words, reality is made up of genuinely distinct beings whose differences are real and fundamental and not merely an appearance, illusion or matter of perspective. Their individual existence is not merely a “mirage” or reducible to something else that is ‘more fundamental’ such as a ground of being, or God.

Accepting some form of ontological pluralism entails the rejection of ontological monism according to which there are no fundamental divisions or distinctions among things – including the distinction between the independent Creator and the dependent creations. In other words, the things of created world can ultimately be reduced to particular modes of being or appearances of God who is the only real thing or substance in existence. All distinctions are illusory for those possessing the enlightenment to see through the unreal distinct surface phenomena to the one reality underneath. According to SAQ, however, the distinctions between individual beings are real, i.e. “each being” has its own “principle, foundation or reality”<sup>20</sup> though, of course, ultimately, this multiplicity of beings operates “under one law from which they will never depart.”<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, as we shall see, in our discussion about the nature of God, SAQ categorically rejects any suggestion that God, the independent and non-contingent Creator can in any way be

ontologically one with dependent and contingent creation. The distinction between the independent and non-contingent and the dependent and contingent cannot be undone or overcome. The reason is obvious. For humans to become ontologically one with the absolutely independent and non-contingent God would be to lose their particular identity as the kinds of beings they are, and the same would hold true for God were He to unite with the contingent. Not only would this deny ontological pluralism by vitiating real differences, but it would also imply that there can be change in God insofar as He could be unified with His creation in some way.

The belief that the existence of the exterior world and its beings are an illusion vis-à-vis God's absolute existence is not an inadvertent re-admission of monism into Bahá'í ontology. It might be argued that since only God really, i.e. absolutely exists, then all other things are not real, illusory or mirages. Consequently, only one being remains – God – as real, and that, of course, is precisely the monist position, i.e. there is only one real substance, or being or will and that everything else is ultimately, unreal, mere epiphenomena. In other words, the distinctions between things are unreal or illusory, including the distinction between God and His creation. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly rejects this position; speaking of the things of this world, He says, "in their own degree they exist."<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere He says,

*So man exists; the animal, the plant and the mineral exist also – but the degrees of these four existences vary. What a difference between the existence of man and of the animal! Yet both are existences. It is evident that in existence there are differences of degrees.*<sup>23</sup>

These statements indicate that although the existence of things is bestowed by God, it nevertheless is real in its own right and not merely a chimera. Like a gift, it really belongs to the recipient though it originates from the wealth and bounty of another. Here again, we see the commitment to ontological pluralism re-enforced since from this perspective, the reality of different grades of being are guaranteed by God's perfections.

*The Creator always had a creation; the rays have always shone and gleamed from the reality of the sun, for without the rays the sun would be opaque darkness. The names and attributes of God require the existence of beings, and the Eternal Bounty does not cease. If it*

*were to, it would be contrary to the perfections of God.*<sup>24</sup>

Pluralism is guaranteed because the “names and attributes of God require the existence of beings,” i.e. require the existence of beings genuinely different from God. The fact that God is the origin of this difference does not make it any less real.

#### 4. Distinctions of Being and Power

According to SAQ, the distinctions between the various kinds of being are based on differences in powers or ability. For example, “The vegetable spirit is the power of growth ... [t]he animal spirit is the power of all the senses”<sup>25</sup> and “human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul”<sup>26</sup> which

*embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.*<sup>27</sup>

In other words, ontological differences in the degrees of being are reflected in the various capacities and powers with which each kind of being is gifted. Each station includes the powers possessed by the preceding station and adds a new power as illustrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion.

*As well as having the perfections of the mineral, of the vegetable and of the animal, he [man] also possesses an especial excellence which the other beings are without – that is, the intellectual perfections.*<sup>28</sup>

Also,

*there is no doubt that from its effects you prove that in the animal there is a power which is not in the plant, and this is the power of the senses – that is to say, sight, hearing and also other powers; from these you infer that there is an animal spirit. In the same way, from the proofs and signs we have mentioned, we argue that there is a human spirit. Since in the animal there are signs which are not in the plant, you say this power of sensation is a property of the animal spirit; you also see in man signs, powers and perfections which do not exist in the animal; therefore, you infer that there is a power in him which the animal is without.*<sup>29</sup>



In other words, the degree of being possessed by an entity manifests itself in the kind of powers and capacities it has. We shall have more to say about this in our discussion of the essences of things. For now, suffice it to note that this image of successively more inclusive levels of being establishes the concept of creation as having an underlying order, of being a hierarchy of successively more expansive capacities which ultimately ends or finds its origin in God. In this way, the cosmic order itself becomes evidence for God's existence. Finally, it should be noted that this cosmic order reinforces the pluralist ontology exemplified by SAQ because it shows the existence of different kinds of being.

It is also worth noting that the terms 'being' or 'existence' cannot be applied univocally to God and His creation, i.e. they do not have exactly the same meaning in each case. Indeed, the 'being' of God and man are so dissimilar that there is a difference of kind between them insofar as God is non-contingent and independent and man is not. Consequently, in SAQ the concepts of 'being' or 'existence' are applied in an equivocal manner to God and man; there is some analogous similarity insofar as in both Creator and creatures, the word 'existence' distinguishes them from 'non-existence' but the manner or mode of this existence is radically different in each case. This is important to keep in mind because it is one of the reasons for saying that God is essentially unknowable to humankind.

## 5. Ontological Hierarchism

The third consequence that follows from the teaching that all things have various degrees of being is the establishment of an ontological hierarchy with God's absolutely independent, non-contingent and incomprehensible being at the top and matter at the bottom. All beings between have existence "in their own degree,"<sup>30</sup> i.e. their own place in this universal hierarchy of being:

*the beings, whether great or small, are connected with one another by the perfect wisdom of God, and affect and influence one another. If it were not so, in the universal system and the general arrangement of existence, there would be disorder and imperfection. But as beings are connected one with another with the greatest strength, they are in order in their places and perfect.*<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in Bahá'í ontology, 'to be' or 'to exist' means possessing one's own degree of reality and having one's own unique place in the hierarchy of being based on the degrees of existence possessed by various kinds of things such as minerals, plants, animals or humans. Indeed, in discussing the various kinds of "beings which inhabit the world, whether man, animal, vegetable, mineral,"<sup>32</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá says the following

*all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.*<sup>33</sup>

Our main point, of course, is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's image of a chain or order made up of different kinds of beings can be viewed as support for the underlying concept of an ontological hierarchy in SAQ. Just as a chain needs links in different positions, so creation requires higher and lower degrees of being with the inevitable result that "as the degrees of existence are different and various, some beings are higher in the scale than others."<sup>34</sup> The mineral, plant and animal are of a lower degree than man, whom God "selected for the highest degree,"<sup>35</sup> though, of course, "material beings are not despised, judged and held responsible for their own degree and station."<sup>36</sup> This hierarchy of being is also reflected in the differences among humankind, among whom there may be a "difference of station ... [which] is not blameworthy."<sup>37</sup> This station, just like the station of minerals, plants and animals is given and is not alterable by our action. In contrast, what can be affected by our actions are the "difference of faith and assurance"<sup>38</sup> and therefore, "the loss of these is blameworthy."<sup>39</sup> SAQ adds, "man is praiseworthy and acceptable in his station, yet as he is deprived of the perfections of that degree, he will become a source of imperfections, for which he is held responsible."<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, no being has the right to complain of the station or degree of being into which we have been placed.

*the mineral, has no right to complain, saying, "O God, why have You not given me the vegetable perfections?" In the same way, the plant has no right to complain that it has been deprived of the perfections of the animal world ...No, all these things are perfect in their own degree, and they must strive after the perfections of their own degree. The inferior beings, as we have said, have neither the right to, nor the fitness for, the*

*states of the superior perfections. No, their progress must be in their own state.*<sup>41</sup>

It should be immediately noted that “inferior” here does not mean inferior in value but less comprehensive in powers, as for example, the mineral lacks of powers of growth or the plant, and the plant lacks the powers of movement of the animal. However, all are “perfect in their own degree.” The idea that differences in degree do not imply differences in valuation is evident, for example, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discussion of the various characters of human beings.

*Hence it is clear that in the original nature there exists a difference of degree and varieties of worthiness and capacity. This difference does not imply good or evil but is simply a difference of degree. One has the highest degree, another has the medium degree, and another the lowest degree.*<sup>42</sup>

No moral evaluation is associated with any degree of being in and of itself. To assert otherwise would be tantamount to claiming that creation has inherent imperfections — a claim which impugn the “Divinity Who has organized this infinite universe in the most perfect form, and its innumerable inhabitants with absolute system, strength and perfection.”<sup>43</sup> Such imperfection is not conceivable from God.

The concept of ontological hierarchy also appears in the following:

*this limitless universe is like the human body, all the members of which are connected and linked with one another with the greatest strength. How much the organs, the members and the parts of the body of man are intermingled and connected for mutual aid and help, and how much they influence one another! In the same way, the parts of this infinite universe have their members and elements connected with one another, and influence one another spiritually and materially.*<sup>44</sup>

Here, too, we observe not just the idea of mutual connection and inter-action at work, but also the idea of hierarchy as indicated in the simile associating the universe and “the human body,” i.e. a hierarchically structured organism in which everything is interconnected. In this passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also alludes to the idea that the universe functions like an organism and is not merely an unorganised collection or

aggregate of isolated individual parts working in isolation. Instead, they are all parts working with an organised whole for their own well-being and for the well-being of the whole. This vision lays the ontological foundation for the Bahá'í social vision of each person functioning as part of an organic community for mutual benefit in a balance of interests between part and whole.

## 6. Hierarchy After Death

The hierarchical nature of existence is also continues in life after death. Punishment consists of “falling into the lowest degrees of existence”<sup>45</sup> where “He who is deprived of these divine favours, although he continues after death, is considered as dead by the people of truth.”<sup>46</sup> The same idea is at work in the following statement:

*In the same way, the souls who are veiled from God, although they exist in this world and in the world after death, are, in comparison with the holy existence of the children of the Kingdom of God, nonexistent and separated from God.*<sup>47</sup>

Here, too, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear that the conduct of our lives determines our degree of existence in the next life; in comparison to those who receive God's favours those who do not are as “dead” or “nonexisting” – just as, analogously, creation has no existence compared to the absolute existence of God. This ontological hierarchy also lays the foundation for the epistemological principle that “the difference of conditions in the world of beings is an obstacle to comprehension,”<sup>48</sup> which is to say, that the lower degrees of being cannot comprehend the higher. Humankind, for example, cannot comprehend the Essence of God because our degree of being is too low and God is too different from us. We shall explore this further in our discussion of the epistemology inherent in SAQ.

It is important to emphasise that these statements about a chain of being refer to the ontological nature of different *kinds* of beings – “man, animal, vegetable, mineral”<sup>49</sup> – and are not statements about the value of these kinds of beings; no kind of being is devalued, as SAQ makes clear by referring to their “reciprocal help, assistance and interaction.” All beings in all stations play a necessary part in the cosmic process, though these parts are very different. In short, the ontological hierarchy does not of itself imply inherent unimportance of

any station. As noted above, “all beings” take part in the cosmic process of influencing and being influenced.

## 7. Kinds and their Perfections

As indicated each link in the chain, each degree or station of being is necessary:

*Know that the order and the perfection of the whole universe require that existence should appear in numberless forms. For existing beings could not be embodied in only one degree, one station, one kind, one species and one class; undoubtedly, the difference of degrees and distinction of forms, and the variety of genus and species, are necessary – that is to say, the degree of mineral, vegetable, animal substances, and of man, are inevitable; for the world could not be arranged, adorned, organized and perfected with man alone.<sup>50</sup>*

Here we find an unmistakable proof that all the various kinds of being are necessary for the perfection of the created universe. We also find in this statement an indication that SAQ accepts the principle of plenitude, i.e. the belief that all possible forms of being will be actualized at some time and in some way. That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ says that “the whole universe require[s] that existence *should appear in numberless forms*.” These forms are numberless because degrees of being are numberless, though, of course, they may be divided into groups or kinds. They are all needed for the universe to achieve its evolutionary perfection.

## 8. A Dynamic Ontology

The fact that each thing has particular degree of being suggests that all things must strive for the perfections appropriate to their kinds, or for “their own degree.” These perfections differ: the vegetable world finds perfection or purpose in growth and supporting animal and human life<sup>51</sup>; the animal finds perfections in achieving a comfortable physical existence and in supporting human life; finally, the perfection of the human world is to attain “the good attributes and virtues which are the adornments of his reality.”<sup>52</sup> Each station or place in the hierarchy of being has its own characteristics and its own perfections.

We should also note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concept of this chain or hierarchical order of being is dynamic insofar as "reciprocal help, assistance and interaction"<sup>53</sup> is concerned. Indeed, SAQ asserts unequivocally the general principle that all existence is dynamic:

*Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose — that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence.*<sup>54</sup>

The exact nature of this dynamism is not only motion, coming into existence, growth, decline and going out of existence but also either direct and/or indirect involvement in the existence of other beings. According to SAQ "every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association."<sup>55</sup> 'To be,' therefore, not only means that a thing has the principle or foundation of its existence "in itself" but also means that 'to be' involves an active relationship with other beings, i.e. to influence and to be influenced, to be active and receptive. This on-going interaction among things means that all beings communicate their existence and the particular nature of their existence to the world around them; they 'share' themselves as part of a cosmic community of such 'sharing' or self-communication. In creation, existence is relational or social and this fundamental fact, which encompasses all created reality, provides the ontological foundation for Bahá'í social philosophy. To keep the relational aspects of human existence in good order is precisely one of the tasks of the Manifestations.

## 9. A Nested Hierarchy

The foregoing considerations strongly suggest the conclusion that according to SAQ, creation is not an ontological flatland in which all things possess the same degree and manner of existence. In other words, existence is arranged in a successively transcendent levels of reality, with successively higher degrees of being, until we come to God Whose being is of another kind completely. From the perspective of the degrees of being, creation is not arranged on egalitarian principles with each kind of thing possessing the same degree. Of course, as seen above, from the perspective of valuation all things have an equally necessary part in the cosmic process although their function and place in the hierarchy of being differs.

The kind of hierarchy observed in SAQ is a nested hierarchy i.e. hierarchy in which higher levels contain lower levels. This is evident in the statement that

*the Divine Essence surrounds all things. Verily, that which surrounds is greater than the surrounded, and the surrounded cannot contain that by which it is surrounded, nor comprehend its reality.*<sup>56</sup>

Elsewhere He says, “the Essence of Unity surrounds all and is not surrounded.”<sup>57</sup> The same situation holds true in regards to the Manifestations: “the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities.”<sup>58</sup> This is also true of humankind:

*The most noble being on earth is man. He embraces the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms – that is to say, these conditions are contained in him.*<sup>59</sup>

To “embrace,” is, of course, to include or surround. The same situation holds true in the case of the spirit and the human body: “for the spirit surrounds the body,”<sup>60</sup> and idea repeated in the assertion that “This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings.”<sup>61</sup>

As we have observed in our discussion of the degrees of being, each ontologically higher level includes the powers of the lower and adds some new power, as humankind includes the powers of vegetable growth, animal motion and sense and adds the powers of the rational soul. Thus, it embraces or surrounds the lower within itself but also transcends it by being more. Therefore SAQ suggests a nested ontological hierarchy that starts with the most inclusive and transcendent, i.e. God, and ends with the least inclusive and least transcendent.

God  
The Manifestation(s)  
Humankind  
Animal  
Vegetable  
Mineral/matter

Refinements and subdivisions may, of course be added if we take other Writings into consideration, but SAQ itself provides warrant for only these.

## 10. Panentheism

The nested hierarchy proposed by SAQ has an important implication for the Bahá'í concept of God. The belief that God ontologically surrounds, embraces and includes all created things and at the same time transcends it is one form of a doctrine known as panentheism.<sup>62</sup> This is not to be confused with pantheism (or monism) according to which God and creation are identified as one substance and the diversity of created beings are ultimately no more than “mirages” or illusions. (We have seen how SAQ categorically rejects this view.<sup>63</sup>) Panentheism, however, admits that all created beings have their own degree of existence, even though they are contained within God.<sup>64</sup> The universe is within God, God is not within the universe. Thus God's presence is everywhere in creation but He transcends this presence and thus remains unknowable to humankind.<sup>65</sup> This transcendence is what differentiates pantheism and monism from panentheism which is distinguished from deism by the fact that it does not see God as completely unconnected from nature or creation.

There is more here than just a change of wording. Panentheism provides a rational alternative to pantheism and monism which reduce the plurality of beings to the divine – and thereby create problems for the concept of free will. How can we be free if we are only mirages or illusions and God is the only real source of action? It also provides a rational alternative to the forms of theism in which God seems disconnected from His creation and often so distantly transcendent as to be remote and beyond interest for human beings. In panentheism, God is both present throughout all creation, and still personal and transcendent. Later in this paper we shall demonstrate the effect panentheism has on the epistemological teachings promulgated in SAQ.

## 11. Ontology: Causality

Causality is one of the most important issues in ontology, one that has been controversial since Hume's reduction of causality to regular succession. This is most commonly understood to mean that when we say 'A caused B' we really mean 'Whenever A occurs, B immediately follows.' He rejects the idea that somehow A 'does something' to make B happen. There is no necessary objectively real connection between the two; any connection is human inference or projection based on



mental habits. Hume's understanding of causality has gained acceptance in light of some interpretations of quantum mechanics, though there has recently been a revival of Bohmian, i.e. causal interpretations.<sup>66</sup>

There is no question that SAQ rejects Hume's analysis of causality and accepts the traditional concept of causality being the influence or affect of one thing or event on another.

*It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association. Finally, the perfection of each individual being – that is to say, the perfection which you now see in man or apart from him, with regard to their atoms, members or powers – is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to mutual influence.*<sup>67</sup>

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that beings affect or influence one another and that these affects have certain results, in this case, the "perfection" of individual beings which is "due to," i.e. caused by these influences among other things. Elsewhere He says,

*There is no doubt that this perfection which is in all beings is caused by the creation of God from the composing elements, by their appropriate mingling and proportionate quantities, the mode of their composition, and the influence of other beings. For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.*<sup>68</sup>

Not only does 'Abdu'l-Bahá state that "reciprocal help, assistance and interaction" affect all beings but also, in the image of a chain, he conveys the idea of a necessary order and connection among these mutually interacting beings. Such necessary connection is precisely what Hume and his followers deny.

### 11.1 Four-Fold Causality

In SAQ, one of the most radical and far-reaching statements about ontology concerns the subject of causality:

*the existence of everything depends upon four causes – the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause. For example, this chair has a maker who is a carpenter, a substance which is wood, a form which is that of a chair, and a purpose which is that it is to be used as a seat. Therefore, this chair is essentially phenomenal, for it is preceded by a cause, and its existence depends upon causes. This is called the essential and really phenomenal.*<sup>69</sup>

This assertion is radical because it is a revival, both in conception and in terminology, of Aristotle's much misunderstood theory of causality as expounded in his *Physics*<sup>70</sup> and *Metaphysics*.<sup>71</sup> Here, too, Aristotle discusses the four causes, using precisely the terminology confirmed later by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: the material cause, or matter of which something is made; the formal cause, or form which makes an entity the particular thing it is; the efficient cause, i.e. mover or maker which directly brings the entity into being, i.e. "brings form to the matter"<sup>72</sup>; and the final cause, or purpose of the entire activity of making. Not only does 'Abdu'l-Bahá employ Aristotle's terms, He uses them exactly as Aristotle used them in order to analyze causality and, furthermore, He uses them to draw a general conclusion about the nature of how causality works in creation. It is interesting to note that SAQ contains no suggestions of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina's four subspecies of the efficient cause.<sup>73</sup>

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify exactly what Aristotle means by four-fold causality lest we entrap ourselves in philosophical misunderstandings that have dogged science and philosophy since the time of Descartes and Galileo. To produce any kind of real change in something, there must be matter or what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls "substance"<sup>74</sup> because there must be something in which the change happens. There must also be a form *from* which the change begins and *to* which it proceeds; in the case of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example, we have the substance in the form of wood being changed into a substance in the form of a chair. There must also be an efficient cause which initiates the change when a new form emerges from an old one, as the chair 'emerges' from the block of wood by way of the carpenter's action. Finally, there is the final cause or purpose which determines how the efficient cause will act, i.e. whether it will act one way or another depending on what is compatible with the goal. All four of these causes must be present for any change to occur. It should be noted that in

'Abdu'l-Bahá's illustration, the final cause is in the mind of the carpenter, i.e. is extrinsic to the material and substantial causes.

This fact leads to a major complaint about four-fold causality, namely, that it is anthropomorphic, applies to conscious and deliberative human actions, but does not apply to natural processes. Indeed, since the time of Descartes and Galileo, accepting final causality has been regarded as an identifying feature of unscientific thinking. Nature, it is said, does not operate with a purpose towards final goals. Only higher animals and humans can conceive of objectives to work for, but the rest of nature certainly does not. Therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of four-fold causality does not harmonize with the accepted science of the last four centuries. Unfortunately, as numerous experts on Aristotle have pointed out, this view is predicated on Descartes' and others' misunderstanding of Aristotle.

The problem with Descartes' and all subsequent misinterpretations of final causality is that they assume that Aristotle meant the term in the sense of an extrinsic conscious, deliberative finality even in the case of natural processes. However, Aristotle never thought that such an extrinsic deliberative cause was at work in all changes. Such is obviously not the case in the growth of a plant, or the digestive process, but because there is no extrinsic and conscious final cause at work does not logically mean that there is not mean there is no final cause at all. As Aristotle writes, "It is absurd to suppose that purpose is not present because we do not observe the [conscious] agent deliberating."<sup>75</sup> He was clearly aware that in natural processes, we see no such extrinsic agent guiding the changes. According to Aristotle, in natural processes "the form [formal cause], the mover [the efficient cause], 'that for the sake of which' [the final cause] ... often coincide."<sup>76</sup> In other words, the efficient cause or mover, the final cause and the formal cause may be one, i.e. three principles operating at once, which is to say, that the final cause may be intrinsic to the process of change. That is why John Wild, a neo-Aristotelian, says that "the only final cause in subhuman processes is the natural form,"<sup>77</sup> a view echoed by Aristotle expert, Abraham Edel: "Thus in nature the final cause and formal causes are one."<sup>78</sup> The form at whatever stage of development it may be, limits the actions of the efficient cause, and these successive limitations in turn, effectively close and open various paths of development, thereby leading to a

particular result. As Aristotle scholar Henry B. Veatch points out that in nature,

*Aristotelian final causes are no more than this: the regular and characteristic consequences or results that are correlated with the characteristic actions of the various agents and efficient causes that operate in the natural world.*<sup>79</sup>

Veatch's example is strikingly simple: we expect sunlight to warm a window sill, we do not expect sunlight to fragment the sill into thousands of pieces, turn it blue or to make it float in the air and fly around like a cloud. Those are not the "regular and characteristic" effects that the laws of physics allow sunlight to have on window sills. Indeed, the laws of physics clearly limit or characterize the action of energy transfer that we observe and this characterization or limitation is what Aristotle means by 'final cause' in regards to non-human nature. As W. Norris Clarke, S.J. points out, this means that the "final causality is necessarily inherent in every exercise of efficient causality."<sup>80</sup> This final cause must be inherent in every efficient cause because

*[i]f the efficient cause at the moment its productive action is not interiorly [inherently] determined or focused towards producing this effect rather than that, then there is no sufficient reason why it should produce this one rather than that.*<sup>81</sup>

Efficient causes always lead to particular effects, and if there is no reason why an efficient cause should produce one or another effect, then any effect might follow: a window sill might flight after being touched by sunlight. However, we know that efficient causes do not produce random results, but rather particular results on a regular basis according to the laws of nature as described by physics and chemistry. "This inner determination of the causal agent [efficient cause] towards the effect-to-be produced is precisely *final causation*."<sup>82</sup> In nature, the efficient cause and the final cause are unified because the efficient causes obey the laws of nature, i.e. fall within the limits imposed by these laws and this conformity to law shapes the outcome. Because the final cause may be implicit in the formal and efficient causes, we cannot simply avoid or side-step the issue of final causes.

## 11.2 Consequences of Four-Fold Causality

What does 'Abdu'l-Bahá's acceptance of Aristotle's four-fold causality mean for our understanding of the philosophical positions inherent in SAQ? The first and most obvious effect is that if understood correctly, four-fold causality and particularly final causality do not place religion in conflict with science which rejects the notion that subhuman processes are shaped by deliberately formulated goals extrinsic to the processes themselves. While processes involving human intervention are guided by such consciously developed goals, natural processes are not. However, nowhere does Aristotle say that final goals must be always be conscious and deliberative, and indeed, as we have seen in *Physics*, he explicitly denies that they are.

The concept of final goals only becomes problematical when it is misunderstood anthropomorphically as a consciously intentional, extrinsically determined goal. However, as shown above, this is not what Aristotle promulgated. Therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's acceptance of final causes does not create disharmony with science once Aristotle's teaching is correctly understood. After the long-term and widespread misrepresentations (originating with Bacon, Descartes and Spinoza) of Aristotle's doctrine, it will, unfortunately, be a difficult struggle to overcome deeply entrenched misinterpretations of Aristotle.

Four-fold causality also provides us with the intellectual tools by which to analyse and explain all aspects of reality except God and the Manifestations Who are not subject to such analysis. In other words, four-fold causality is a particular way of understanding reality and is, therefore, an embryonic ontological world-view with all kinds of implications for various human endeavours.

## 12. Teleology

The second conclusion we may draw from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's acceptance of four-fold causality is that in Bahá'í ontology, reality is teleological, i.e. informed or guided in its processes by intrinsic and/or extrinsic final causes. The ubiquity of final causes means that creation is not random or anarchic but rather law abiding and organised. On this topic, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states regarding nature,

*This composition and arrangement, through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization, which was composed and combined with the greatest strength, conformable to wisdom, and according to a universal law. From this it is evident that it is the creation of God, and is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement.*<sup>83</sup>

If a series of events is not fortuitous or accidental, then some principle of order or lawfulness must be at work in nature either extrinsically or intrinsically or both to shape events and their consequences. If there were no ordering principle or guiding law, then any results might follow an action. Aristotle's four-fold causality is simply a philosophical explanation of why this does not happen, i.e. why results are regular unless disturbed by other extraneous factors. Hence, order, pattern i.e. organisation emerge from the action of intrinsic final causes (and thus establish the very conditions for the existence of science).

### 13. Intelligent Design

However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes much further than the assertion of order, pattern and organisation. Nature, He says,

*is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart – to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart.*<sup>84</sup>

In other words, nature as a whole shows “finished design,” i.e. is not “a fortuitous composition and arrangement”<sup>85</sup> – phrases suggesting not only that existence is organised and lawful, but more strongly, that existence is characterised by a design. This, of course, brings up a sensitive question: does SAQ promulgate a variation of intelligent design theory? From these statements, and others we shall examine later, it is clear that the answer is affirmative, though the variation of intelligent design

in SAQ is not that of Biblical literalism. If the natural world is not “a fortuitous composition and arrangement,” if it is “conformable to wisdom”<sup>86</sup> and if it is “subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design,”<sup>87</sup> then it is clear that nature is not a result of undirected accidents and random events but of some ordering principle however complex its workings may be. This design requires the existence of an extrinsic consciously deliberative final cause. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

*the least change produced in the form of the smallest thing proves the existence of a creator: then can this great universe, which is endless, be self-created and come into existence from the action of matter and the elements? How self-evidently wrong is such a supposition!*<sup>88</sup>

Here, too, the subject of change and by implication, causality, emerges, since without the guidance of final causality inherent in the efficient and formal causes of change, change would be undirected and accidental. However, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, this change is so far from being random that it “proves the existence of a creator,” i.e., an ultimate source of the laws manifest in the changing process. The universe cannot have come into existence only “from the action of matter and the elements” because this matter requires form in order to be the particular kind of matter it is and act in the particular way it does – and form, as Aristotle points out, intrinsically includes final causality in natural processes. This intrinsic form of final causality of course leads to the question about the source of order and lawfulness, i.e., to God. It is worth noting how hylomorphism (see below) is implicitly assumed in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument as well as His explicit endorsement of the foundational principle of intelligent design, namely that we can legitimately reason our way from events in nature to the existence of “a creator.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, we have moved from a final cause intrinsic to natural processes to an extrinsic, deliberative and conscious final cause. That ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regards such a reasoning process as correct is rhetorically shown by His categorical rejection of the contrary view: “How self-evidently wrong is such a supposition!” Even though some Bahá’ís may find this association with some form of intelligent design theory uncomfortable, intelligent design, albeit not in its Biblically literal version, is a fact of Bahá’í ontology in SAQ.

However, this does not necessarily cause a conflict with science insofar as science concerns itself with intrinsic final causality as evident in the operation of empirically verifiable natural laws, whereas religion's concern is extrinsic final causality as known through revelation and rational reflection. Each explores aspects of final causality appropriate to its methods. If conflict develops, it is a consequence of choosing to let this happen.

#### 14. Hylomorphism

The acceptance of four-fold causality is an important contact point between SAQ and the philosophical tradition begun by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus (the Athenian tradition) and continued in various forms in the modern world. This would be even more apparent if we were to embark on a detailed analysis of what is entailed in four-fold causality, for example the implication that any entity is made up of matter (as in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example) and form, the latter being provided by the carpenter in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's illustration. SAQ itself makes a passing reference to this view, stating, "The sun is born from substance and form, which can be compared to father and mother."<sup>90</sup> SAQ then proceeds to say that darkness, which, as an absence of light has no existence in itself, i.e. "has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection."<sup>91</sup> This suggests that in order for entities to exist requires substance or matter and form, or to put it another way, all things existing in nature are made of substance and form.

Those familiar with the history of western philosophy will, of course, recognise the doctrine of hylomorphism which asserts that all sensible things exemplify a union of matter and a form that makes it a certain kind of thing.<sup>92</sup> The hylomorphic theme is not explicitly developed in SAQ, but the statement that "the existence of everything depends upon four causes"<sup>93</sup> strongly suggests its universal applicability in our understanding of reality and thus creates an unmistakable contact point with the Athenian tradition both in its European and its Muslim branches as seen in the philosophy of Aquinas and such Muslim philosophers as Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd.



## 15. An Application of Four-Fold Causality

In order to understand the versatility of four-fold causality as an analytical tool, we shall briefly outline how it may be used in the analysis of society or any other community. The matter or material cause of a society are the individuals who make up the society or group. The final cause (which may or may not be explicitly conscious in all members) is the common good for which the individuals work, either deliberately or though being enlisted by the rules, customs and trends in that society. For example, the final cause of Communist society was to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary step to the abolition of all rulers. The formal cause of a society is made up of the rules, duties, obligations, rights and offices required to achieve the common good. These give society its particular form or shape. The efficient cause is the people's willingness to achieve the common good, their willingness to abide by the rules and fulfill their obligations, i.e. the love of the common good. For a society or community to be healthy requires that all of these four causes are working appropriately. If, for example, a community loses sight of its final cause i.e. the common good towards which it is dedicated, it will soon lose its way and dissolve into rampant individualism where the pursuit of the good of individual persons dominates lives.

## 16. Platonic Trends in SAQ

Another contact point with the Athenian tradition is the suggestion scattered throughout SAQ that the world in which we live is or will be mirror of a superior, spiritual world. Such a view is usually described as Platonic, i.e. reminiscent of Plato's teaching that the world is only a shadow, imitation, reflection or image of the superior real world of ideas. These shadows or reflections are embodied in the ever-changing world of matter. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "the earth is the mirror of the Kingdom; the material world corresponds to the spiritual world."<sup>94</sup> It is "the outward expression of the inward,"<sup>95</sup> i.e. the material expression of the spiritual or the expression of the "spiritual world" in the material realm. Such views are certainly Platonic in nature insofar as they posit a material world which is a counterpart or copy of a spiritual or non-material model. The Kingdom, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "is not a material place; it is sanctified from time and place. It is a spiritual world, a divine world ... it is freed from body and that which is corporeal."<sup>96</sup> Unfortunately, this material world is all-to-often

a distorted reflection of the spiritual world, a condition that the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is intended to remedy: "The world will become the mirror of the Heavenly kingdom."<sup>97</sup> Here, too, the Platonic theme is evident. Platonism also has applications for their key doctrine of progressive revelation and ethics. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "what is meant by the term Holy of Holies is that spiritual Law which will never be modified, altered or abrogated; and the Holy City means the material Law which may be abrogated."<sup>98</sup> The "material Law" is an earthly image of the eternally unchanging "spiritual Law" which is reflected in varying material conditions. In this case, Plato's Ideas – such as the Idea of the perfect horse – has been transferred into ethics; instead of perfect Ideas of things, we have perfect Ideas of eternal ethical principles which we try to imitate or reflect as best we can.

If the material world reflects or corresponds to the spiritual world, one of the consequences is that reality is structured as a series of correspondences between the spiritual and the material. This is illustrated by the statement that "The Sun of Reality", like the material sun, has numerous rising and dawning places."<sup>99</sup> As we shall see in the section on epistemology, these correspondences have far-reaching consequences for the epistemology explicitly and implicitly present in SAQ. It means, for example, that we cannot understand the phenomena of material reality fully without taking into account what has been revealed about their spiritual counterparts. This is most readily illustrated in the case of human nature which cannot be properly understood only on the basis of material studies but must also take into consideration the divine ideal of which actually existing man is a reflection, image or shadow.

## 17. The Reality of Universals

The subject of Platonism raises another important ontological question for SAQ, namely, does SAQ recognise the reality or existence of at least some universals? Universals are the

*supposed referents of general terms like 'red', 'table', 'tree, understood as entities distinct from any of the particular things described by those terms.*<sup>100</sup>

For example, 'dog' is a universal but 'Otto' is a particular example or instantiation of this universal. All individual dogs

have certain characteristics in common that make them members of the universal class 'dog.' There are three possible viewpoints (and variations thereof) about universals. One is extreme realism espoused by Plato, which holds that universals i.e. Ideas, are real entities in themselves in "a non-spatio-temporal existence distinct and separable"<sup>101</sup> from all particular instantiations. The second is moderate realism held by Aristotle which maintains that universals are real but only in their individual instantiations. The human mind abstracts them – but it abstracts from something real in the individuals. The third view is nominalism, "the view that things denominated by the same term share nothing in common except that fact."<sup>102</sup> In other words, there are no such things as universals and all so-called universal terms are arbitrary constructions.

The reason this ontological issue is so important well beyond its technical philosophic aspects and receives considerable attention is that it has an enormous impact on personal and social ethics, psychology, philosophical anthropology as well as positive and natural law. For example, it concerns whether or not there is such a thing as human nature, what it is and what role is its role in individual and social ethics. Does human nature establish norms in behavior and ethics? Postmodernism and *some* forms of existentialism, adopt the nominalist view and deny that any such thing as human nature exists; in their view, it is nothing short of totalitarian to establish ethics or laws on the basis of standards based on so-called human nature. Only individuals are real and any concepts of universal essences, natures or attributes are constructions of fictions imposed upon individuals. Perhaps Sartre sums up this attitude best when he writes, "As we have seen, for human reality, to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes from the outside or from within which it can receive or accept."<sup>103</sup> There is no 'pre-made' human nature or any other nature, there are only individuals making themselves.

SAQ rejects the nominalist position. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*spirit is universally divided into five categories: the vegetable spirit, the animal spirit, the human spirit, the spirit of faith, and the Holy Spirit.*

*The vegetable spirit is the power of growth which is brought about in the seed through the influence of other existences.*

*The animal spirit is the power of all the senses, which is realized from the composition and mingling of elements ...*

*The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings. But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. It is like a mirror which, although clear, polished and brilliant, is still in need of light. Until a ray of the sun reflects upon it, it cannot discover the heavenly secrets.<sup>104</sup>*

Here we have a virtually self-evident demonstration of belief in universal attributes and powers that define different kinds, species or essential; attributes things. These essential attributes and powers are present in and identify all members of a kind as vegetable, animal or human. Germane to our discussion is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's categorical declaration about the spirit being "universally divided into five categories," indicating that this division is an objective fact of creation or nature and not merely a product of human intellectual construction. They are simply given facts we have to work with as we explore the world. The "five categories"<sup>105</sup> are real – manifested in differences of composition and capacity – and are not merely arbitrary man-made contrivances. Their essential attributes always appear in individuals and are known by the human mind, but they have an objective basis in reality.

The reality of universals is emphasised from another perspective when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*Know that the order and the perfection of the whole universe require that existence should appear in numberless forms. For existing beings could not be embodied in only one degree, one station, one kind, one species and one class; undoubtedly, the difference of degrees and distinction of forms, and the variety of genus and species, are necessary – that is to say, the*

*degree of mineral, vegetable, animal substances, and of man, are inevitable; for the world could not be arranged, adorned, organized and perfected with man alone. In the same way, with only animals, only plants or only minerals, this world could not show forth beautiful scenery, exact organization and exquisite adornment. Without doubt it is because of the varieties of degrees, stations, species and classes that existence becomes resplendent with utmost perfection.*<sup>106</sup>

Here the issue of universals is taken up from the perspective of the ontological principles of plenitude and perfection. The principle of plenitude and perfection as given in this quotation asserts that for creation to be perfect (How could it not be given its origin in God?) requires diversity, i.e. more than “one degree, one station, one *kind*, one *species* and one *class*.” Degrees, stations, kinds, species and classes are all references to universals, i.e. to terms that refer to types of beings, to categories or collectives united by common essential attributes. The fact that kinds are considered necessary for the perfection of God’s creation demonstrates that they are real and not mere human constructions of fictions.

A third indicator that Bahá’í ontology exemplifies some form of realism in regards to universals are ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements about the evolution of humankind:

*But from the beginning of man’s existence he is a distinct species ... But even when in the womb of the mother and in this strange form, entirely different from his present form and figure, he is the embryo of the superior species ... For the proof of the originality of the human species, and of the permanency of the nature of man, is clear and evident.*<sup>107</sup>

Throughout His discussion of the inalterability of human nature, He makes clear that humankind represents a different kind of species from minerals, plants and animals. References to humankind’s existence as a distinct species with characteristic capacities are also found in his discussion of life after death:

*When we consider beings with the seeing eye, we observe that they are limited to three sorts – that is to say, as a whole they are either mineral, vegetable or animal, each of these three classes containing species.*

*Man is the highest species because he is the possessor of the perfections of all the classes – that is, he has a body which grows and which feels. As well as having the perfections of the mineral, of the vegetable and of the animal, he also possesses an especial excellence which the other beings are without – that is, the intellectual perfections. Therefore, man is the most noble of beings.*<sup>108</sup>

These statements are quite categorical about the objective reality of these different “sorts” or “classes” and their various species. Humankind’s differences from the others and its position as the peak of this hierarchy are also presented as facts of creation or nature and not merely as artefacts of human subjectivity. They do not exist merely as thoughts without any connection to reality.

Since classes, categories and species are ontologically real, it remains to determine whether or not SAQ indicates if they exist in a Platonic or Aristotelian manner. If they exist Platonically, these universals exist objectively as part of a non-spatio-temporal realm separate from the ever-changing material world. If their existence is Aristotelian they exist objectively but only in particular instantiations from which our ideas of them are abstracted by the human mind.

This paper contends that on the issue of universals, the interpretation most consistent with SAQ (and the Writings in general) is the Platonic interpretation although it is not developed in any great detail. In this connection, it should be recalled that “the earth is the mirror of the Kingdom; the material world corresponds to the spiritual world.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, the kinds, species and classes that exist physically on the earth are the material reflections of their spiritual, i.e. non-spatio-temporal counterparts. Their key point is that the ideal spiritual prototypes exist in the “Kingdom” and these are reflected over time. A similar concept is found in the following statement:

*The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation: three things. The first emanation from God is the bounty of the Kingdom, which emanates and is reflected in the reality of the creatures.*<sup>110</sup>

Here, too, 'Abdu'l-Bahá shows that the "world of Creation" reflects or corresponds to the "world of the Kingdom," which thereby functions as an ideal Platonic realm to the former. It is, of course, also possible to argue that these universals, the kinds, classes or species exist as ideas in the "First Mind"<sup>111</sup> and then gradually actualised in the evolution of the material world. Both of these alternatives would be in harmony with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements that creation exemplifies design i.e. something in which there is conscious deliberation and forethought. That these universals may somehow pre-exist their appearance in the material realm is suggested by the following quote:

*the terrestrial globe from the beginning was created with all its elements, substances, minerals, atoms and organisms; but these only appeared by degrees: first the mineral, then the plant, afterward the animal, and finally man. But from the first these kinds and species existed, but were undeveloped in the terrestrial globe, and then appeared only gradually. For the supreme organization of God, and the universal natural system, surround all beings, and all are subject to this rule.*<sup>112</sup>

In other words, the earth was created "from the beginning" with all its potential beings and species within it. This implies forethought and ideas for "these kinds and species" insofar as specific plans are necessary to make such detailed provisions for the future. The evidence provided by SAQ suggests that such 'Platonic' ideas or models were present in the Kingdom or the "First Mind" before the earth was created or any of them had been turned into materially manifest realities.

## 18. Reflection and Participation

The 'Platonic' affinities in SAQ are also strengthened by the teaching that all existing beings and kinds reflect one or more of the names of God. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*The world, indeed each existing being, proclaims to us one of the names of God, but the reality of man is the collective reality, the general reality, and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth.*<sup>113</sup>

Elsewhere He states,

*Without doubt each being is the center of the shining forth of the glory of God – that is to say, the perfections of God appear from it and are resplendent in it ... The world, indeed each existing being, proclaims to us one of the names of God, but the reality of man is the collective reality, the general reality, and is the center where the glory of all the perfections of God shine forth.*<sup>114</sup>

He also says, “all beings express something and *partake* of some ray and portion of this [divine] light.”<sup>115</sup> These quotations assert that every being has within itself a reflection of one or more of the names of God which is to say that every being has a direct connection with the ideal or spiritual power of the names of God. As a species human kind is distinguished from other species because we reflect or participate in all of the names of God: it is the “collective reality” which reflects or participates in “all the perfections of God.” Other kinds, classes or species of being only reflect one of these names.

In the language of the Athenian tradition in philosophy, the reflection of one of God’s names in every being means that each being ‘participates’ in the names of God, it instantiates or exemplifies these names in its own way. Thus ‘to be’ means to reflect one of the names of God, just as we have seen before that ‘to be’ means to have one’s particular degree of being and one’s appropriate place in the chain of being. In regards to reflecting the names of God we might also say that beings imitate the names of God in their instantiations of them, and thus, collectively make the signs of God’s power present or establish God’s presence in creation. This helps lay the ontological foundations for a Bahá’í natural theology, since such reflection, participation, imitation allows us to argue from the created world to the Creator because “[a]ll the creatures are evident signs of God.”<sup>116</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reasons from the created to the Creator in His various proofs of God’s existence in SAQ. Indeed, some of His arguments such as the argument that the creator must be more perfect than the created – as the Kingdom is more perfect than the material world – make no logical sense outside of a Platonic ontology in which higher levels of being are more perfect than lower levels<sup>117</sup> and the lower participate in the higher.

In this Platonic ontological schema, each being is also a “pointer towards the Infinite.”<sup>118</sup> Thus, the study of God’s creation by the sciences takes on a religious significance



insofar as such study will bring us closer to God — if understood spiritually and not in strictly positivist, empiricist and materialist terms. Such spiritual understanding of science is justified because the material world and the metaphysical or spiritual world are closed to each other, but inter-act through reflection, imitation or participation. In this way, the doctrine of reflection and participation provides an ontological basis for the Bahá'í emphasis on science. It also lays the ontological foundations for a Bahá'í philosophy of man or philosophical anthropology. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The reflection of the divine perfections appears in the reality of man, so he is the representative of God, the messenger of God. If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the object of existence is the appearance of the perfections of God.*<sup>119</sup>

In other words, the universe is incomplete without man, who represents a necessary degree of perfection which gives the universe a goal and purpose (note the teleological thinking) just as the fruit is “is the reason”<sup>120</sup> for the existence of the tree. Humankind has a necessary place in the existence of the universe which is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, “it cannot be said there was a time when man was not”<sup>121</sup> and adds that the belief that there was a time when man did not exist in some form in the universe is “false and meaningless.”<sup>122</sup> In short, humankind has a cosmic role.

## 19. Existence and Nonexistence

In SAQ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes a number of extremely important and far-reaching statements about existence and nonexistence.

*The second proposition is that existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence ... Though the dust — that is to say, the mineral — has existence in its own condition, in relation to man it is nothingness. Both exist, but the existence of dust and mineral, in relation to man, is nonexistence and nothingness.*<sup>123</sup>

We have already discussed one aspect of this teaching in our consideration of the degrees of being of different kind of things. Our focus at this point, however, is the categorical denial that anything can be produced or produce itself from “absolute nothingness.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers two kinds of reasons why the *ex nihilo* interpretation of creation is in error. The first is onto-theological in nature i.e. bases its ontological argument on our understanding of God’s nature. According to this view, “absolute nothingness” cannot even theoretically exist as implied in the doctrine that “the Eternal Bounty does not cease. If it were to, it would be contrary to the perfections of God.”<sup>124</sup>

Since God’s “Bounty” or emanations never stop and have always been forthcoming, there must always have been a creation in some form. This is reinforced by the argument that

*the names and attributes of the Divinity themselves require the existence of beings ... a creator without a creature is impossible ... for all the divine names and attributes demand the existence of beings. If we could imagine a time when no beings existed, this imagination would be the denial of the Divinity of God ... Therefore, as the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God) is everlasting and eternal – that is to say, it has neither beginning nor end – it is certain that this world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end.*<sup>125</sup>

The questions underlying this argument are, ‘How can God be the Creator if He has no creation?’ and ‘If God has no creation, how can He claim perfection?’ Thus, the Christian and Muslim doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* contradicts the belief that God is perfect. This issue constitutes a major difference between Bahá’í, Muslim and Christian onto-theology.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s second reason for rejecting *ex nihilo* creation is more philosophical in nature, i.e. is based on the logical problems inherent in this concept. He says that “it is impossible that from absolute nonexistence signs should appear – for the signs are the consequence of an existence.”<sup>126</sup> How could nothingness actively give a sign, i.e. take action and communicate? What could it communicate? How could it receive action? In order to receive, there must be a receiver, something to receive. The whole concept dissolves into

nonsense. Nor could “absolute nothingness” become anything since there would not even be a capacity or potential for something new to come into existence. Thus, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “Moreover, absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, existence would not have come into being.”<sup>127</sup>

Therefore, the concept of “absolute nonexistence” must be rejected and replaced by a concept of relative nonexistence, which is exactly what he does: “existence and nonexistence are both relative.”<sup>128</sup> The diverse kinds and species that exist potentially in the earth are only relatively nonexistent, i.e. they exist “potentially”<sup>129</sup> like the various attributes of the plant hidden in a seed. They exist in a hidden plane, just like the natural powers before they are brought “out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible”<sup>130</sup> by humankind.

The denial of “absolute nothingness” lays the ontological foundation for the belief that a creation, a universe of some kind has always existed: “the world of existence has always been”<sup>131</sup> and can never fall into absolute annihilation although particular worlds may do so. There is no ontological ground in SAQ to believe that one day God will choose to bring about the end of the world as many Christians have interpreted *Matthew 24:35-36*. On the basis of SAQ, it is also possible to reject similar interpretations of such Qu’ranic suras as 20:15.<sup>132</sup>

The denial of “absolute nothingness” also lays the ontological foundations for the belief that whatever manifests itself over a period of time was the result of the actualization of potentials inherent in a being. Furthermore, it becomes the basis for the teaching that all things have an essence and that essences are real. Obviously, every being does not have all potentials – the proverbial sow’s ear cannot become a silk purse, a ski-boot cannot become an alligator. In other words, both individual things and kinds of things have a limited array of potentials available to them – as already seen in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanations about the mineral, plant, animal and human degrees of spirit. One aspect of essence is precisely this limited collection of potentials which determine what kind of thing a particular being is and what it can or cannot become. Thus, we are led to the conclusion that the rejection of “absolute nothingness” is the ontological foundation for the essentialist nature of the philosophy embedded in SAQ.

## 20. The Structure of Beings

Every being has a structure of actuality and potentiality, i.e. what it is at the moment and what it could be in the future. The actuality is what we encounter first but, nonetheless, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, every being has its potentials. Speaking of a seed, He says, "So it is first the shoot which appears from the seed, then the branches, leaves, blossoms and fruits; but from the beginning of its existence all these things are in the seed, potentially, though not apparently."<sup>133</sup> There is more in the seed than what is manifest to us. The same is true of the earth as a whole: "the terrestrial globe from the beginning was created with all its elements, substances, minerals, atoms and organisms; but these only appeared by degrees."<sup>134</sup> In other words these beings existed potentially in the earth and gradually were actualized. In reference to humankind, He says,

*In the same way, the embryo possesses from the first all perfections, such as the spirit, the mind, the sight, the smell, the taste – in one word, all the powers – but they are not visible and become so only by degrees.*<sup>135</sup>

Various perfections are potentially present in the embryo. With this teaching of the reality of potentials, SAQ aligns itself with the Aristotelian branch of the Athenian tradition in philosophy in which all beings are a composite of actuality and potentials, i.e. what is manifested (actuality) and what remains to be manifested in the future (potentiality). This is why beings are capable of change, i.e. they still have potentials left to actualize, and why God is changeless, i.e. He has no potentials to actualize and is absolute actuality; He needs no additional completion. Except for God, every being is incomplete and requires the realization of its potentials to be complete. The potentials inherent in every being are the reason for the active and evolutionary nature of each being as it actualizes its innate potentials. This, in turn, re-emphasises the dynamic and teleological nature of all beings. Indeed, these potentials or "perfections"<sup>136</sup> which gradually appear show that one aspect of a being's development is a self-perfecting process in which it strives to maximise its being.

Every being is also a composite of substance or essence and accidents, qualities or attributes as shown in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement

*Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.*<sup>137</sup>

He expresses the same idea when He says,

*Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident – that is to say, the body – be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains.*<sup>138</sup>

In this statement, the spirit is the substance, i.e. the essence which is the basis of a thing's existence as the kind of it is (in this case, human) and possesses certain "accidental" qualities.<sup>139</sup> In both quotations, a being is composed of an essence or substance as well as of particular qualities or attributes. As the second quotation shows, some of the attributes are "accident[s]," i.e. they are not absolutely necessary or essential to the existence of the substance or essence. When applied to humankind, this becomes the ontological basis for the immortality of the soul which, being a substance, can exist without its accidents. This leads to the conclusion that some attributes are "accidental" and not necessary, while others, such as immortality or rationality in the case of humankind, are necessary or essential attributes. They cannot be removed without changing the essence into some other kind of being. It should be noted that here again, SAQ analyses reality in the terms established by the Athenian tradition, particularly by Aristotle.

In SAQ, we observe even God is discussed in these terms:

*for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension. If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist.*<sup>140</sup>

The gist of this statement is a philosophical demonstration of God's unity: He is one because His Essence and His "essential names and attributes" are identical. If they were not, then God's unity would be undermined by the difference between

God and His attributes. An additional implication of this statement is that, unlike all other beings, God possesses no unnecessary or accidental attributes that could be separated from Him. All of His attributes are essential – but such is not the case with any other kind of being all of which are made up of both essential and accidental attributes.

Each being is also a composite of matter and form. Since we have already touched on this in a foregoing discussion, there is no need to repeat the relevant evidence here. Suffice it to say that this acceptance of hylomorphism also places the philosophy embedded in SAQ in the Athenian tradition.

## 21. Essence and Existence

SAQ provides reason to claim that each being is a composite of existence and essence. We cannot imagine a being which has pure existence but no essence. Even God, according to SAQ, has an essence.<sup>141</sup> The moment we enquire 'What is it like?' we are already asking for its nature, its essence and attributes. There is no such a thing as simple 'existence'; existence is always the existence of some particular thing. On the other hand, just because we can imagine an essence with all its attributes e.g. a unicorn, does not mean it actually exists. Existence and essence are clearly two different things. In every real being they are joined.

All other beings, as we have seen above, possess varying degrees of existence in contrast to God's absolute existence and independence from all other things. In other words, they are contingent, i.e. not necessary: it is possible to conceive of their not existing without tangling ourselves in all kinds of logical difficulties. As contingent, they exist only by the will of God Who chooses to bestow existence on them but Who was obviously under no obligation to do so. They are utterly dependent on God for their existence and lack any capacity to bring themselves into being.

The fact that beings are contingent means that existence is a freely given bestowal from God Who did not have to confer it. Therefore, it is God's gift to give existence as a real being to a particular essence, even though this essence could have remained either potential or imaginary. This gift is distinct from the gift of our particular essence. Existence and essence are two principles that are found at work in every actually existing being, i.e. they are not things in any material sense but

rather requirements that must necessarily be fulfilled for any thing to be and which can be observed in any real being.

This composition of essence and existence is worth noting first, because it provides an ontological foundation for the Bahá'í teaching of the contingency of all beings except God and second, because it provides an ontological foundation for our gratitude to God for the gift of existence. Our obligation for gratitude is rooted in the ontology of being-in-general. As we can see from this, our ethical relationship to God also has ontological roots.

## 22. God – an Epistemological Preview

Any discussion of God in regards to SAQ (and the Bahá'í Writings in general) must deal with the limitations on our knowledge of God. This requires a preview of some epistemological issues. On the subject of knowing God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*the essence and the attributes of the Lord of Unity are in the heights of sanctity, and for the minds and understandings there is no way to approach that position. 'The way is closed, and seeking is forbidden.'*<sup>142</sup>

Later He adds, “the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.”<sup>143</sup> Such strictures raise the inevitable question, ‘What, if anything, do SAQ and the Writings allow us to say about God?’

If we analyse the first statement, it is clear that we cannot “approach” God, i.e. discover Him directly as He is in Himself i.e. in His essence. The same applies to His names and attributes because God is one with these.<sup>144</sup> In other words, there is no direct knowledge of God because such knowledge requires comprehension or ‘surrounding’ of the object to be understood. In the case of God, this is impossible because humankind lacks the capacity to ‘surround’ what is ontologically higher.

*It is evident that the human understanding is a quality of the existence of man, and that man is a sign of God: how can the quality of the sign surround the creator of the sign? – that is to say, how can the understanding, which is a quality of the existence of man, comprehend*

*God? Therefore, the Reality of the Divinity is hidden from all comprehension, and concealed from the minds of all men. It is absolutely impossible to ascend to that plane. We see that everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher.*<sup>145</sup>

However, SAQ (and the Writings) do not fall into the trap of claiming that God is unknowable in any way whatever; were that the case, we would have the problems created by a disappearing God Whose very existence is unknowable and ultimately irrelevant to humankind. However, SAQ provides for knowledge of God indirectly, through the Manifestations:

*all that the human reality knows, discovers and understands of the names, the attributes and the perfections of God refer to these Holy Manifestations. There is no access to anything else: 'the way is closed, and seeking is forbidden.'*<sup>146</sup>

In other words, we can know about God through the Manifestation and we can reason about this knowledge but we cannot know God directly without an intermediary. Indeed, all of this knowledge about God

*refer[s] to the Holy Manifestations – that is to say, all the descriptions, the qualities, the names and the attributes which we mention return to the Divine Manifestations; but as no one has attained to the reality of the Essence of Divinity...*<sup>147</sup>

However, we must not make the mistake of concluding that this limited knowledge *about* God, is untrue or merely a fiction or construct. Limited and indirect knowledge about something is not necessarily untrue or a man-made fiction, especially when it comes from a Manifestation. Thus, we may conclude that while we have knowledge about God via the Manifestation, we have no direct knowledge of God as He is in Himself. Furthermore, we may reason about God from the information provided us by the Manifestation.

It should be noted in passing that humankind's inability to know God's essence decisively negates any claims that man and God can be ontologically united in mystic states and the suggestion that God and creation or any part of creation can be one. Unity with God is forbidden by the extreme ontological



differences between the independent and the dependent and all claims to having achieved such unity are delusions.

### 23. The Existence of God: The Argument from Contingency

The ontology of SAQ is premised on the existence of God Who is the ultimate source of all beings. To support His case, 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides various proofs for the existence of God. The first of these is a variation of the proof from contingency:

*One of the proofs and demonstrations of the existence of God is the fact that man did not create himself: nay, his creator and designer is another than himself.*<sup>148</sup>

Humankind is contingent, i.e. humankind cannot be responsible for its existence and essence; therefore, logically, its cause must be outside itself in something else. After all, a thing that does not exist, cannot bring itself into existence, since to do so would be to imply that it can act before it actually is in existence. This is logically and physically impossible. For this reason, human existence necessarily requires an external cause. At this point it is important to digress briefly to note what 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not say, namely, that God is the immediate cause for the existence of humankind. The kind of processes studied by science may well be the immediate or proximate causes by means of which humankind evolved but these proximate causes do not necessarily exclude the ultimate cause which begins and guides the evolutionary process through its varying vicissitudes. In other words, once we distinguish proximate from ultimate causes, there is not an inevitable conflict with science on this issue.

From 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement we also learn that God is our ultimate efficient cause or "creator" and our ultimate final cause or "designer." As the final cause, He would also be our formal cause, i.e. the source of our form or essence as human beings. However, He is not our material cause since God is not the matter or substance from which we are constituted as is asserted by pantheism and monism according to which God and creation are ultimately one substance. Finally, it is worth noting 'Abdu'l-Bahá's use of the term "designer" in regards to humankind strengthens the argument that SAQ supports some variation of Intelligent Design theory in regards to human origins. (See the Introduction.) Humankind, and creation as a whole, is not merely a "fortuitous composition and arrangement."<sup>149</sup>

## 24. The Ontological Argument

In SAQ 'Abdu'l-Bahá combines the argument from contingency with the argument of perfection when He states,

*The contingent world is the source of imperfections: God is the origin of perfections. The imperfections of the contingent world are in themselves a proof of the perfections of God.*<sup>150</sup>

The argument from contingency was discussed above, so let us turn our attention to the argument from perfection. It is based on the degrees in which beings possess certain attributes. For example, qualities like goodness and truth are found in greater or lesser degrees in various beings. In other words, they exist on a scale according to which some approach more closely than others the greatest possible degree of a certain quality, i.e. some approach perfection more closely than others. To say that something is imperfect or approaches perfection more than something else implies the existence of a perfect standard by which to measure imperfection. Such a perfect standard ultimately can only refer to God. Since we observe imperfection around us, the perfect standard i.e. God must exist.<sup>151</sup> If God, or this perfect standard did not exist, it would not be perfect since it would lack the perfection of existence.

'Abdu'l-Bahá makes use of this argument in SAQ, referring to the attributes of power, knowledge and wealth, which, in their imperfects become weakness, ignorance and poverty. The existence of these imperfections proves that a supreme degree of these qualities must exist, and since qualities cannot exist by themselves they must exist in someone or something. Since things cannot have wealth, knowledge, goodness or truthfulness, these qualities must exist in someone, i.e. God:

*Therefore, it becomes evident that there is an Eternal Almighty One, Who is the possessor of all perfections, because unless He possessed all perfections He would be like His creation.*<sup>152</sup>

When this argument is applied to 'being' or 'existence,' it is known as the 'ontological argument,' first propounded by Ibn Sina, but also by St. Anselm, Descartes, Leibniz and in our time, Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga. This argument, still hotly debated today, exists in various forms, one of which is:

1. God possesses all perfections.
2. Existence is a perfection.
3. Therefore God possesses existence, i.e. God exists.

In the terms of `Abdu'l-Bahá's argument above, all beings are contingent, i.e. their degree of being is not absolute and necessary. However, the existence of these lesser degrees means there must be a perfect standard of existence, something that exists absolutely and necessarily. This being is God.

The root assumption of `Abdu'l-Bahá's argument from perfection grows out of the Platonic position that the material world is a less perfect, i.e. contingent and subject to all kinds of vicissitudes. Even among members of a kind or species, some members exemplify the perfections of that species or kind better than others, as, for example, a healthy as opposed to a crippled dog, a well-functioning car versus a 'beater.' The deficient examples lack the perfection of the Kingdom. The existence of these lesser degrees of perfection requires the existence of an ultimate degree of perfection – and this is identified with God. In a Platonic world-view, this line of reasoning is completely logical, but it does not work in a non-hierarchical world-view in which all things are understood as having an equal share of perfection. So-called 'imperfect' people are just 'perfect' in their own way, as are 'imperfect' plants, cars and systems of governance. However, SAQ does not accept this non-hierarchical view: "As the degrees of existence are different and various, some beings are higher in the scale than others."<sup>153</sup>

## 25. The Argument from Design

`Abdu'l-Bahá also alludes to a variation of the watch-maker argument when He says, "the smallest created thing proves that there is a creator. For instance, this piece of bread proves that it has a maker."<sup>154</sup> A piece of bread does not bake itself – and, therefore, implies the presence of a baker, just as Paley's watch implies the existence of a watchmaker. `Abdu'l-Bahá applies this idea to 'the natural laws that operate in nature:

*It is certain that the whole contingent world is subjected to a law and rule which it can never disobey; even man is forced to submit to death, to sleep and to other conditions – that is to say, man in certain*

*particulars is governed, and necessarily this state of being governed implies the existence of a governor.*<sup>155</sup>

In short, there can be no law without a law-maker, i.e. someone or something who imposes limits on beings and their actions. To appreciate the force of this argument we need to do a thought-experiment: we must try to imagine a world where there are no limits on any being or its actions. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine any beings at all since every being is limited, and cannot do simply anything. For there to be beings and inter-action among beings there must be something which limits them – and this source of order is God.

## 26. The Argument from Change

Finally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the argument from motion or change: “the least change produced in the form of the smallest thing proves the existence of a creator.”<sup>156</sup> According to this argument, every change requires an external cause and this line of causes cannot be infinite; if it were, no action or change would take place because nowhere do we find the necessary prerequisites for change, i.e. external causation. Each cause would still be waiting for its predecessor to come into action and this would go on *ad infinitum*. Therefore, a final first cause of all change must exist and this first cause is God. Because 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects the view that even the slightest motion can be self-caused, He also rejects the suggestion that the universe could have brought itself into being:

*can this great universe, which is endless, be self-created and come into existence from the action of matter and the elements? How self-evidently wrong is such a supposition!*<sup>157</sup>

The question, of course, is rhetorical. What is noteworthy here is the categorical way in which He rejects any contradictory views by calling them “self-evidently wrong.”

'Abdu'l-Bahá ends the discussion of the proofs for God's existence by saying that “These obvious arguments are adduced for weak souls; but if the inner perception be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible.”<sup>158</sup> This, of course, has important implications for epistemology insofar as it recognises “inner perception” as a more powerful source of knowledge of God's existence than discursive arguments.

Insight can teach us more than discursive reasoning in some cases.

## 27. The Perfection of Creation

The argument from perfection inevitably raises the question about the perfection of creation. If the imperfection of creation is proof of God's existence, is creation flawed? Assuredly not, according to SAQ:

*For all existing beings, terrestrial and celestial, as well as this limitless space and all that is in it, have been created and organised, composed, arranged and perfected as they ought to be; the universe has no imperfection.*<sup>159</sup>

Elsewhere He emphasizes this point by saying, "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees."<sup>160</sup> In other words, all were created with their full or "complete" endowment of potentials that will be actualised over time. Although no being perfect in relationship to God – which is the basis of the argument from perfection – each thing is created perfect *in itself, in its own degree, in its essence*, but it does not necessarily give perfect expression or actualization to its perfect endowment of potentials. The vicissitudes of existence, and, in the case of humankind, misuse of free will may hinder the optimum actualisation of the originally perfect essence. Thus, both from an ontological and existential view, there is no contradiction between saying that the universe as originally created by God is perfect but that there are more or less imperfect actualisations of our perfect essential endowments.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also makes the following remark:

*the universe has no imperfection, so that if all beings became pure intelligence and reflected forever and ever, it is impossible that they could imagine anything better than that which exists.*<sup>161</sup>

This is a noteworthy statement because it seems to be another variation of what has become known as Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds" argument, according to which God optimizes and actualises all genuine possibilities in His creation, thereby creating a universe that contains the optimal diversity of beings. (This recalls the principle of plenitude discussed above.) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's formulation of this argument is especially

interesting because it answers the usual criticism of Leibniz' view, namely, the existence of evil and suffering negates the alleged inherent perfection of the world. Basically, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answer is a challenge: let those who think they can, design a better world with the same diversity of beings and including human free will. He answers the challenge by saying that no one could do so. In other words, the fact that evil and ill exists is not in itself an argument against the essential perfection of the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates this by saying,

*a scorpion is evil in relation to man; a serpent is evil in relation to man; but in relation to themselves they are not evil, for their poison is their weapon, and by their sting they defend themselves. But as the elements of their poison do not agree with our elements – that is to say, as there is antagonism between these different elements, therefore, this antagonism is evil; but in reality as regards themselves they are good.*<sup>162</sup>

## 28. A Process Ontology

One of the most common criticisms made of the Athenian tradition is that it is a philosophy of stasis that is based on a static vision of the universe. There is some debate about whether or not this is actually the case, but that need not detain us here. Rather, it is important to note that SAQ makes it patently obvious that its ontology is an active, evolutionary process ontology.

*Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose – that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either growing or declining; all things are either coming from nonexistence into being, or going from existence into nonexistence. So this flower, this hyacinth, during a certain period of time was coming from the world of nonexistence into being, and now it is going from being into nonexistence. This state of motion is said to be essential – that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.*<sup>163</sup>

Motion or change, and existence are correlatives: change “cannot be separated from beings because it is their “essential requirement.” In other words, change is an essential attribute that is necessary for a thing to exist, a statement that in

passing re-affirms the essence and attribute analysis of reality in SAQ, and implies the difference between essential and accidental attributes. This statement also re-affirms the teleological nature of our existence insofar as we are always moving towards a goal of some kind, whether it be coming into existence or going out.

Change is universal – “nothing which exists remains in a state of repose” – and because it is a correlative of existence, there is no possibility of avoiding it for individuals or collectives. Here then, we discover the ontological foundation of the teaching of progressive revelation which is predicated on our subjection to endless change. That is why the revelation of the “eternal verities”<sup>164</sup> must be adapted to the ever-changing condition of humankind and material civilization. Change is also why the “contingent world is the source of imperfections.”<sup>165</sup> The reason is clear: change is only possible if things have unactualised potentials or capacities to shed and/or add unrealised attributes which means that by definition they are incomplete and not fully themselves. That by definition makes them imperfect.

The fact that change is ineradicably part of existence is also seen in the statement that “[i]n this material world time has cycles”<sup>166</sup> This applies to spiritual issues as well; as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “for souls there are progress, retrogression and education.”<sup>167</sup> This, of course, also includes the development of the human soul after death which once again draws attention to the process-nature of all existence. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Both before and after putting off this material form, there is progress in perfection but not in state,”<sup>168</sup> as well as “as the spirit continues to exist after death, it necessarily progresses or declines.”<sup>169</sup> Thus He affirms that change is inevitable both in the material and the spiritual worlds.

Despite the ubiquity of change, we must not make the mistake of assuming that all kinds of change are applicable to all kinds of beings. “Intellectual realities”<sup>170</sup> and spiritual realities do not engage in physical motion:

*entrance and exit, descent and ascent, are characteristics of bodies and not of spirits – that is to say, sensible realities enter and come forth, but intellectual subtleties and mental realities, such as intelligence, love, knowledge, imagination and thought, do not enter, nor come forth, nor descend, but rather*

*they have direct connection ... the intellectual realities do not enter and descend, and it is absolutely impossible that the Holy Spirit should ascend and descend, enter, come out or penetrate, it can only be that the Holy Spirit appears in splendor, as the sun appears in the mirror.*<sup>171</sup>

Spirit and “intellectual realities” do not move through time and space as material things do, but ‘move’ in their own way by a “direct connection”<sup>172</sup> that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares to the reflection of the sun in a mirror. This has tremendous implications for His teaching about what happens at death because it means that the spirit or soul does not enter the body, or inhabit the body as is so often imagined, and therefore has no place ‘to go’ at the onset of death. It simply does not exist in the spatio-temporal realm and is not subject to spatio-temporal change.

*The spirit never entered this body, so in quitting it, it will not be in need of an abiding-place: no, the spirit is connected with the body, as this light is with this mirror. When the mirror is clear and perfect, the light of the lamp will be apparent in it, and when the mirror becomes covered with dust or breaks, the light will disappear.*<sup>173</sup>

The question remains, of course, about the exact meaning of the metaphor of the light in the mirror. Here is one possibility: the sun does not enter i.e. descend into the mirror ontologically but maintains a formal but not substantial presence in it by means of its power or light. Thus, we observe the form of the sun but not its substance in the mirror and we experience its power/light but neither the sun nor its power/light depend on the body/mirror for their actual existence. When the mirror breaks or is darkened there is nowhere for this power/light to manifest itself and therefore it ‘disappears’ not in itself but in relation to us. To continue the analogy, our soul after death is that ‘segment’ and amount of light we have reflected in our life-times which will differ just as each mirror reflects the sun in a slightly different manner.

## Part II: Onto-Theology

For our purposes, onto-theology is the study of ontological principles in relation to theological issues, or, if we wish, it



refers to the theology of being. In other words, it examines theological issues from an ontological perspective to explore the nature of reality.

## 29. The Ontological Attributes of God

Scattered throughout SAQ is a catalogue of God's attributes and these may be divided into two broad categories: God's ontological attributes and His ethical attributes, i.e. attributes related to the nature of God's being as we are informed of this subject by the Manifestation and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the attributes related to God's ethical relationship to His creation, as for example, the Merciful, the Educator and the Compassionate for example. In this portion of the paper, we shall focus on the ontological attributes because they form the foundation on which the ethical attributes are built. For example, if God were subject to time and had to wait for the future to unfold before He knew what it was, He could not be the all-knowing, omniscient educator Who could meet humankind's evolutionary needs.

According to SAQ, God possess certain attributes that make Him absolutely unique and distinguish Him from the rest of His creation. One of these is singleness which has several possible meanings. First, it means God is an absolute unity:

*That Lordly Reality admits of no division; for division and multiplicity are properties of creatures which are contingent existences, and not accidents which happen to the self-existent.*<sup>174</sup>

This complex and far-reaching statement makes two points. First, unlike all created beings, God is not a composite of actuality and potential, essence and attribute, essence and existence and substance and form. He is not a composite of actuality and potential because if God had any potentials, i.e. unactualised capacities, He would obviously be incomplete i.e. imperfect and subject to additional change. This would make God like all other contingent beings, it would be a demotion: "[t]he descent of that Lordly Reality into conditions and degrees would be equivalent to imperfection and contrary to perfection, and is, therefore, absolutely impossible."<sup>175</sup> God is not a composite of essence and attribute because "the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension."<sup>176</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá

provides a very precise ontological reason why God's essence and attributes must be one:

*If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist; and as Preexistence is necessary, therefore, the sequence of preexistences would become infinite. This is an evident error.*<sup>177</sup>

In other words, if the essence and attributes are not one, then both must be "pre-existence[s]" like God because they co-exist with Him. However, this denies the singleness of God and makes Him one of a multiplicity of co-existing things. Moreover, if the attributes are preexistences, then there must be an infinite number of them since the ontological 'distance,' the degrees, between the essence of God and His attributes is infinite if God is not one with His attributes. This leads to an infinite sequence and the possibility of such a sequence is denied by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "This is an evident error." (His rejection of an infinite real sequence is another link to the philosophy of Aristotle.)

Because God has no potentials to actualise, i.e. is completely actualized, God undergoes no change. There is nothing further for God to change to; hence God is immutable:

*The Sun of Reality, as we have said, has always been in one condition; it has no change, no alteration, no transformation and no vicissitude. It is eternal and everlasting.*<sup>178</sup>

Change is imperfection because it means that a being is not yet 'all it can be.' Such a statement could only apply to contingent beings because contingent beings depend on new circumstances and conditions to initiate change. For them to change means they also exist in time as they await new circumstances and conditions. This is impossible in the case of God because He does not exist in time: "Time has sway over creatures but not over God."<sup>179</sup> Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that "beginning and end in relation to God are one,"<sup>180</sup> which is to say that for God, the future does not exist as something distinct from the present and the past as they do for all created and contingent beings: they are the one.

God is also not a composite of substance and form because form must be imposed on a substance or material from

outside; no material can give itself form, as in the case of the chair in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example of four-fold causality. Furthermore, God cannot be a composite of essence and existence because He is the only necessary being, i.e. the only non-contingent being whose nature it is to exist. His essence and existence are one. He exists necessarily, He is not contingent or dependent<sup>181</sup> on anything else. That is why He can bestow existence on others but none can bestow existence on Him. In these four ways, God is different from all other beings, i.e. is ontologically unique and cannot, logically speaking, have any partner: "if we say that there is one Sun, and it is pure singleness, and has no partner and equal, we again speak truly."<sup>182</sup> This, it may be noted in passing, is the ontological reason why there can be no Satan, i.e. no actually existing being capable of challenging God's absolute position as Creator and ruler of creation. Such a being, would, in effect, be a 'partner' or co-ruler.

Of course, we must also keep in mind that "the Divine Reality is sanctified from singleness"<sup>183</sup> and not just from plurality. This statement reminds us that God is even beyond 'one-ness,' i.e. is beyond all conceivable categories of being ('number' is one of those categories) — a position which sets the ontological foundation for the necessity of knowing the Divine only through the Manifestation. If God were conceivable by the human mind, either by reason or by means of experience through 'mystic states,' there would be no absolute necessity for us to turn to the Manifestation to know about God.

It is important to remember that God does have names and attributes revealed to us by the Manifestation, and, with the guidance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá we may reason about these as long as we recall our thoughts are only partial and reflect an innate human bias. ('Partial' of course does not mean 'incorrect.')

For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "the names and attributes of the Divinity themselves *require* the existence of beings."<sup>184</sup> He proceeds to point out that there can be no creator without a creation or a monarch without subjects. His statement is challenging not because it implicitly names God as the Creator but because it says that God's names "*require*" a creation. Does this not effectively deny God's freedom to create because He is being required to do so by something? Moreover, does not this lack of freedom constitute an imperfection in God, a denial of the principle that "He doeth whatsoever He willeth"<sup>185</sup>? There is at least one solution to this apparent contradiction. As we saw earlier, God and His attributes are one, i.e. identical. Thus

God and the name of 'Creator' are one, and therefore, the necessity to create and the will to create are one and the same. Such distinctions do not exist in God for if they did, He would no longer be a unity. Only to us, whose attributes and essences are not always identical with our essence, is it possible for an attribute to compel us to do something. Moreover, there is no external entity imposing itself on God. What contingent and dependent being could have the capacity to do so?

God's absolute unity or "singleness" is only one of the ways in which He is unique. Neither spirits nor God engage in physical motion in any way and, therefore, really have no physical or material mode of existence.

*This state is neither abiding nor entering, neither commingling nor descending; for entering, abiding, descending, issuing forth and commingling are the necessities and characteristics of bodies, not of spirits; then how much less do they belong to the sanctified and pure Reality of God.*<sup>186</sup>

This has important implications for science because it means that any efforts to find the soul in the body is misguided insofar as souls, like God, are not subject to the conditions of place and time (nor of quantity) which are measurements crucial to scientific endeavour. Their existence can neither be proven nor disproven by these means, which means, in effect, we have encountered one of the limitations of science.

Of course, SAQ, draws attention to other attributes of God, such as the fact that He is omnipotent:

*it becomes evident that this Nature, which has neither perception nor intelligence, is in the grasp of Almighty God, Who is the Ruler of the world of Nature; whatever He wishes, He causes Nature to manifest.*<sup>187</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá also maintains that God is omniscient or all-knowing: "He is the Omniscient, the Knower."<sup>188</sup>

### 30. Emanationism

One of the signature doctrines of Bahá'í onto-theology is the doctrine of emanation, which, historically gets its first thorough explication in the *Enneads* of Plotinus in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD. The *Enneads* were a synthesis of Plato and Aristotle and has great influence both in the Christian and

Muslim traditions of philosophy. Plotinus' main metaphor for the emanative process was the sun and its light. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also uses this metaphor.

*the light of the sun emanates from the sun; it does not manifest it. The appearance through emanation is like the appearance of the rays from the luminary of the horizons of the world – that is to say, the holy essence of the Sun of Truth is not divided and does not descend to the condition of the creatures. In the same way, the globe of the sun does not become divided and does not descend to the earth. No, the rays of the sun, which are its bounty, emanate from it and illumine the dark bodies.*<sup>189</sup>

Several observations are in order. First, the sun, i.e. God, retains His unity or “singleness” and does not divide or distribute itself in its light or among His creations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls such division and distribution “proceeding through manifestation”<sup>190</sup> in which the “reality of a thing [appears] in other forms.”<sup>191</sup> His example of such manifestation is the emergence of a tree or flower from a seed. Under no circumstances does manifestation apply to God Who never becomes part of creation and Who “has no change, no alteration, no transformation, and no vicissitude”<sup>192</sup> – a position that effectively precludes even the slightest suggestions of pantheism and monism since the teaching of emanation supports ontological pluralism. It also effectively precludes incarnationism, i.e. the Christian doctrine that in the person of Christ, God Himself became part of creation. The rejection of this doctrine defines a major difference between virtually all branches of Christianity and the Bahá'í understanding of the nature of the Manifestations.

To clarify the nature of emanationism, 'Abdu'l-Bahá adds the following statement:

*The spirits of men, with reference to God, have dependence through emanation, just as the discourse proceeds from the speaker and the writing from the writer – that is to say, the speaker himself does not become the discourse, nor does the writer himself become the writing.*<sup>193</sup>

The distinction between speaker and speech, and writer and words clearly demonstrates the ontological difference between God and creation: the difference between them is not one of

degree but rather, a difference of kind – hence the ontological pluralism of SAQ. One is not a 'lesser version' of the other. Reality is not the appearance of God "in other forms."<sup>194</sup>

Emanationism requires that reality be strictly divided into successive planes or levels of the emanative process with God as the only absolutely independent non-contingent being as the source or fountainhead of all other beings. This, of course, is exactly what we observe in SAQ as we have already shown with the hierarchy of mineral, vegetable, animal and human, and as shall be demonstrated below in the hierarchy of the world of God, the Kingdom and the material world. Moreover, in emanationism each successive level of being has less and less power or capacity and in that sense is proportionally less than its predecessor which has its powers in addition to new ones. For that reason, matter is described as "imperfection," "darkness" and "night,"<sup>195</sup> and humankind is described as "the end of imperfection ["materiality"]and the beginning of perfection. He is at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light."<sup>196</sup>

Emanationism stands in sharp contrast to creationism, i.e. the doctrine that God created only once and that was out of nothing. This is the commonly accepted doctrine in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Emanationism holds that creation is eternal and on-going although there may be phases in this process in which particular universes come into or go out of existence. Emanationism is distinct from monism insofar as emanationism does not see all of reality as one without any ontologically fundamental differences between the Creator and the created. The existence of the strict hierarchy we have observed in SAQ negates any such undifferentiated unity. Similarly, emanationism, though sometimes confused with pantheism, is really quite different insofar as emanationism does not identify God with creation or nature since such an identification would involve God in change and have Him descend into ordinary, material beings.

The emanationist ontology of SAQ (and the Writings in general) creates bridges between Bahá'í teachings and teachings found in other spiritual traditions such as Sufism, Kabbalah, Advaita Vedanta and the Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism. Moreover, it establishes connections with such philosophers as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd in the Muslim tradition, with Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, John Scotus Erigena and

Nicholas of Cusa in the Christian tradition and with Maimonides in the Jewish tradition.

### 31. The Manifestations

Because God and creation are so ontologically different, an intermediary level of reality is needed to connect them without impugning God's ontological absolute inviolability and without raising the possibility of created beings ascending to the level of the Creator as some mystics claim to do. The need for an intermediary is the ontological basis for the three part structure of reality as variously expressed in SAQ: "Know that the conditions of existence are limited to the conditions of servitude, of prophethood and of Deity..."<sup>197</sup> The three conditions mentioned here correspond to the levels of the creation, the Manifestation and the Creator. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also expresses this three-part structure of existence by stating, "The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation: three things."<sup>198</sup> Again we observe the three part structure with an intermediary between God and His creation. The Kingdom, as we have already seen, is the ideal world of which this world is an image or shadow. The three-part structure is also implicit in the following statement:

*Therefore, all creatures emanate from God – that is to say, it is by God that all things are realized, and by Him that all beings have attained to existence. The first thing which emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the "First Mind," and which the people of Bahá call the "First Will."<sup>199</sup>*

In this case, there is God, the first emanation called the "First Mind" or "First Will" and then the subsequent levels of emanation. The "First Mind" or "First Will" stands between them. The tripartite division is referred to implicitly when 'Abdu'l-Bahá, speaking of the impossibility of man devising adequate concepts of God, says,

*But for this Essence of the essences, this Truth of truths, this Mystery of mysteries, there are reflections, auroras, appearances and resplendencies in the world of existence. The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the*

*Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God.*<sup>200</sup>

Again we observe the tripartite structure of God, the “reflections, auras, appearances” and the “world of existence.” We also observe how this ‘middle point’ or “dawning place,” of “Universal Realit[y]” mediates or transmits the light of God into the rest of creation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the Manifestation as the “mediator of the Divine Bounty”<sup>201</sup> to the created world:

*The splendors of the perfections, bounties and attributes of God shine forth and radiate from the reality of the Perfect Man – that is to say, the Unique One, the supreme Manifestation of God. Other beings receive only one ray, but the supreme Manifestation is the mirror for this Sun, which appears and becomes manifest in it, with all its perfections, attributes, signs and wonders.*<sup>202</sup>

In the perfect Mirror, “the Sun of Reality becomes visible and manifest with all its qualities and perfections.”<sup>203</sup> This ontological function comes into sharper focus when we consider the third of the three stations of the Manifestations. “The third station is that of the divine appearance and heavenly splendour: it is the Word of God, the Eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit.”<sup>204</sup> This connection between the Manifestation in His third station with the Holy Spirit is significant because the Holy Spirit is also described as “the mediator between God and His creatures,”<sup>205</sup> which re-emphasises the Manifestation’s role as intermediary between the highest and lowest ontological levels.

### 32. The Manifestation as World-Soul

However, in His third station, the role of the Manifestation goes even further: it is

*the divine appearance, which is the divine perfections, the cause of the life of existence, of the education of souls, of the guidance of people, and of the enlightenment of the contingent world.*<sup>206</sup>

The teaching that the Manifestation is “the cause of the life of existence” means that He functions like the traditional concept of the ‘world-soul,’ the immediate source of existence and life throughout the created universe. (This is another link between



SAQ and the Athenian, particularly neo-Platonic tradition.) Thus the Manifestation has a 'cosmic' function in the evolution of the universe itself; His 'work' is not simply limited to the human sphere. This third station "has neither beginning nor end. When beginning is spoken of, it signifies the state of manifesting."<sup>207</sup> In other words, this third station has always existed as a part of the three-fold structure of existence.

This 'world-soul' function is emphasised vis-à-vis humanity by the statement that

*One Holy Soul gives life to the world of humanity, changes the aspect of the terrestrial globe, causes intelligence to progress, vivifies souls, lays the basis of a new life, establishes new foundations, organizes the world, brings nations and religions under the shadow of one standard, delivers man from the world of imperfections and vices, and inspires him with the desire and need of natural and acquired perfections.*<sup>208</sup>

Without the Manifestation in His three conditions – the physical, the human or rational soul and the "divine appearance"<sup>209</sup> i.e. the "the Word of God, the eternal Bounty, the Holy Spirit"<sup>210</sup> – humankind could not exist. He is literally the source of life to humanity (and by implication all the beings humanity physically depends on) as well as the mover of political, socio-economic and cultural progress. In other words, the Manifestation beyond His specifically human aspect, also has a cosmic and world-historical function. Thus, according to SAQ, the Manifestation is more than a teacher of moral and theological truths which is how Manifestations tend to be viewed in other religions. Rather, The Manifestation's role is wider and more far-reaching than that of the conventional theological understandings.

In the ontological schema we have examined, it is apparent that God is ontological prior to all the other levels, i.e. the existence of God is the condition that allows the other two levels to exist. The same is true of the Manifestation Whose existence is the necessary condition that allows creation to exist. That is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "the Reality of Christ, Who is the Word of God, with regard to essence, attributes and glory, certainly precedes the creatures."<sup>211</sup> Without this "Reality," the rest of creation could not exist, a fact which indicates the ontological function of the Manifestation.

### 33. Three Comments

At this point two general comments are in order. First, SAQ suggest correspondences from the onto-theological perspective. The Manifestations of God occupy the station of prophethood, which corresponds to the Kingdom and to the "First Mind" or "First Will": all of them occupy a middle position between God and creation. This leads to the possibility that there may be a deeper order or structure at work in SAQ (and the other Writings) than what is explicitly apparent. This suggestion, however, will require more research. From this possibility, a question arises: 'Why then, the different terms for the 'middle level?' At this point a definitive answer is difficult to establish but one possibility is that the different terms arise due to different perspectives or contexts and purposes. For example, the term 'Manifestation' is used when the focus of discussion is the human and historical presence of this first creation, i.e. when the focus of discussion is onto-theological. The other terms are used when the focus is more ontological and theoretical.

The second comment is that the conditions or levels of reality are absolutely fixed insofar as "for every being there is a point which it cannot overpass."<sup>212</sup> In other words, no being can escape the condition of "servitude" in which it exists. For example, "a mineral, however far it may progress in the mineral kingdom, cannot gain the vegetable power,"<sup>213</sup> and a human being "however far he may progress in gaining limitless perfections, will never reach the condition of Deity."<sup>214</sup> Obviously SAQ's ontology inherently subscribes to a law of limits vis-à-vis progress which effectively rejects any mystic claims of being ontologically one with God, and any notion that the creation and God can in any way be one. Moreover, we might describe this ontological structure as 'hard' insofar as there is no crossing over from one level or condition to another. This provides additional support to the idea that the universe has an underlying order and structure which in turn supports the idea of a Creator. Finally, the 'hard' distinctions between levels of reality provides ontological foundations for the teaching that human beings cannot attain direct knowledge of God.

In the foregoing discussion we have observed in passing that the Manifestations exist on "three planes"<sup>215</sup> or "conditions"<sup>216</sup> or "stations"<sup>217</sup>; the physical condition as with all material beings; the "individual reality"<sup>218</sup> of the rational human soul

and the condition of the “divine appearance and heavenly splendour.”<sup>219</sup> A similar idea is found in the following: “but Their *heavenly condition* embraces all things, knows all mysteries, discovers all signs, and rules over all things.”<sup>220</sup> However, even in rational condition of the human soul, the Manifestation is not merely a man ‘like the others:’

*But the individual reality of the Manifestations of God is a holy reality, and for that reason it is sanctified and, in that which concerns its nature and quality, is distinguished from all other things.*<sup>221</sup>

In other words, the Manifestation possesses an individual rational soul, as do all human beings, but it is different from ours in regards to its nature and quality. This establishes a difference in kind between the Manifestation and the rest of creation; He is not merely ‘one of us,’ at least not in His second and third stations. One of the key differences concerns Their knowledge of the world:

*Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired – that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.*<sup>222</sup>

Here we see how ontology impacts epistemology insofar as a higher ontological station enables greater access to knowledge of beings on a lower station. In this case, just as the human soul surrounds the body and has intuitive knowledge of its parts and their condition, the Manifestation ontologically surrounds all created entities insofar as His powers and capacities exceed theirs. (See the earlier section on nested hierarchies.) Unlike us, His immediate knowledge is not limited to His own body but extends to all creation. Therefore, He can comprehend all things and know them intuitively just as we are aware of our own bodies.

#### 34. The Manifestations’ Superior Knowledge

Precisely because He has such superior knowledge of all beings, He is capable of guiding humankind.

*The Manifestation – that is, the Holy Lawgiver – unless He is aware of the realities of beings, will not*

*comprehend the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things, and He will certainly not be able to establish a religion conformable to the facts and suited to the conditions.*<sup>223</sup>

Without His special insight into the conditions of “the realities of things,” the Manifestation would not be able to be the meet the needs of human spiritual and socio-economic evolution. The ontological basis for this special insight is found in the Manifestation’s role as a ‘world-soul Who is “the cause of the life of existence.”<sup>224</sup> This position allows Him privileged insight into the nature of all beings. In this connection, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

*the universal divine mind, which is beyond nature, is the bounty of the Preexistent Power. This universal mind is divine; it embraces existing realities, and it receives the light of the mysteries of God. It is a conscious power, not a power investigation and of research ... This divine intellectual power is the special attribute of the Holy Manifestations and the Dawning-places of prophethood.*<sup>225</sup>

In other words, the special and privileged insight into the conditions of creation are a result of possessing the “universal divine mind” which is supra-natural, i.e. “beyond nature.” This means that the “universal divine mind” and its powers are beyond natural explanation, i.e. cannot be explained in purely natural or scientific terms. The fact that it is a “conscious power” and not an investigative power means that the universal mind does not engage in step-by-step discursive reasoning but rather works by immediate insight.

### Part III: Epistemology

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerning itself with questions about what we know, what is possible for us to know, how we can know, and the reliability of our knowledge and methods of acquiring it. Although SAQ has a considerable amount to say on this subject, it does not contain an epistemological theory worked out in minute detail. Instead, SAQ sets out general guidelines which all proposed Bahá’í-based epistemological theories must satisfy to be in harmony with the Writings. It is, therefore, possible that there may be a

variety of Bahá'í-based epistemologies which are consistent with the Writings, though not necessarily with each other.

As already discussed above, epistemology is intimately related with ontology because ontological station or condition determines what and how we can acquire knowledge. One of the principles which underlies SAQ's epistemology is that "everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher."<sup>226</sup> This is why humankind cannot comprehend the "Reality of the Divinity"<sup>227</sup> and why the plant or animal cannot comprehend the human essence; 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "the difference of conditions in the world of beings is an obstacle to comprehension"<sup>228</sup> and adds, "[d]ifference of condition is an obstacle to knowledge; the inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior degree."<sup>229</sup> Consequently, humankind needs the Manifestation to attain knowledge of God: "if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God."<sup>230</sup> Furthermore, this principle shapes SAQ's view of what philosophy is and can do: "Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things *as they exist*, according to the capacity and the power of man."<sup>231</sup>

Here we observe not only the realist orientation of SAQ's epistemology in knowing "the reality of things *as they exist*," but also a re-affirmation of the principle that the capacity to know is linked to one's ontological condition.

### 35. Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth

As indicated in our discussion of ontology, SAQ falls clearly into the realist camp. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that each thing has its degree of existence provides a realist foundation for Bahá'í ontology and epistemology. If "each being" has its own "principle, foundation or reality"<sup>232</sup> and reflects one of the names of God in its own way, it is, therefore, not only genuinely distinct from all other things but also independent from them, i.e. has its own principle or foundation of existence "in itself."<sup>233</sup> Having this principle or foundation "in itself" establishes a basis for the ontological independence of "each being" (except, of course, from God) including independence from human observers, which is to say, the ontological status of "each being" is does not depend on being observed by humans or on human beliefs or linguistic practices.

SAQ builds on this realist ontological foundation by asserting that

*All sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul. There was a time when they were unknown, preserved mysteries and hidden secrets; the rational soul gradually discovered them and brought them out from the plane of the invisible and the hidden into the realm of the visible. This is the greatest power of perception in the world of nature, which in its highest flight and soaring comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of the contingent beings.*<sup>234</sup>

The realist approach is clearly present in the assertion that the rational soul *discovers* the unknown, and “comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of contingent beings.” In other words, the rational soul does not construct them, which is to say that these “realities” exist independently of the human perceiver. They once existed in a hidden form and are now revealed. Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation. But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them.*<sup>235</sup>

Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes into more detail. Discoveries lead to “thought [that] has a foundation,” i.e. a foundation in reality. This, in effect, asserts a correspondence theory of truth in which correct thought has a “foundation” or basis in reality, which is to say, corresponds to reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also differentiates such thought from imaginations which He says lead to no real results. This idea is reinforced by His statement that “Man is able to resist and to oppose Nature because he discovers the constitution of things, and through this he commands the forces of Nature.”<sup>236</sup> The result of human discoveries that have a “foundation” in or correspond to reality is the ability to control nature. This, too, implies that discovers the pre-existing “constitution of things” and does not invent or construct them, i.e. they are independent of human perception. Here is another example:

*the rational soul as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.*<sup>237</sup>

The rational soul becomes “cognizant” of “*their* peculiarities and effects,” i.e. perceives them in their nature and ways of being, not in our constructions. We observe the “properties of beings,” not the humanly constructed properties that we ascribe to them.

Of course, humankind is not God or a Manifestation. Its ability to acquire knowledge has limits; we know “as far as human ability permits.” We are not omniscient. However, we must not draw false conclusions from this. The fact that our knowledge is limited by our human ontological station and to our human capacities does not mean it is mistaken or a human construct. A child’s knowledge of arithmetic is limited, but it is not, thereby, in error, nor is it a construction dependent on the human perceiver. Our knowledge that the Giants won the Super Bowl 2008 is a limited knowledge of the actual game, but nonetheless it is correct and not dependent on an observer. Indeed, through the course of this study, we could not locate a single direct or indirect epistemological reference in SAQ which deviated from the realist position and the consequent correspondence theory of knowledge.

SAQ reinforces the correspondence theory of knowledge in a variety of statements. As already noted, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things *as they exist*, according to the capacity and the power of man.”<sup>238</sup> To comprehend “the reality of things *as they exist*” is nothing other than to have one’s knowledge correspond to reality. Naturally, this comprehension is limited by our station and capacities but this does not mean that what we do in fact comprehend does not correspond to reality. Imagine a very dirty window with only one clear patch: what we see through the clear patch is limited but that does not mean what we see is not really there. Furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that we can gain real knowledge by the power of inference: “From known realities – that is to say, from the things which are known and visible – he discovers unknown things.”<sup>239</sup> His example is Columbus who “through the power of his reason he discovers another hemisphere,”<sup>240</sup> whose inferred knowledge corresponded to reality. Another example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s to a correspondence theory of knowledge is the following:

*Reflect that man's power of thought consists of two kinds. One kind is true, when it agrees with a determined truth. Such conceptions find realization in the exterior world; such are accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions.*<sup>241</sup>

Here He speaks specifically of a knowledge that “agrees with a determined truth,” i.e. knowledge that corresponds to reality. He also provides a test for this knowledge: it leads to “accurate opinions” and “correct theories” which conform to reality as well as to discoveries and inventions. In other words, such knowledge has real results testable with the reality in question.

### 36. Rejection of Nominalism and Conceptualism

The inherent realism of SAQ places it squarely in opposition to nominalism and its variant, conceptualism. Nominalism holds that general or abstract terms i.e. ‘universals’ only exist as names (hence ‘nominalism’) and do not correspond to any reality. It is the

*view that things denominated by the same term share nothing in common except that fact: what all chairs have in common is that they are called ‘chair.’*<sup>242</sup>

According to nominalism, only individuals are real; kinds, species and classes are not – something which, as we have seen, SAQ emphatically denies in its assertion of the plant, animal and human levels of spirit, each with its own particular set of class, kind or ‘species’ attributes. The same is clear from SAQ’s references to “degrees, stations, species and classes.”<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, for nominalism, even the common qualities of things such as colours, structure, function and materials are human constructions and do not actually correspond to any real qualities in the things perceived. This, too, conflicts with SAQ which considers the attributes of plants, animals and humans to be objectively real. Humankind, for example, has the powers of growth attributable to plants, the powers of sense and motion of animals as well as the “rational soul” which distinguishes our species. These are objectively real qualities inhering in things.

Moreover, as the following statement shows, humankind “discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the *qualities and properties of beings.*”<sup>244</sup> It is noteworthy that we discover the



realities, “peculiarities and effects,” and “the qualities and properties of beings” — we do not invent or construct them. Furthermore, the qualities which clearly belong to the things in which they inhere are a source of knowledge about things: “our knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is knowledge of their qualities.”<sup>245</sup> Indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identifies knowledge of qualities or attributes as one of two kinds of knowledge:

*Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.*<sup>246</sup>

Obviously, in His view, qualities provide knowledge about things. Hence SAQ does not agree with the nominalist view that qualities do not correspond to anything real in objects.

It is important to emphasise this in order to locate the philosophy of SAQ on the spectrum of available philosophies and especially those of our time when nominalism in its various forms is popular, especially in its postmodern guise.<sup>247</sup> Locating the Bahá’í philosophy on the spectrum of available philosophies helps us determine its nature, not to mention its closest relatives and its opponents. As explained at the beginning of this paper, this has tremendous implications for teaching and explicating the Faith as well as for inter-faith dialogue, especially with religions that have strongly developed philosophical traditions.

### 37. Sources of Knowledge

According to SAQ, there are four generally accepted sources of knowledge. The first of these is knowledge based on the evidence based on sensory observation or, as it is called today, empirical knowledge. This kind of knowledge has its stronghold in science. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejects this kind of knowledge as final and authoritative because the senses can mislead us and consequently mislead our thinking. Reason is the second method of gaining knowledge, but He rejects it as final and authoritative because it does not necessarily lead to agreement and certainty: “the method of reason is not perfect.”<sup>248</sup> The third method is tradition, and this method is “not perfect, because the traditions are understood by the reason ... [and] the reason itself is liable to err.”<sup>249</sup> However, there is a fourth

method of acquiring knowledge which is able to provide certainty.

*But the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.*<sup>250</sup>

Let us examine this carefully, for in the contemporary philosophical climate, much depends on it. The “bounty of the Holy Spirit” provides the conditions in which we can attain “certainty,” “infallible” and “indubitable,” knowledge. Hence it is possible, at least in principle, for humankind to attain certain knowledge. The location of this passage as the conclusion of a talk on epistemology is also of interest because it demonstrates that in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s view, the spiritual condition of humankind has consequences on what and how much we are capable of knowing even in other areas. Our natural abilities, i.e. our abilities unassisted by the Holy Spirit, have inherent limitations that can only be overcome with divine support. Our spiritual condition and our capacity for knowledge are connected, as illustrated in the following statement:

*Now consider, in this great century which is the cycle of Bahá’u’lláh, what progress science and knowledge have made, how many secrets of existence have been discovered, how many great inventions have been brought to light and are day by day multiplying in number. Before long, material science and learning, as well as the knowledge of God, will make such progress and will show forth such wonders that the beholders will be amazed.*<sup>251</sup>

The spiritual and the scientific are not opposed to one another and can work together in harmony. There is a further association of the Holy Spirit with knowledge and understanding when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the appearance of the Holy Spirit “dispels the darkness of ignorance.”<sup>252</sup> Here, too, spiritual condition and knowledge, i.e. epistemology, are linked.

Even the possibility of attaining certain knowledge distinguishes the epistemology of SAQ from that of contemporary postmodern philosophies which cannot admit that sure knowledge is possible even in principle. This is a

‘continental divide’ among modern philosophies with some philosophies, like those in the Athenian tradition, going one way and others, such as postmodernism, going another.

Naturally it is necessary to ask ourselves what is meant by the “bounty of the Holy Spirit.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers one clue when discussing the proofs for God’s existence:

*if the inner perception be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible. Thus, when man feels the indwelling spirit, he is in no need of arguments for its existence; but for those who are deprived of the bounty of the spirit, it is necessary to establish external arguments.*<sup>253</sup>

In other words, when the mind is clear and open, we can perceive directly that which we otherwise must laboriously prove by discursive reasoning. We acquire knowledge by immediate insight because we are enlightened by the “the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations.”<sup>254</sup> This is analogous to but not the same as Descartes’ “clear and distinct ideas,”<sup>255</sup> the difference being that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá includes our spiritual and not merely our intellectual condition in His statement about “the bounty of the Holy Spirit.” However, in both cases, the insight attained, the comprehension attained by the “bounty of the Holy Spirit” is foundational, i.e. it cannot be doubted and is “infallible and indubitable.” On these certain foundations we can build a variety of inferences and deductions. Therefore, we may conclude that the epistemological position of SAQ is foundational insofar as “infallible and indubitable” knowledge is at least possible for those who attain the “bounty of the Holy Spirit.” SAQ is also foundational because the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh are the certain foundations on which all other certain knowledge claims must be based.

### 38. A Reflection on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Statements

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements about the four methods of knowledge do not assert that the senses, reason or tradition cannot be used at all in the quest for certain knowledge but rather that by themselves they are not sufficient. They are “liable to error,”<sup>256</sup> i.e. “not perfect”<sup>257</sup> which does not mean ‘always wrong’ but rather, being possibly “exposed or subject to some usually adverse contingency or action.”<sup>258</sup> They may be wrong in various degrees of probability, but this is not to say

that they are useless in the quest for knowledge; rather, it indicates that they must be used with care and in the correct conditions. They are necessary but are not sufficient.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá the senses, reason and traditions must be augmented and assisted by the inspiration or "bounty" of the Holy Spirit; when this occurs, we meet the necessary and sufficient condition for attaining certainty in our knowledge. This assistance provides us with a touchstone, a perspective or 'Archimedean point' from which we can judge whether our views agree with the revelation, are neutral towards it or disagree. Consequently, we must reject views that patently disagree with the revelation, assign various degrees of probability to those that are neutral and accept those which are endorsed or in harmony with the tenor of the Writings.

In considering the epistemology of SAQ, we must beware of going to two extremes common in our time. On one hand, we must not accept the senses, reason and traditions as absolute sources of truth, the way science accepts empiricism or religions often accept unexamined tradition. Such knowledge is necessary but not sufficient for certainty. On the other hand, we must not fall – as is common in postmodern philosophy – into the trap of corrosive relativism and scepticism about all knowledge claims and judge them all as equal because we 'can't really know for sure.' All truth-claims are judged to have the same degree of probability or improbability, which is a viewpoint that brings with it a host of philosophical difficulties.<sup>259</sup> As we have seen, however, throughout SAQ, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has no hesitations in describing various views – such as pantheism, maya-ism, re-incarnationism or a real infinite regress – as erroneous.

If 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not think that error and truth are real and that progress involves moving from the former to the latter, He would not be able to argue that humankind needs an educator

*so that knowledge and science may increase, and the reality of things, the mysteries of beings and the properties of existence maybe discovered; that, day by day, instructions, inventions and institutions may be improved; and from things perceptible to the senses conclusions as to intellectual things may be deduced.<sup>260</sup>*

If there were no real knowledge, i.e. no difference between truth and error, and no progress in knowledge, i.e. no

displacement of error by truth, or if all truth-claims had the some degree of probability or improbability, 'Abdu'l-Bahá could not speak meaningfully of the "progress science and knowledge have made"<sup>261</sup> since the inauguration of "the cycle of Bahá'u'lláh."<sup>262</sup> Elsewhere He says, "at the time of the appearance of each Manifestation of God extraordinary progress has occurred in the world of minds, thoughts and spirits."<sup>263</sup> Without improvements in knowledge there would only be change and not progress; indeed, the whole idea of progressive revelation is predicated on the progress i.e. advancement of human kind. It is, therefore, clear that any variant of scepticism would effectively negate two of the key principles of progressive revelation, namely, that new Manifestations appear because humankind has progressed to the point of needing not just a renewal of the "eternal verities"<sup>264</sup> but also a new, more advanced teachings than previous generations, and that the advent of the Manifestation inaugurates a new era of progress and improvement.

SAQ encourages the conclusion that the senses, reason and tradition may give us accurate knowledge, but that we must be open to the possibility of error. This, of course, does not mean we have to be sceptical as a matter of principle even when there is no reason to be. SAQ does not to foster an all-corrosive scepticism which would undermine even its own claims and teachings on the importance of discovering the truth about things. Furthermore, any wholesale rejection of reason would undermine the teaching that the distinctively human attribute is the "rational soul."<sup>265</sup> It would also contradict the praise bestowed upon science, everything said about discovering truths as well as the dictum that "in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason."<sup>266</sup>

### 39. The Question of Certainty: Between Scylla and Charybdis

All this leads to an awkward and delicate question: 'Can human beings have certain knowledge?' According to SAQ, the answer is that in principle we can have "indubitable" knowledge if we are open to the "bounty of the Holy Spirit."

However, aside from this, the issue depends on what definition we assign to 'certainty.' Were we to say that a fact is certain if there is no reasonable evidence to doubt it – such as 'The Giants won Super Bowl 2008,' '1 + 1 = 2' and 'People will starve if they do not eat' – then we can indeed have certain knowledge. In other words, truth-claims can be accepted as

certainly true if they meet four conditions: (a) there is evidence supporting them; (b) there is no bona-fide evidence against them; (c) they are not self-contradictory or self-refuting and do not necessarily lead us to demonstrably false conclusions and (d) they are not in conflict with the teachings of the Manifestation. No one would seriously doubt that the Giants won Super Bowl 2008 or that people who do not eat will starve to death. The evidence for these truth-claims is overwhelming and there simply is no evidence against them whatever. The statements 'The Giants won Super Bowl 2008' or 'People who do not eat starve to death' contain no self-contradictions' neither do they undermine themselves or necessarily lead us to other palpably false conclusions. Finally, they are not in conflict with the Writings. In other words, we can have provisional certainty, i.e. certainty until bona-fide evidence to the contrary appears. The arrival of such evidence and the replacement of one truth-claim by a better, more adequate one is precisely what happens in scientific, social or spiritual progress.

The idea of provisional certainty of knowledge suggest that because of the short-comings of the senses, reason and tradition as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, any truth-claim is open *in principle* to correction although *in practice* there is no reason to doubt to await such correction. Who would seriously assert that people can live indefinitely without food? The world is brim full of countless such 'humble facts' – fire is hotter than rice, people cannot eat rocks, alligators are not ducks, the sun appears to rise at dawn – that may be doubted only in principle, but not in actual practice. They are provisionally or practically certain – and even SAQ makes use of them, as in the following example:

*Afterward comes the summer, when the heat increases, and growth and development attain their greatest power. The energy of life in the vegetable kingdom reaches to the degree of perfection, the fruit appears, and the time of harvest ripens; a seed has become a sheaf, and the food is stored for winter.*<sup>267</sup>

Here is an example of sense observation that may be doubtable in principle but is not doubtable in practice. However, rather than state that this truth is absolute i.e. indubitable, we should say that there are no reasons to doubt this – a formulation that reminds us that all truth-claims, like all claims based on the

senses, reason or tradition, are open to correction, at least in principle.

In our understanding, SAQ essentially steers the middle course of provisional certainty when the “bounty of the Holy Spirit” is not involved. On one extreme is the Charybdis of a rigid and dogmatic belief in our natural abilities to discover absolute truth, a position that as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, is not warranted. On the other extreme is the Scylla of scepticism and relativism which abandon all attempts to adjudicate among truth-claims and, thereby, undermine the very concept of progress – one of the foundation stones of this revelation – as well as its epistemology of discovering truth and the importance of education:

*Human education signifies civilization and progress – that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal.*<sup>268</sup>

The middle course between dogmatic certainty and an equally dogmatic scepticism and relativism is one of the key strategies for the unity of science and religion, at least on the methodological level. Science employs this policy, i.e. a properly established truth-claim is accepted as true until bona fide contrary evidence appears and then appropriate changes are made. Some truth-claims, such as the spherical form of the earth, are so well established and unchallenged by contrary evidence that for all practical purposes they are certain. They meet all of the four criteria noted above. However, others, such as higher level interpretations of complex data in cosmology or quantum physics are far from certain and still subject to debate. With some of these, we may never attain even practical certainty – and it is important not to lump these in with the ‘humble facts’ about which practical certainty is possible.

#### 40. Moderate Rationalism

As we have observed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not regard reason as a sufficient criterion of truth – and yet SAQ itself defines the human soul as the “rational soul,”<sup>269</sup> praises reason’s powers of discovery and invention,<sup>270</sup> and tells us that “in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason.”<sup>271</sup> How are we to reconcile the apparent contradiction in the praise of

reason's importance on one hand and the recognition of its limits on the other?

The clearest solution is that SAQ exemplifies a position known as moderate rationalism. If we ask the question, 'How much can reason know?' there are basically three answers. Extreme rationalism, as represented Spinoza, Leibniz and modern positivists of various stripes, asserts that reason can tell us everything that is genuine knowledge. Whatever is not reasonable is not authentic knowledge; furthermore, there is nothing that reason cannot tell us. This view represents an absolute trust in the reliability of reason. Scepticism (and its cousins relativism and nihilism) take the polar opposite view: reason cannot give us any authentic knowledge since reason itself is subject to challenge or is merely a prejudiced cultural product that gives us nothing but viewpoints – but these are not really knowledge per se. This view has its strongest proponents in the ancient Sophists, Nietzsche and contemporary postmodernism.<sup>272</sup> Moderate rationalism, however, maintains that reason can tell us some things but not others, that reason is necessary but is not all-sufficient, that other ways of knowing are possible. It can, for example, accommodate belief in divine inspiration and revelation as part of a rationally based hierarchy of knowing in which rational knowledge leads us to a point where other forms of knowing are necessary. Moderate rationalism recognises that reason must be augmented by other powers – such as by the “bounties of the Holy Spirit” mentioned in SAQ.

#### 41. Knowledge of Essences

One of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's most significant statements on epistemology concerns our knowledge of the essences of things. He says,

*Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.*<sup>273</sup>

Aside from the fact that this statement confirms the existence of essences – thereby clearly making Bahá'í philosophy a type of essentialism – 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us that essences can be known. However, He clearly specifies that essences can only be known by means of their qualities or attributes and cannot be known immediately through direct insight. Indeed, “our



knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is knowledge of their qualities and not of their essence”<sup>274</sup> He announces, and repeats this theme when He says,

*For example, the inner essence of the sun is unknown, but is understood by its qualities, which are heat and light. The inner essence of man is unknown and not evident, but by its qualities it is characterized and known. Thus everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence. Although the mind encompasses all things, and the outward beings are comprehended by it, nevertheless these beings with regard to their essence are unknown; they are only known with regard to their qualities.*<sup>275</sup>

In passing, let us note again how this passage confirms the possibility of genuine knowledge about things, although it limits the means by which we may attain this knowledge. We can only know through the outer qualities or attributes, which can tell us some things about an object, but cannot tell us about its essence, its *en-soi* or ‘in-itself,’ from ‘within.’ In other words, we can only know things from the externalized signs of their interaction with us, which establishes specific limits on human knowledge. In the case of humans, we would say that our subjectivity is unknowable by others; all we can know are externalized attributes such as EEG graphs and verbal reports. Here is a limitation of human knowledge, including science: to paraphrase Schopenhauer, our scientific knowledge is phenomenal (of external attributes) and not noumenal (of essences).

It is important to avoid assuming that any and all knowledge of essences is forbidden by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. If this is what He meant, we would be trapped in a terrible conundrum because if qualities are not associated with an essence and cannot give us knowledge about the essence, what are they giving us knowledge about? Unattached qualities can’t give us knowledge about anything – which opens the door to radical scepticism and the impossibility of knowledge which in turn denies the teachings about progress in science, society and spirituality. How can we say we know about the sun if its qualities are not somehow connected with it? Thus, it would seem clear that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not setting the stage for such virulent scepticism. Rather, what He says is that our knowledge about the essence must come from its attributes i.e. by means of the attributes and not from direct insight or intuition.

Furthermore, this knowledge is limited and cannot tell us everything about an object for the good ontological reason that every object always has a vast store of unactualised potentials. (See the section on the composition of beings.)

Consequently, we conclude that SAQ does not absolutely disallow knowledge of essences but disallows any direct access to essences and requires use to gain our knowledge via the attributes and to recognise that such knowledge has inherent limits.

## 42. Objective and Subjective Knowledge

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in SAQ, knowledge can be divided into two major categories, both of which differ essentially in kind and not merely in degree: subjective knowledge and objective knowledge i.e. “an intuitive knowledge and a knowledge derived from perception.”<sup>276</sup> In objective knowledge, which is “derived from perception” and belongs “universally”<sup>277</sup> (a essential species attribute) to all human beings,

*by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart. The circle of this knowledge is very limited because it depends upon effort and attainment.*<sup>278</sup>

The reference to the impression of the form of a perceived object “in the mirror of the heart” agrees with the Athenian tradition (especially Aristotle and Plotinus) that perception concerns the form of things impressing themselves on the mind or heart. However, this knowledge is limited “because it depends on effort and attainment;” after all, our efforts suffer not only the perceptive limitations of our species but also our personal limitations. Such knowledge is external because it does not originate within the object of perception.

By way of contrast, the Manifestation knows subjectively or intuitively; this is “the knowledge of being, is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself.”<sup>279</sup> We, too, have subjective intuitive knowledge because “the spirit surrounds the body”<sup>280</sup> and is aware of the body's conditions as well as of all the body parts. However, in human beings this capacity is limited to our own bodies; we cannot actually feel another's pain, despite our best efforts at

empathy. The spirit knows the body from within because it is in the higher ontological station of surrounding the body. The Manifestations attain knowledge of the world in the same way because He is on a higher ontological plane and spiritually surrounds all lower beings.

Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired — that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.<sup>281</sup>

Such immediate and intuitive knowledge of created beings is necessary because

*unless He is aware of the realities of beings, will not comprehend the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things, and He will certainly not be able to establish a religion conformable to the facts and suited to the conditions.*<sup>282</sup>

Only immediate and intuitive knowledge of the Manifestation can understand things from within, can understand the essences or “realities of beings,” which means that unlike scientists or any other human beings, the Manifestation has access to the subjectivity of other beings. For this reason He is able to understand “the essential connections” which emanate from the essences or “realities of things.”

*Religion, then, is the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things; and as the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of the mysteries of beings, therefore, They understand this essential connection, and by this knowledge establish the Law of God.*<sup>283</sup>

This means that the religion established by the Manifestation is based on His immediate and intuitive knowledge of the essences or realities of beings and their “necessary connections.” Because humankind does not and cannot possess subjective or intuitive knowledge of those realities and the connections between them, we must accept what the Manifestation establishes as “the Law of God.”

From this situation it logically follows that humankind could not reasonably challenge the “Laws of God”: we lack the knowledge and insight to do so, nor will we ever be able to acquire such knowledge. Since we cannot possibly ever possess the necessary knowledge to base a challenge on the foundations of knowledge, it makes no sense to do so. The necessary and sufficient basis for any such challenge is missing. Indeed, it would make more sense for a five year old to challenge the judgment of an experienced physician (even a blind pig finds the occasional acorn) than for humankind to challenge the “Laws of God” established by the Manifestation. Thus, any prohibition of challenging what the Manifestation establishes is not evidence of domination, suppression or latent totalitarianism but simply a rational outcome of the differing ontological and subsequent epistemological situations of the Manifestation and humankind.

### 43. Knowledge of God

One of the foundational principles of Bahá’í epistemology is that the essence and attributes of God are unknowable to humankind.

For the essence and the attributes of the Lord of Unity are in the heights of sanctity, and for the minds and understandings there is no way to approach that position. *‘The way is closed, and seeking is forbidden.’*<sup>284</sup>

Previously in this paper, we have already seen the ontological reason why this is so: “everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher.”<sup>285</sup> Although humankind is obviously on a lower ontological level than God and, therefore, barred from directly acquiring knowledge of Him, this does not mean that such knowledge is impossible to attain:

*But for this Essence of the essences, this Truth of truths, this Mystery of mysteries, there are reflections, auroras, appearances and resplendencies in the world of existence. The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God. All the perfections, the bounties, the splendors which come*

*from God are visible and evident in the Reality of the Holy Manifestations.*<sup>286</sup>

For this reason, “all that the human reality knows, discovers and understands of the names, the attributes and the perfections of God refer to these Holy Manifestations.”<sup>287</sup> Thus, “if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God.”<sup>288</sup>

In light of these statements, it becomes clear that SAQ steers a middle course between an apophatic theology according to which all descriptions and conceptualizations of God and subsequent discussions are false and should be avoided because God’s essence is unknowable, and, on the other hand, an extreme natural theology which tries to deduce knowledge of God’s essence and attributes by humankind’s natural powers without divine revelation through the Manifestation. SAQ’s position seems to be that correct reasoning about God and His attributes is possible – but it must be based on and checked against what the Manifestation reveals. Furthermore, we must remember that what the Manifestation reveals is a limited and adapted not only to our human capacities but also to what is comprehensible and practical in our particular cultural-spiritual milieu. We may know about God but only indirectly, in a mediated manner, and in a manner consistent with our human, personal and cultural capacity.

Of course, such limitations do not mean that the knowledge of God we obtain is incorrect. How could it be if it comes from the Manifestation? Moreover, as shown before, ‘incomplete’ does not mean ‘incorrect.’ Therefore, it is apparent that we do indeed have knowledge of God, but it is knowledge that comes to us via a particular route – the Manifestation – and not by means of direct personal insight or by mystical experience of God or His attributes.

The fact that we do, in fact, receive correct knowledge about God from the Manifestation has an important consequence: it means that on the basis of what has been revealed about God’s attributes by the Manifestations, we can legitimately reason about the implications and meaning of these attributes for us. In other words, the denial of any direct knowledge of God’s essence or attributes does not foreclose reasonable dialogue on this subject though it does undercut dogmatic claims in any dialogue based on what the Manifestation reveals. It does not,

of course, prohibit categorical rejection of claims that contradict what the Manifestation says not to mention any dismissal of God's existence.

A final note in regard to the limitation of our knowledge by our specifically human capacity and our personal and cultural condition: this accords with one of the key principles of the Athenian tradition in philosophy, namely, that all knowledge is known according to the nature/essence and condition of the knower. Animals, for example, can only know through the senses whereas humans know through the senses as well as their rational capacities. This principle is implicitly present in the statement that "the differences of conditions in the world of beings is an obstacle to comprehension."<sup>289</sup> Our place on the ontological scale of being determines what we can and cannot know. Agreement on this principle is another major connection between SAQ and the Athenian tradition.

#### 44. God's Knowledge

In SAQ's epistemology, God is "omniscient"<sup>290</sup> because, as we have seen, He surrounds all creation and, for that reason, has immediate access to all that can be known. The ontologically higher comprehends the lower, and the highest comprehends all. There can be no obstacles to God's comprehension since anything that could be an obstacle would be something with the power to limit God and this is impossible: "God is powerful, omnipotent."<sup>291</sup> At this point, the differences between God's knowledge and that of other beings can still be rationally explained in terms of the ontological schema established in SAQ.

However, SAQ also points to one fundamental difference between God's knowledge and the knowledge of His creatures. For human beings to have knowledge requires that there be an object of knowledge, a tree, a person, an idea, a feeling – something which is present to a subject. According to SAQ, this is not the case with God Who, unlike other beings, does not need an object of knowledge:

*The Prophets say, The Knowledge of God has no need of the existence of beings, but the knowledge of the creature needs the existence of things known; if the Knowledge of God had need of any other thing, then it would be the knowledge of the creature, and not that of God ... The phenomenal knowledge [the knowledge of*

*created beings] has need of things known; the Preexistent Knowledge is independent of their existence.*<sup>292</sup>

To need objects of knowledge would be a sign of imperfection in God since that would put God in the position of needing something other than Himself. This would be an imperfection and would, in effect, make God's knowledge contingent or dependent on something else — which is an impossibility because “sanctification from imperfections [] is one of His necessary properties.”<sup>293</sup> From divine perfection it follows logically that God's knowledge cannot be dependent on anything else. However, if we attempt to understand this from a purely natural point of view we may appreciate *why* things must be this way but not *how* such knowledge can exist: “these divine and perfect attributes are not so understood by the intelligence that we can decide if the Divine Knowledge has need of things known or not.”<sup>294</sup> We are simply incapable of knowing how knowledge can exist independently of an object of knowledge present to a subject and, consequently, must accept what the Manifestation and His authorized and divinely guided interpreters tell us. Although the details of the belief itself cannot be explained to us, the foundation of the belief, namely, that God is necessarily independent of all things, is rational.

#### 45. Mind

According to SAQ, mind is an essential attribute of the human spirit, i.e. a quality without which the human spirit could not be itself. In short, it is an aspect of the essence of the human spirit.

*the mind is the power of the human spirit. Spirit is the lamp; mind is the light which shines from the lamp. Spirit is the tree, and the mind is the fruit. Mind is the perfection of the spirit and is its essential quality, as the sun's rays are the essential necessity of the sun.*<sup>295</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also describes the mind as a “power,” or capacity to interact with the world in a certain way, i.e. to acquire knowledge and form judgments. In the metaphor of the mind as the fruit of the tree of the human spirit, as “the perfection of the spirit,” He indicates that mind is the ultimate purpose of spirit, its entelechy, that for which spirit exists. The same idea is conveyed by the metaphor of the mind as light

from the lamp of the spirit; a lamp has no other reason to exist than the production of light. Moreover, light enables us to distinguish between things, and thereby establishes the basis of all knowledge.

As we have had occasion to observe, the human mind because of its high ontological position, “encompasses all things”<sup>296</sup> at least outwardly or phenomenally. However, it cannot know their essences directly but only learn about them by way of their qualities. SAQ makes it clear that the mind can acquire truth and make something of these findings, though, of course, the mind also can deceive itself.

*The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation. But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them.*<sup>297</sup>

We can distinguish between mere imaginings and realities by the lack of results. SAQ therefore seems to adopt a pragmatic test to determine which discoveries are genuine knowledge and which are fantasies.

#### 46. Mind is Not Brain

Another attribute of the mind is that it is not subject to time and space: “Place and time surround the body, not the mind and spirit.”<sup>298</sup> Simply put, locality in space and time to do not apply to the mind; it is, to use a word from physics, ‘non-local.’ This allows “the spirit and mind of man [to] travel to all countries and regions – even through the limitless space of the heaven.”<sup>299</sup> Such freedom from material conditions is significant because it means that according to SAQ, mind cannot be identified with or reduced to brain since the latter is a purely material entity and mind is not. Unlike material beings, “mind itself is an intellectual thing which has no outward existence.”<sup>300</sup> The distinction between mind and brain is reinforced by the following statement:

*Thus consider what thousands of vicissitudes can happen to the body of man, but the spirit is not affected by them; it may even be that some members of the body are entirely crippled, but the essence of the mind remains and is everlasting.*<sup>301</sup>



Like spirit, mind is independent of the body, though not, as we shall see, unconnected. The body cannot hinder the spirit in itself but it can hinder the expression of that spirit in the material world. The fact that the brain and spirit/mind are distinct and separable (at death) but not unconnected entities in this life suggests that the brain is only the material organ through which mind manifests temporarily in the material world.

Emphasising the difference between the mind and material objects, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the mind is not involved in physical motion of any kind:

*Moreover, entrance and exit, descent and ascent, are characteristics of bodies and not of spirits – that is to say, sensible realities enter and come forth, but intellectual subtleties and mental realities, such as intelligence, love, knowledge, imagination and thought, do not enter, nor come forth, nor descend, but rather they have direct connection.*<sup>302</sup>

In reading this, we must recall that the mind is a power of the human spirit and shares its essential attributes and, therefore, does not conform to the laws of material behavior. For this reason it would be fallacious to attempt to study the mind by scientific methods which have been specifically developed to study material entities and their behaviors for to do so would be confuse and conflate two different kinds of beings. Brain research cannot tell us about the mind per se; what it can do is tell us about how the mind acts through the material medium of the brain i.e. about the material signs of the mind's action. If we wish to study the mind itself, other methods of study not based on material objects must be developed.

If mind and body/brain are not identical, and are essentially independent, then it is necessary to question how they are connected. SAQ does not provide a technically detailed answer to this question but instead supplies a metaphorical model from which we can develop one or more solutions. Let us begin by examining the relationship between the body and the human spirit of which the body is a particular material instantiation. According to SAQ, "the connection of the spirit with the body is like that of the sun with the mirror."<sup>303</sup> Elsewhere it says,

*This perfected body can be compared to a mirror, and the human spirit to the sun. Nevertheless, if the mirror breaks, the bounty of the sun continues; and if the*

*mirror is destroyed or ceases to exist, no harm will happen to the bounty of the sun which is everlasting.*<sup>304</sup>

We should keep in mind that if the body functions like a mirror, then obviously the brain – also a part of the body – does too. The image of the sun in the mirror is used elsewhere in SAQ to explain the connection between spirit and body: “the spirit is connected with the body, as this light is with this mirror.”<sup>305</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also says, “The sun is not within the mirror, but it has a connection with the mirror.”<sup>306</sup> The import of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement is that the mind – which is an essential attribute of the human spirit – acts through the brain the same way the image of the sun acts in the mirror.

#### 47. Brain and Mind – A Formal Connection

Examining the nature of this connection, we find that the sun is in the mirror not substantially but formally. The actual sun is not in actually (ontologically) present in the mirror. Instead, the form of the sun is present in the mirror and it is there because the emanations of the sun, the light, condition the mirror in a specific way to reflect the sun’s image. In other words, the sun is formally but not substantially present and through this formal presence conditions or determines what the mirror reflects. (How, i.e. to what degree of brightness or accuracy the mirror reflects depends on the qualities of the mirror but that is a another issue.) In the same way, the “the mind is connected with the acquisition of knowledge, like images reflected in a mirror.”<sup>307</sup> The mind is conditioned by the formal presence of the images that it receives inasmuch as every perception and idea or conception has its own specific form to distinguish it from others. This form is what conditions the mind so that it acquires information and knowledge:

*the knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence – that is to say, either by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart.*<sup>308</sup>

Whether it be the form of a perceived object or the particular form of an idea or conception, the mind seems to work by means of conditioning by formal causality. Formal causality – which we have already encountered in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explication of four-fold causality acts as a cause because it shapes or conditions something, which has an effect

on how the conditioned object inter-acts with other things. A piece of bronze in the form of a statue and the same bronze recast as a suit of armour will inter-act differently with their surroundings. Substantially they are the same but formally they are not and this formal difference is decisive. This is an example of formal causality in action.

The conclusion seems clear: mind and brain/body are distinct and separate entities but are connected nevertheless: “the mind has no place, but it is connected with the brain.”<sup>309</sup> Thus, SAQ suggests a mind-brain dualism, the two being different kinds of entities. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “spirit is different from the body.”<sup>310</sup> Indeed, He elaborates further, adding, “the spirit of man is not in the body because it is freed and sanctified from entrance and exit.”<sup>311</sup> Mind, we must recall is a power or attribute of the spirit. However, because mind/spirit and body are connected, SAQ’s teachings about the mind and body/brain cannot be taken as encouragement to adopt occasionalism, the belief that mind and brain are so different that they cannot interact and therefore require God to coordinate their activities. Leibniz’ variation of this – the doctrine of pre-established harmony – states that God had arranged the universe so that all apparent cases of cause-and-effect arose in a divinely pre-established sequences without any interaction.<sup>312</sup> This, too, violates the formal causality that is implicit in the image of the sun and the mirror.

This is, in our view, as far as we can go in understanding how the mind works if we limit ourselves to SAQ. Of course, SAQ does not go into the technical details of formal causality, but in the image of the sun and the mirror, it provides us with a direction in which to seek more detailed answer and to exclude certain viewpoints such as the identity of brain and mind. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “This explanation, though short, is complete; therefore, reflect upon it, and if God wills, you may become acquainted with the details.”<sup>313</sup>

According to SAQ, the human mind is not the only mind in existence. There is also the “First Mind”:

*the first thing which emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the ‘First Mind,’ and which the people of Bahá call the ‘First Will.’ This emanation, in that which concerns its action in the world of God, is not limited by time or*

*place; it is without beginning or end – beginning and end in relation to God are one.*<sup>314</sup>

Like the human mind, it is not limited by time and space, though as the first emanation, it is on a higher ontological plane than humankind or nature and can, therefore, surround or comprehend more of reality. Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*But the universal divine mind, which is beyond nature, is the bounty of the Preexistent Power. This universal mind is divine; it embraces existing realities, and it receives the light of the mysteries of God. It is a conscious power, not a power of investigation and of research.*<sup>315</sup>

Because this mind, which is a “bounty” or emanation of God, is not subject to the laws of time and space, it is “beyond nature” and surrounds all other things. For that reason, too, it is a “conscious power,” i.e. a power that knows subjectively, immediately and intuitively and is not dependent on investigation, research and discursive reasoning. Furthermore,

*This divine intellectual power [the “universal divine mind”] is the special attribute of the Holy Manifestations and the Dawning-places of prophethood; a ray of this light falls upon the mirrors of the hearts of the righteous, and a portion and a share of this power comes to them through the Holy Manifestations.*<sup>316</sup>

This divine mind, which is an essential attribute of the Manifestations, helps establish a rational foundation for the belief that the Manifestation possesses universal knowledge of all creation and must, therefore be obeyed even though we, who lack such knowledge, do not always understand.

#### 48. Infallibility

Perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of SAQ's epistemology is the concept of infallibility. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there are two kinds of infallibility, “essential infallibility and acquired infallibility”<sup>317</sup> which He compares to “essential knowledge and acquired knowledge.”<sup>318</sup> As we recall from our examination of ontology and onto-theology, the Manifestation is on a higher ontological plane than creation and, therefore, comprehends or surrounds, which is to say, He can know its conditions subjectively within Himself. His

“knowledge of being, is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself.”<sup>319</sup> The Manifestation knows creation the way He knows Himself and, therefore, is able to reveal perfect laws that meet all of the hidden and overt needs of creation. Our insight, of course, is only partial which is why it is inappropriate for us to critique His commandments. This explanation shows why the “Most Great Infallibility”<sup>320</sup> of the Manifestation is a necessary consequence of His ontological position.

The second kind of infallibility is “acquired infallibility”<sup>321</sup> which is bestowed by God upon some special souls: “Although these souls have not essential infallibility, still they are under the protection of God – that is to say, God preserves them from error.”<sup>322</sup> These souls cannot be essentially infallible because, unlike the Manifestations, they do not surround or comprehend creation. However, the “protection of God ... preserves them from error” because if it did not, “their error would cause believing souls to fall into error, and thus the foundation of the Religion of God would be overturned, which would not be fitting nor worthy of God.”<sup>323</sup> This protection from error extends to the Universal House of Justice as an institution (not to its individual members) and in this case is called “conferred infallibility.”<sup>324</sup>

The doctrine of infallibility has generated considerable discussion about what it actually means. The ontological foundations of the concept of the Manifestation show that the “essential infallibility” of the Manifestation potentially covers all areas of knowledge; He surrounds all creation not just parts of it. There is no indication of a limitation to ‘faith and morals’ or to anything else: “*whatever* emanates from Them is identical with the truth, and conformable to reality.”<sup>325</sup> The Manifestation, after all, is not simply another human being like the rest of us, occupying a higher plane of being.

The case of “acquired” and “conferred” infallibility is somewhat different because human beings lack the Manifestation’s superior ontological station. Consequently, it may be possible to limit the range of infallibility to matters of faith and morals, i.e. to that which affects our conduct as Bahá’ís and to what the Writings declare to be true. This practical limitation is evident in the concern that if holy souls were not safe-guarded from error, they would mislead others.<sup>326</sup> Here we have a more practical concern about why “acquired” or “conferred” infallibility is necessary. However, in SAQ we find

no evidence that “infallibility” is limited to a condition of ‘sinlessness’ as has been suggested. It very clearly refers to knowledge of various kinds and not to personal states of being.

#### IV. Philosophical Anthropology

Philosophical anthropology, which originates with Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Viewpoint*, is a branch of philosophy that explores the individual and collective nature of humankind. It may also be called ‘theory of man.’ It examines such subjects as individual and collective human nature, humankind’s position and role in the universe and the purpose of human existence. Philosophical anthropology has enormous relevance to human existence. For example, all religions, all systems of ethics are explicitly or implicitly based on a theory of man. The same is true for all legal systems as well as all systems of psychology and education. Each of these endeavours makes assumptions about what people ‘are like,’ their needs and desires, reasonable obligations as well as innate capacities. A theory of man is also embedded in all cultures.

##### 49. Human Nature

We shall begin this survey of the philosophical anthropology in SAQ with an examination of its theory of human nature. The very possession of such a theory is controversial in today’s intellectual climate since such influential philosophies as Sartrean existentialism and postmodernism completely reject the idea of there being a given, universal human nature. Sartre first sounded this note in 1943 in *Being and Nothingness* which is based on the premise the “existence precedes essence,” that we are not ‘oppressed’ by a pre-given, ready-made human nature applicable to all persons but that we must make ourselves through our own choices and actions. Without exception, all major postmodernist philosophers follow Sartre on this point, a position described most succinctly by Lyotard as a rejection of “metanarratives.”<sup>327</sup> A “metanarrative” is a universal explanatory paradigm which purports to provide true explanations of phenomena of a certain kind.

Sartrean existentialism and postmodernism notwithstanding, SAQ promulgates the concept of a human nature explicitly and implicitly in various ways and contexts. For example, in His discussion of human evolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “For the proof of the originality of the human species,

and of the *permanency of the nature of man, is clear and evident.*"<sup>328</sup> The nature of humankind exists, is stable and "permanent" and, above all, "is clear and evident." By describing its existence and permanency as "clear and evident," 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in effect, suggesting that those who disagree are not seeing the evidence or not evaluating the evidence properly. In short, He is dismissing their views as fundamentally ignorant. Vis-à-vis ethics, He says that those who follow the Manifestation are "delivered from the animal characteristics and qualities which are *the characteristics of human nature.*"<sup>329</sup> On a similar note, He points out that "brutal qualities exist in *the nature of man.*"<sup>330</sup> These remarks simply affirm the existence of human nature as part of a discussing human morality or lack of it. The same occurs in His discussion of human evolution in which He refers to the human embryo developing "until it reaches the degree of reason and perfection."<sup>331</sup> The concept of human nature is also implicit in the ontological hierarchy in which humankind is at the summit because it possesses all the powers of the lower vegetable and animal levels. Human nature also lifts humankind above the rest of nature: neither sun nor sea "can never comprehend the conditions, the state, the qualities, the movements and the nature of man."<sup>332</sup>

However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not just refer to human nature in passing; rather He provides a detailed picture of some of its foundational attributes. These are common to all human beings at all times and in all cultures – which is, of course, what we would expect from a religious world-view that teaches the essential oneness of humankind. Without such a universal human nature, there would be no basis for the unification of humankind because there would be no basis on which to develop global teachings.

In SAQ, the most obvious attribute of human nature is that we are essentially spiritual beings. This fact is reflected in our ontological structure: "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>333</sup> Briefly, in the Athenian tradition which this statement exemplifies, the substance (not to be confused with matter) is independent in its existence and possess certain qualities called 'accidents.' These accidents are not necessary to the existence of the substance and can be altered without affecting the identity or existence of the substance. For example, a cat is a substance, but its color is an accident; if the color is changed,

the same cat continues to exist. Stating that the rational soul is the substance, means that soul is what we essentially are and that our bodily existence is a temporary 'accident.' From this it follows that the soul and the body are not the same kinds of 'things' – which, in effect, is a form of soul/body dualism – and that the soul is immortal because it is capable of existing without the accidental body. All of these assertions are universally true of all human beings at all times, in all places and under all circumstances. In other words, here we find the basis of anthropological essentialism in SAQ, which does not agree with Sartre's claim that "existence precedes essence."

Not only are we essentially spiritual beings, but share the same essential attributes:

*This spiritual nature, which came into existence through the bounty of the Divine Reality, is the union of all perfections and appears through the breath of the Holy Spirit. It is the divine perfections; it is light, spirituality, guidance, exaltation, high aspiration, justice, love, grace, kindness to all, philanthropy, the essence of life.*<sup>334</sup>

Spirit is the source of our "perfections" with which to overcome the imperfections of our physical nature which is subject to "anger, jealousy, dispute, covetousness, avarice, ignorance, prejudice, hatred, pride and tyranny."<sup>335</sup> According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, our task and destiny is to perfect our human existence by strengthening and developing the spiritual aspects of our nature. This means that human beings share a universal duty and destiny – a struggle to control our unruly animal nature and make it work for the good of the soul and our spiritual development. Both as individuals and collectives we succeed in varying degrees in this process and sometimes slip into complete failure.

As shown throughout SAQ, all of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings about philosophical anthropology is premised on our essential identity as spiritual beings and the primacy of the soul over the material body. This brings in its train a host of profound consequences for the conduct of individual lives and the management of society. For example, it enlarges our perspective on what is meant by 'doing good' or 'reducing harm' because we must not only consider the good of the body but also the good of the soul. It will deeply affect education policy in such areas as curriculum because questions of



spiritual education cannot be circumvented or ignored outright. Recognising the primacy of the spirit in our constitution will also have effects on our personal and collective scale of values which in turn affects decisions at every level and at every turn. Most obviously this would affect the operations of a consumer-driven economy or, at least, the kind of products in demand, especially if large numbers of people were to believe “[t]he rewards of this life are the virtues and perfections which adorn the reality of man”<sup>336</sup> and not the acquisition of ‘things’ or material wealth. These rewards are attainable both in the earthly life and in the next.

## 50. The Soul and Immortality

As already noted, the fact that the soul is a substance and the body an accident is the basis for an ontological proof for the immortality of the soul, which according to SAQ is “the fundamental basis of the divine religions.”<sup>337</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers not only to traditional religious traditions to establish the immortality of the spirit – the Gospels and the Qur’án – but also to logical proofs which we shall briefly examine. One of these proofs is that, as just demonstrated, that the spirit or substance is independent of the body or accident. The spirit, He says, can see and hear without sense organs and even travel as it does during sleep without any material means<sup>338</sup>; furthermore, the spirit is unaffected by the illnesses and debilities of the body.<sup>339</sup> Because “the spirit is different from the body”<sup>340</sup> it continues to exist even when the body disintegrates.

At this point it is apropos to note that not just the soul but also the personality is independent of the body as well.

*The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance, veiled and deprived from beholding the signs of God.*<sup>341</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s wording here shows His awareness of a long-standing subject of debate in the Athenian tradition, namely, the origin of the individual personality. Since there exists an essence shared by all humans, what is it that individualises us? One answer is that individualization occurs through the

particular body we possess, i.e. matter is what individualises. Another is that form, not matter, individualises, i.e. each thing possesses a “*haecceitas*” or ‘this-ness’ that makes it the specific thing it is.<sup>342</sup> As the foregoing quotation from SAQ shows, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá plainly takes the latter view that the “personality of the rational soul” exists from the start and does not depend on the body to be. Experience in the world may strengthen the personality but it can only actualise what is already potential in it. This original personality is part of the innate character that we all possess. The innate character will be discussed in greater detail below.

Another proof of immortality is based on the premise

*that no sign can come from a nonexistent thing – that is to say, it is impossible that from absolute nonexistence signs should appear – for the signs are the consequence of an existence, and the consequence depends upon the existence of the principle.*<sup>343</sup>

In other words, non-existent entities cannot produce results i.e. cannot actualise potentials either in themselves or in something else for the obvious reason that as non-existent they have no potentials and they certainly cannot act as efficient causes actualising potentials elsewhere because they do not exist! However, after the death of the body, the human spirit “persists and continues to act and to have power.”<sup>344</sup> The evidence offered is the “Kingdom of Christ”<sup>345</sup> which continues to exist and influence the world long after the death of Christ’s body. For this to occur, the ‘Christ-spirit’ must continue to exist in some form.

Along with the “logical proofs” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also offers what might be called a direct proof of immediate insight, such as we have already discussed in the epistemology section of this paper. If we open our “inner sight,” we shall need no discursive proofs of immortality because we shall be able to apprehend this fact immediately for ourselves.

*But if the human spirit will rejoice and be attracted to the Kingdom of God, if the inner sight becomes opened, and the spiritual hearing strengthened, and the spiritual feelings predominant, he will see the immortality of the spirit as clearly as he sees the sun...*<sup>346</sup>

If we attain the right spiritual condition, we see truths such as the immortality of the soul by immediate insight rather than by discursive argument.

## 51. The Rational Soul

Another far-reaching attribute of human nature is the possession of a rational soul:

*The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names – the human spirit and the rational soul – designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings...*<sup>347</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that the rational soul differentiates humanity from animals, and is, therefore, an essential, i.e. defining characteristic of all human beings. Individuals and cultures may not always make use of this rational power to the same extent but it is universal, i.e. always there whenever and wherever humans exist.

*The first condition of perception in the world of nature is the perception of the rational soul. In this perception and in this power all men are sharers, whether they be neglectful or vigilant, believers or deniers.*<sup>348</sup>

This statement has far-reaching consequences because it means that at least in principle, we possess a universal standard, an ‘Archimedean standpoint’ by which to evaluate individual and collective action and beliefs. He himself does not hesitate to apply it. For example, He dismisses the traditional Christian account of original sin as “unreasonable and evidently wrong”<sup>349</sup> for various reasons. Similarly, in rejecting the traditional Christian interpretation of the Trinity He states,

*If it were otherwise [than his explanation], the foundations of the Religion of God would rest upon an illogical proposition which the mind could never conceive, and how can the mind be forced to believe a thing which it cannot conceive? A thing cannot be grasped by the intelligence except when it is clothed in an intelligible form; otherwise, it is but an effort of the imagination.*<sup>350</sup>

Even religion must have rational foundations because, given our nature as a “rational soul,” we cannot even “conceive” of teachings which rest on “an illogical proposition.” If we cannot “conceive” of an idea, how can we as rational beings, believe? In other words, a belief must have a sufficient reason that explains why it (or any other phenomenon) is what it is. Otherwise the belief becomes problematical. Because of our “rational souls” neither individuals nor cultures can accept insufficient explanations which is why they all persons and cultures develop various explanations for phenomena. The form and details of these explanations may differ, but all are attempts to satisfy the principle of sufficient reason.

## 52. Humankind’s Dual Nature

Unlike the lower level of being, humanity has a dual nature, i.e. it is a composite of two natures:

*Know that there are two natures in man: the physical nature and the spiritual nature. The physical nature is inherited from Adam, and the spiritual nature is inherited from the Reality of the Word of God, which is the spirituality of Christ. The physical nature is born of Adam, but the spiritual nature is born from the bounty of the Holy Spirit. The first is the source of all imperfection; the second is the source of all perfection.*<sup>351</sup>

The first noteworthy issue here is that this statement is about humankind in general, i.e. it is a universal statement about human nature. The two-part structure constitutes a fundamental feature of what it means to be human at all times and places, and in all cultures or stages of collective development. There is no suggestion in SAQ (or anywhere else in the Writings) that any exceptions exist or that our two-part constitutional nature will change during the course of human evolution on earth. Second, this duality is hierarchical, with the spiritual part taking precedence over the physical or animal nature which is associated with “imperfection.” The Manifestations appear so that “men might be freed from the imperfections of the physical nature and might become possessed of the virtues of the spiritual nature.”<sup>352</sup> Of course, this is not to say that our physical aspect is of no value but only that for it to function for our complete well-being it must be properly subordinated by our spiritual higher nature. Here

we see yet another confirmation of the hierarchical ontology at work in SAQ.

### 53. Inherent Struggle Between Higher and Lower Natures

Third, it follows from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that humans are divided between a higher and lower nature and that we are inherently conflicted beings always engaged in a struggle within ourselves. Hence, we are often forced to choose between following these two natures, between "imperfection" and "perfection," and since this make dualism constitutes our nature, there is no way this struggle can be overcome completely; it constitutes who and what we are. However, the struggle between these two principles must not be seen as an imperfection in itself; rather it is a necessary pre-condition for our ethical existence, i.e. for us to attain increasing perfection by means of free choice among real alternatives. To help us make that choice is precisely the reason for the existence of Manifestations if we choose to accept it. In other words, this division between our two natures is the condition for humankind's ability to rise to greater heights of spiritual development. Without it, any moral ascent is impossible.

Finally, this dual constitution reflects humankind's two-fold ontological position in creation.

*Man is in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality – that is to say, he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light; that is why it has been said that the condition of man is the end of the night and the beginning of day, meaning that he is the sum of all the degrees of imperfection, and that he possesses the degrees of perfection. He has the animal side as well as the angelic side and the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side.*<sup>353</sup>

Ontologically speaking, humanity occupies a dual station as the apex of "materiality" but also as the "beginning of spirituality" and this dual station reflects itself in our two natures. We are the transition point from "materiality" to spirituality and have attributes of both. This helps explain our ethical ambiguity; because we are the "last degree of darkness" we are capable of tremendous evil and because we are

“beginning of light” we are also capable of great good. No individual, no collective and no culture have ever been able to escape this fundamental ambiguity which is, therefore, also a universal attribute of humankind.

#### 54. The Purpose of Earthly Existence

The existence of this perpetual moral struggle within humankind inevitably raises the question of what is the purpose in requiring the human soul to go through the difficult phase of bodily being. Here is one part of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's answer:

*The wisdom of the appearance of the spirit in the body is this: the human spirit is a Divine Trust, and it must traverse all conditions, for its passage and movement through the conditions of existence will be the means of its acquiring perfections ...*<sup>354</sup>

In other words, the purpose of physical existence is to help the soul acquire “perfections,” i.e. to develop its inherent capacities, accumulate experience and knowledge and, through free choice, attain spiritual virtues. Without this passage through physical being, there could be no real qualitative growth, learning and maturation; we would remain unactualised potentials and, therefore, not fully ourselves. However, there is another, ontological and cosmic reason for our bodily existence:

*Besides this, it is necessary that the signs of the perfection of the spirit should be apparent in this world, so that the world of creation may bring forth endless results, and this body may receive life and manifest the divine bounties ... If the rays and heat of the sun did not shine upon the earth, the earth would be uninhabited, without meaning; and its development would be retarded. In the same way, if the perfections of the spirit did not appear in this world, this world would be unenlightened and absolutely brutal. By the appearance of the spirit in the physical form, this world is enlightened.*<sup>355</sup>

In other words, humanity is the means by which the “perfections of the spirit” appear in the material world and, thereby, render it “enlightened.” Without this spiritual enlightenment the world would be “absolutely brutal” (“nasty, brutish and short” to borrow Hobbes' phrase.) i.e. bereft of

the virtues of knowledge and understanding, as well as completely subject to the lowest animal impulses such as greed, violence, lust, sloth or laziness and self-centeredness. Humankind, therefore, is the agency through which a new, transcendent spiritual dimension begins to play a role in the material world by adding a new feature to the one-dimensional material existence. At this point it is tempting to think of Teilhard de Chardin's theory of the noosphere as the specifically human contribution to the evolution of the material world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements certainly are in harmony with this line of thought. He says that without humanity, the material universe would have no purpose for its existence (recall our earlier discussion of teleology): "This world is also in the condition of a fruit tree, and man is like the fruit; without fruit the tree would be useless."<sup>356</sup> Like the fruit of a tree, humankind is the noblest product of the material world, and, for that reason, its *raison d'être*. In other words, the existence of humankind has a cosmological and evolutionary function. From this perspective, humankind is not simply an accidental development on the planet but rather a necessary occurrence.

Humankind is able to be the spiritual enlightener of the material world only because it exists both in materiality and spirituality. We possess the necessary and sufficient material conditions to attract the influence of the spirit in the same way that a clear mirror is able to receive and reflect the sun.

*these members, these elements, this composition, which are found in the organism of man, are an attraction and magnet for the spirit; it is certain that the spirit will appear in it. So a mirror which is clear will certainly attract the rays of the sun ... when these existing elements are gathered together according to the natural order, and with perfect strength, they become a magnet for the spirit, and the spirit will become manifest in them with all its perfections.*<sup>357</sup>

In other words, the physical constitution of human beings is sufficiently complex and sensitive enough to "become a magnet for the spirit" and allow the spirit to become manifest in the material world. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá this course of events is necessary because

*the connection which exists between the reality of things, whether they be spiritual or material, requires*

*that when the mirror is clear and faces the sun, the light of the sun must become apparent in it. In the same way, when the elements are arranged and combined in the most glorious system, organization and manner, the human spirit will appear and be manifest in them. This is the decree of the Powerful, the Wise.*<sup>358</sup>

In this passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá draws our attention to a fundamental cosmic law established by God in His design of the universe. It is as much a law as the law of gravity or the Boyle gas laws. This law forms a "connection" which joins all aspects of reality into a single whole and is, thereby, a universal connective principle that joins different ontological levels of reality, in this case, the material and the spiritual.

We also observe a correspondence between the Manifestation enlightening us spiritually, and we, in turn, bringing signs of the spirit into the material realm. This is confirmed when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*As the spirit of man is the cause of the life of the body, so the world is in the condition of the body, and man is in the condition of the spirit. If there were no man, the perfections of the spirit would not appear, and the light of the mind would not be resplendent in this world. This world would be like a body without a soul.*<sup>359</sup>

By means of its analogy of the "spirit of man" and the human body, this passage suggests that humankind provides a soul for the world of matter and, thereby, provides it with "life." One assumes that this means spiritual life inasmuch as it is humankind which brings the "perfections of the spirit" and the "light of the mind" into the world of matter.

All of the various attributes mentioned in the previous discussion are universally applicable to human beings and are not dependent on culture, ethnicity or any other external factors. Different cultures may reflect the light of the spirit differently, some more adequately than others and some, such as Nazi Germany or Stalin's Russia hardly at all. (Unless we are willing to accept these examples, we cannot assent to the unqualified proposition that all cultures reflect the spiritual light equally.)



## 55. Innate, Inherited and Acquired Character

Within our specifically human nature, there are three further divisions: “the innate character, the inherited character and the acquired character which is gained by education.”<sup>360</sup> Of the innate character, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says

*With regard to the innate character, although the divine creation is purely good, yet the varieties of natural qualities in man come from the difference of degree; all are excellent, but they are more or less so, according to the degree. So all mankind possess intelligence and capacities, but the intelligence, the capacity and the worthiness of men differ.*<sup>361</sup>

The innate character, which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also calls the “original nature”<sup>362</sup> is that foundational essence that identifies us as human and is made up of such “natural qualities” as “intelligence” and other capacities. These are good in themselves but not all people have them in the same degree. It is worthwhile pointing out this innate character is universal, possessed by “all mankind” i.e. identifies the human species and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, distinguishes it from the animal. In other words, this is a general species quality that does not yet identify us as individuals.

*The “inherited character” is the individual constitution we inherit from our parents: “The variety of inherited qualities comes from strength and weakness of constitution – that is to say, when the two parents are weak, the children will be weak.”*<sup>363</sup>

(Of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is speaking in ‘bell-curve’ generalities here, since exceptions always exist; however, as Toynbee points out, exceptions prove the rule.) This “inherited character” helps to differentiate us as individuals since we all have one; with the innate human character it forms “the capital of life”<sup>364</sup> which He also calls the “natural capacity”<sup>365</sup> and which “God has given equally to all mankind.”<sup>366</sup> This “natural capacity” is inherently good. Again we observe the universal nature of the structure of human nature as presented by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

The “acquired character,” associated with “acquired capacity,”<sup>367</sup> is the third aspect of our specifically human character. It is the result of education, and the choices we learn to make as a result of our education. This is where we shape our characters through the exercise of free will, above all guided by

the education provided by the Manifestations. Here is where we acquire praiseworthy or blameworthy attributes: "One does not criticize vicious people because of their innate capacities and nature, but rather for their acquired capacities and nature."<sup>368</sup>

## 56. Free Will

The issue of "acquired character" brings us to one of the most important topics in philosophical anthropology, namely free will. This, too, is one of the constitutive aspects of our human nature. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions ... in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.*<sup>369</sup>

In other words, human beings are free in regards to our ethical choices be they words, actions or attitudes; regardless of what our circumstances are, we are always free to choose our response. Ethically speaking, we all possess radical or complete freedom by virtue of the inescapable fact that we are human. As Sartre put it in *Being and Nothingness*, we are "condemned to be free"<sup>370</sup> whether we want to be or not. We can only 'escape' our freedom by living in "bad faith," i.e. by self-deceptively and/or hypocritically lying to ourselves that 'we have no choice.' Ontologically, this freedom is based on the fact that the spirit in itself is not subject to any of the vicissitudes of material existence and thereby cannot use these hardships.

This theme of radical ethical freedom brings with it the consequence of radical responsibility for ourselves, for our decision, words and actions. 'Radical responsibility' means that we embrace our complete ethical freedom and, therefore, abstain from seeking any excuses or justifications for our bad actions in the circumstances of the external world nor do we blame God for making us the kind of person we are, i.e. for our innate and inherited character. That is the point of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Bible-based discussion about the mineral not having any right to complain to God that it was not giving vegetable perfections. Each state of being is perfect in its own degree and "must strive after the perfections of [its] own degree."<sup>371</sup> That is all it can be responsible for because perfecting one's

own degree of being is all that one has the power to do. However, within that purview human beings are completely responsible. Obviously, this aspect of Bahá'í philosophical anthropology has enormous implications for law and the justice system, education and social policies.

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts our radical ethical freedom, He also frankly and realistically recognises that

*there are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes; these are not subject to the will of man, and he is not responsible for them, for he is compelled to endure them.*<sup>372</sup>

There are certain things we must do simply by virtue of being alive, and there are other things we must do to deal with various misfortunes and difficulties, over which we have no control. Free will is not absolute, nor can we always shape reality as we would like it to be by force of will. SAQ gives no comfort to the belief that we can literally 'make our own reality' as we choose. However, we incur no culpability for these uncontrollable events themselves, but rather, we can incur praise or blame by our response to them; we are, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, always free to take "good and bad action."<sup>373</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that nothing in SAQ suggests that free will is limited to one group, ethnicity, class or culture; rather it is possessed universally by all human beings at all times because it is a constitutional part of human nature. Nor is there any insinuation that socio-economic conditions excuse or justify destructive choices although reflection on these conditions may help us understand how people came to take destructive or self-destructive turns. Moreover, SAQ does not seem to answer the question of whether or not poor material conditions diminish ethical responsibility and the ability to make free moral choices. These considerations, which clearly affect law and justice, education and social policies will require further study of the Writings.

## 57. Ethics

Although the ethical teachings of SAQ incorporate some elements of other approaches to ethics, the foundations of the ethical teachings promulgated in SAQ have deep affinities with what is known as 'virtue ethics.' In general terms, virtue ethics

emphasise the acquisition of certain virtues and the subsequent development of good character as the best foundation for making ethical choices. This close relationship to virtue ethics, is yet another sign of SAQ (and the Writings) belonging to the Athenian tradition in philosophy especially with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The virtue ethics tradition, was, of course developed among the Jews, Christians and Muslims who inherited Greek philosophical thought.

Before examining SAQ's relationship to virtue ethics more closely, it is helpful to examine its position in regards to other approaches to ethics. One of the most famous and influential is Kant's deontological ethics according to which acts are right or wrong independently of their consequences.<sup>374</sup> In other words, consequences are not the only criteria by which to judge an action; Deontological ethics emphasise knowing what our duty is and carrying it out. Our personal motivation for doing the act is essentially irrelevant as long as the right act is properly carried out. For SAQ, deontological ethics are not so much wrong as incomplete. We certainly have obligations to God, for example – “to know [Him] and to worship [Him]” – but 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that mere outward action, merely going through the motions, even if correct, is not sufficient for humans to attain their highest possible moral development. Speaking of those who do much good in the world but have no knowledge of the divine teachings, He says,

*Know that such actions, such efforts and such words are praiseworthy and approved, and are the glory of humanity. But these actions alone are not sufficient; they are a body of the greatest loveliness, but without spirit.*<sup>375</sup>

In other words, the motivations driving even right actions are as important as the actions themselves. It is, after all, possible to do outwardly good actions with bad intent or from bad motives; we may tell a truth about someone – with the intention of causing them harm. The character of the doer and his spiritual condition are also relevant in judging an action. Another problem with deontological ethics is that we have is the question of how we know which acts are wrong or right. Hence, deontological ethics are not wrong but rather incomplete; what they tell is necessary but not sufficient for complete human ethical development.

SAQ also shows points of contact with consequentialism, another major class of moral theories, which maintains that the consequences of an action are the only basis for moral judgment. Moral acts are those which have good consequences. Sometimes consequentialism is described as ‘utilitarian’ ethics because it judges actions strictly by outcomes. The obvious problem with this approach is that it cannot define what we mean by a ‘good consequence,’ which can vary widely not only among individuals but also among societies and thus offers little real guidance as to what constitutes ‘good consequences.’ What should be considered a good consequence? What should not be – and how do arbitrate among conflicting ‘good’ consequences such as the public’s right to fly safely and the privacy rights of the individual? Unlike consequentialism, SAQ cannot agree that the value of an action depends solely on its good or desirable outcomes. For example, a rigorous programme of euthanizing the terminally ill and incurable mentally handicapped may have numerous positive results but such results alone would be a weak recommendation for action on this score. There are obviously other factors to consider such as the effect of an act on the character of those who perform it. This shows that from SAQ’s point of view, consequentialism is not wrong – good actions involve good consequences in some way – but rather, it is incomplete.

SAQ can agree with consequentialism insofar as divinely given virtues and teachings lead to positive outcomes for humankind. Bad consequences are, after all, important reasons to replace beliefs that encourage disunity and conflict with beliefs that draw human beings together. The Manifestations appear to give teachings that will lead to good consequences for humanity. In SAQ, there is one apparent example of consequentialism to consider. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes lying as the “foundation of all evil,”<sup>376</sup> but He says that a doctor may lie to a patient to help the patient’s recovery,<sup>377</sup> adding cryptically, “This is not blameworthy.”<sup>378</sup> Does He mean the action is good – or merely that in this special situation, it should not be condemned, i.e. is permissible? From a consequentialist viewpoint, He seems to be approving the action or at least finding it acceptable and justifiable because of its positive consequences for the patient. But is He giving us permission to lie for other reasons we judge to be good? That, of course, would open the door to all kinds of self-justifying rationalisations and erode the value of the virtue of truthfulness. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá words “Notwithstanding all this [the

evil of lying]”<sup>379</sup> shows that He means this case to be seen as an exception and not as a general guide to action.

(Despite first impressions, this is not an example of moral relativism in SAQ. The action of lying is justified by reference to a moral absolute, i.e. saving a life, which in itself is beyond any relativist questioning at all.)

## 58. Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics are based on the belief that good action requires the development of good character and that in turn requires the acquisition of certain personal virtues. Only then can we be prepared to make good ethical decisions and to live well. Virtue ethics places great emphasis on motivation, holding that truly good deeds can only come when we have good motives. The basis of Bahá'í ethics as laid out in SAQ is that our ethical task is to overcome the impulses of our lower, animal nature and to acquire virtues by struggling to actualise our higher, spiritual nature.

*He [man] has the animal side as well as the angelic side, and the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side. Then if the divine power in man, which is his essential perfection, overcomes the satanic power, which is absolute imperfection, he becomes the most excellent among the creatures; but if the satanic power overcomes the divine power, he becomes the lowest of the creatures.*<sup>380</sup>

The “satanic power” is the uncontrolled demands of our physical or animal nature and these can lead us into evil. The purpose of overcoming our animal aspects is that we might acquire the eternal virtues that have been taught by the Manifestations. These

*foundations of the Religion of God, which are spiritual and which are the virtues of humanity, cannot be abrogated; they are irremovable and eternal, and are renewed in the cycle of every Prophet.*<sup>381</sup>

The reason why these virtues are eternal is because, as we shall see in the section on philosophical anthropology, our human nature is so formed by God as to need the fulfillment of certain needs to achieve optimum growth. In other words, the virtues reflect the needs of our divinely created, objectively real and

universal human nature and develop our characters in a positive way. For us to achieve optimum development, we need

*faith, knowledge, certitude, justice, piety, righteousness, trustworthiness, love of God, benevolence, purity, detachment, humility, meekness, patience and constancy. It shows mercy to the poor, defends the oppressed, gives to the wretched and uplifts the fallen ... These divine qualities, these eternal commandments, will never be abolished; nay, they will last and remain established for ever and ever. These virtues of humanity will be renewed in each of the different cycles; for at the end of every cycle the spiritual Law of God – that is to say, the human virtues – disappears, and only the form subsists.*<sup>382</sup>

If the soul acquires these virtues, “it is the most noble of the existing beings; and if it acquires vices, it becomes the most degraded existence.”<sup>383</sup> Virtue ethics do not just focus on the action alone nor on its consequences, but rather place great emphasis on the motive for which an action is done. To act virtuously is not only to act properly from but to act properly for good motives or “purity of heart.”

*But the heavenly water and spirit, which are knowledge and life, make the human heart good and pure; the heart which receives a portion of the bounty of the Spirit becomes sanctified, good and pure – that is to say, the reality of man becomes purified and sanctified from the impurities of the world of nature. These natural impurities are evil qualities: anger, lust, worldliness, pride, lying, hypocrisy, fraud, self-love, etc.*<sup>384</sup>

Purity of heart is necessary to do genuinely good deeds. As we have seen, this purity of heart or good will is necessary so that acts have more than mere good appearance:

*The third virtue of humanity is the goodwill which is the basis of good actions ... for the goodwill is absolute light; it is purified and sanctified from the impurities of selfishness, of enmity, of deception. Now it may be that a man performs an action which in appearance is righteous, but which is dictated by covetousness.*<sup>385</sup>

However, to acquire purity of heart we must have “knowledge of God”<sup>386</sup> which is “the cause of spiritual progress and attraction, and through it the perception of truth, the

*exaltation of humanity, divine civilization, rightness of morals and illumination are obtained.*"<sup>387</sup> This is the foundation of the virtues we are to acquire. "If man has not this knowledge, He will be separated from God, and when this separation exists, *good actions have not complete effect.*"<sup>388</sup>

We also need the love of God:

*The light of which shines in the lamp of the hearts of those who know God; its brilliant rays illuminate the horizon and give to man the life of the Kingdom. In truth, the fruit of human existence is the love of God, for this love is the spirit of life, and the eternal bounty. If the love of God did not exist, the contingent world would be in darkness ... the hearts of men would be dead, and deprived of the sensations of existence ... spiritual union would be lost ... the light of unity would not illuminate humanity ...*<sup>389</sup>

Once we have attained knowledge and love of God, then we are ready to acquire the other virtues that distinguish us from animals. Because the virtues taught by the Manifestations, they are in themselves the rewards we attain in this world: "The rewards of this life are the virtues and perfections which adorn the reality of man."<sup>390</sup> In other words, we need not wait for the next life to reap the rewards of virtue, but may have these rewards immediately in this life:

*When they are delivered through the light of faith from the darkness of these vices, and become illuminated with the radiance of the sun of reality, and ennobled with all the virtues, they esteem this the greatest reward, and they know it to be the true paradise.*<sup>391</sup>

It should be noted that the virtue ethics promulgated in SAQ are completely incompatible with any version of relativism or ethical subjectivism. In SAQ, we are not being invited to a debate on whether or know faith, knowledge, purity and detachment are virtues worth attaining – the fact that they are is established implicitly by our universal human nature and explicitly by the Manifestation Who is not seeking our in-pu on these issues. On the contrary, the Manifestation proclaims these and other virtues He lists, as the virtues necessary for each and every member of humankind whether we know it or not. These values are objective, and a contrary opinion on the importance of purity, for example is simply a sign of error. Nor does SAQ accept ethical subjectivism, i.e.



the belief that we make our own individual ethical codes in our statements and actions and that a person is moral if his actions match his words. This, of course, allows some very evil actions to qualify as ‘moral’ if for no other reason than that they are consistent with a statement of plans. Consistency and sincerity are not sufficient to make an action moral. The ethics of SAQ are, on the contrary, objective, not subjective ethics – an individual’s personal views about these virtues are basically irrelevant as to their necessity.

## 59. Progress

The concept of progress is foundational to SAQ’s philosophical anthropology, ontology and onto-theology. In fact, without the concept of progress, the very rationale for the appearance of successive Manifestations, and with it, the rationale for the Bahá’í revelation would vanish: “at the time of the appearance of each Manifestation of God extraordinary progress has occurred in the world of minds, thoughts and spirits.”<sup>392</sup> The whole purpose of consecutive Manifestations is to ensure that humankind makes progress in “material, human and spiritual”<sup>393</sup> education and to help us achieve this goal, “we need an educator who will be at the same time a material, human and spiritual educator.”<sup>394</sup> At this point the onto-theological dimensions of SAQ’s teachings on progress become clear in respect to the need for an “educator [who] must be *unquestionably and indubitably perfect in all respects and distinguished above all men.*”<sup>395</sup> Without these supra-human perfections He would be subject to all the same weaknesses as other humans and would lack the ability to carry out His mission.

According to SAQ, material education:

*is concerned with the progress and development of the body, through gaining its sustenance, its material comfort and ease. This education is common to animals and man.*<sup>396</sup>

Human education:

*signifies civilization and progress – that is to say, government, administration, charitable works, trades, arts and handicrafts, sciences, great inventions and discoveries and elaborate institutions, which are the*

*activities essential to man as distinguished from the animal.*<sup>397</sup>

Human education includes progress in:

*intelligence and thought in such a way that they may attain complete development, so that knowledge and science may increase, and the reality of things, the mysteries of beings and the properties of existence may be discovered; that, day by day, instructions, inventions and institutions may be improved; and from things perceptible to the senses conclusions as to intellectual things may be deduced.*<sup>398</sup>

Spiritual education “is that of the Kingdom of God: it consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings.”<sup>399</sup> Spiritual education also exists “so that intelligence and comprehension may penetrate the metaphysical world, and may receive benefit from the sanctifying breeze of the Holy Spirit”<sup>400</sup> and so that human beings may become mirrors reflecting the “attributes and names of God.”<sup>401</sup>

These passages make clear that 'Abdu'l-Bahá sees humankind making progress in its material, intellectual, social and governmental aspects, as well as in spiritual existence. With the arrival of the Manifestation, “universal progress appears in the world of humanity.”<sup>402</sup>

Specifically, He praises the progress made with the appearance of Bahá'u'lláh:

*In this great century which is the cycle of Bahá'u'lláh, what progress science and knowledge have made, how many secrets of existence have been discovered, how many great inventions have been brought to light and are day by day multiplying in number. Before long, material science and learning, as well as the knowledge beholders will be amazed.*<sup>403</sup>

In this passage we not only see the role of Bahá'u'lláh in human progress, but we also have specific indications that ‘progress’ means more and better knowledge vis-à-vis the secrets that have been “discovered,” more and better “great inventions,” and new and amazing developments in “material science and learning.” In other words, progress means improvement i.e. the replacement of something that is inadequate by something that

is more adequate, be it a procedure, a theory, belief or understanding, a device and so on. A similar idea is evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remark that if we educate populations,

*day by day knowledge and sciences would increase, the understanding would be broadened, the sensibilities developed, customs would become good, and morals normal; in one word, in all these classes of perfections there would be progress, and there would be fewer crimes.*<sup>404</sup>

It is evident here that 'progress' does not merely mean 'change' or 'difference' but rather 'improvement,' 'greater efficiency,' 'greater adequacy' of understanding and knowledge, and enhanced "sensibilities." This, of course, implies the currently controversial proposition that if there is genuine progress then the level of material, human and spiritual civilization attained by previous civilizations and cultures were not as advanced as that which will be achieved by civilization and culture in the era inaugurated by Bahá'u'lláh. In other words, 'progress' as used in SAQ involves the idea of advancement and improvement beyond a previous stage of development that is incomplete or less perfect than its successor.

An inescapable consequence of belief in progress is that some civilizations and cultures are more advanced than others, i.e. that not all are equal in their development of humankind's material, human and intellectual, and spiritual capacities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá certainly accepts this result, as is evident in His references to "barbarian[]" cultures: "These Arab tribes were in the lowest depths of savagery and barbarism, and in comparison with them the savages of Africa and wild Indians of America were as advanced as a Plato."<sup>405</sup> During the twentieth century the Nazis, Fascists and Communists showed how even materially and intellectually advanced individuals and societies could retrogress into barbarism when spiritual education is ignored or suppressed. Civilizations and cultures can remain in or retrogress into lower states.

The doctrine of progress also shapes SAQ's vision of the after-life: "man can also make progress in perfections after leaving this world."<sup>406</sup> This means that we may increase our specifically human perfections in the next life but that we cannot advance beyond our essential human nature to become God or a Manifestation.<sup>407</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá illustrates this in the following statement:

*Look at this mineral. However far it may evolve, it only evolves in its own condition; you cannot bring the crystal to a state where it can attain to sight. This is impossible. So the moon which is in the heavens, however far it might evolve, could never become a luminous sun, but in its own condition it has apogee and perigee ... It is true that coal could become a diamond, but both are in the mineral condition, and their component elements are the same.*<sup>408</sup>

Thus, progress is limited or bounded by the essential nature of things, but is not bounded within the limits established by the essential nature of a being. Here we observe a convergence between SAQ's ontological teachings regarding essence and its teachings regarding spiritual progress after death.

## 60. Human Evolution

'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings on human progress include the concept of human evolution over the last few million years. However, there is an important caveat attached to His assent. 'Abdu'l-Bahá unequivocally rejects the notion that the human species has evolved from an animal although He does not reject that throughout our long history the human species has changed accidental i.e. physical attributes and appeared in a variety of forms. Of the suggestion that humankind was initially an animal and that through progressive modifications it became human, He says, "How puerile and unfounded is this idea and this thought!"<sup>409</sup> We may have changed our actualised outward attributes but we have not changed our substance or essence.

*For man, from the beginning of the embryonic period till he reaches the degree of maturity, goes through different forms and appearances. His aspect, his form, his appearance and color change; he passes from one form to another, and from one appearance to another. Nevertheless, from the beginning of the embryonic period he is of the species of man – that is to say, an embryo of a man and not of an animal; but this is not at first apparent, but later it becomes visible and evident.*<sup>410</sup>

In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá accepts the notion of humankind having progressed through a long line of accidental changes in different forms just like a human embryo in the womb.

However, He disagrees with the interpretation of these accidental changes as showing that there has been essential or substantial alteration in the development of the human race. In 'Abdu'l-Bahá's view, "his [man's] species and essence undergo no change"<sup>411</sup> which is simply a particular application of His general dictum that "the essence of things does not change."<sup>412</sup> Things may appear to change their essences over time as they actualize their previously hidden potentials, but deeper philosophical reflection shows that the essence and its potentials remain stable. After all, a thing cannot change into something for which it has no potential: a gumboot will not become a live alligator. No matter what we do to and with the gumboot, and no matter how different it looks and acts, none of its transformations will involve anything for which it doesn't have potential in the first place. All its transformations are potentially present, i.e. essentially present from the first. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says

*the embryo possesses from the first all perfections, such as the spirit, the mind, the sight, the smell, the taste – in one word, all the powers – but they are not visible and become so only by degrees.*<sup>413</sup>

This is also what transpired in human history on the earth: there were beings which outwardly resembled animals but they carried within them the potentials of attaining spirit and mind, although it took a long time to actualise these potentials. "In the beginning of his formation the mind and spirit also existed, but they were hidden; later they were manifested."<sup>414</sup> Because mind and spirit were not manifested and left no outward signs of their existence does not mean that these potentials did not exist; indeed, the fact that they are now actualized proves they must have existed as unactualised potentials. After all, as explained above, a thing cannot actualise potentials it does not have. Thus, two seemingly identical species may in fact be radically different if one possesses the potentials for spirit and mind, and the other does not, even though skeletal remains alone may not allow us to distinguish them. Any attempt to draw conclusions solely on the basis of outward form alone would obviously be going beyond the available evidence. Consequently, there are good ontologically based reasons for 'Abdu'l-Bahá to say, "he [man] is the embryo of the superior species, and not of the animal; his species and essence undergo no change"<sup>415</sup> and "Man was always a distinct species, a man, not an animal."<sup>416</sup> Only our actualised attributes and appearance have changed.

As we have seen, 'Abdu'l-Bahá frames His interpretation of evolution on the philosophical analysis of reality in terms of essence, attribute, accident, potential and actuality. Such analysis, integral to the Athenian tradition, even applies to the history of the earth itself.

*the terrestrial globe from the beginning was created with all its elements, substances, minerals, atoms and organisms; but these only appeared by degrees: first the mineral, then the plant, afterward the animal, and finally man. But from the first these kinds and species existed, but were undeveloped in the terrestrial globe, and then appeared only gradually.*<sup>417</sup>

In other words, “from the beginning” the earth possessed in potential “all its elements, substances, minerals, atoms and organisms.” They were all potentially present and gradually became actualised. However, each of these kinds of things and species existed “from the first” and, therefore, did not require that one kind or essence be transformed into another. Indeed, that is impossible. Anything that exists on earth can exist only because the potential for its development was there in the first place. If there were no potential, how could it develop? How could a gumboot become a live alligator?

'Abdu'l-Bahá's argument is an inevitable consequence of the explanatory framework of the Athenian tradition in philosophy according to which “the essence of things does not change.”<sup>418</sup> Each species – a word He uses to refer to different specific kinds of plants or animals as well as humans – has its own unique essence and the inherent hidden potentials which will be actualized or externalised under different conditions. Hence differences may arise as several instantiations of an essence actualise different attributes under different circumstances; outwardly, some of these differences may be dramatic. Nonetheless, they are variant actualisations of the same essence. If, for example, species A gives rise to species B, then the potential for creating species B was already in species A. Therefore, from the point of view of essences and potentials, they are still one kind or essence or species, although they actualise or manifest vastly different potentials. There has been no change in the essence per se but there have been changes insofar as different potentials have been actualized and externalised.

## 61. SAQ and Science

There is no question that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's views on human evolution are in conflict with current scientific thought in regards to the origins and history of humankind. However, this does not necessarily undermine Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that science and religion should be in harmony unless one adopts the view that religion must uncritically agree with science on all its pronouncements at all times. Logically this is untenable for the simple reason that science itself changes its views – sometime profoundly – and no text, revealed or not, can adopt all the successive scientific beliefs on a given subject without falling into self-contradiction and, thereby, ceasing to be useful as a guide.<sup>419</sup>

Nor does SAQ lend itself to the suggestion that religion and science are non-overlapping magisterial (NOMA) in which each has its own specific area of competency which cannot conflict because they deal with different topics.<sup>420</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá's critique of scientists' interpretation of the data of evolution – he does not challenge the data itself – shows that in His view, science and religion are not separate compartments hermetically sealed off from each other. Nor is there a firewall between science and His ontological statements which are, after all, statements about the nature of all reality, including that which is studied by science. This applies particularly to His proofs for the existence of God which most certainly have implications for cosmology if for no other reason than that such proofs suggest that all purely material explanations are inherently incomplete. Thus, it seems clear that SAQ exemplifies the dialogical approach to the harmony of religion and science. In the dialogical approach, both sides are aware of their own and the other's inherent strengths and limitations and engage in careful dialogue in the quest for truth; they feel free to engage in mutual critique and recognise their commonalities vis-à-vis methods (the use of reason, models, paradigms, independent investigation), and presuppositions about the nature of reality. They also concern themselves with the "limit-questions"<sup>421</sup> that science raises about the origins of the universe, its intelligibility and order, the origin and nature of natural law and appearance versus reality. These "limit questions" are of mutual interest to science and religion. From the dialogical perspective the harmony of religion and science does not mean uncritical agreement of one with the other, but of a mutual quest for a more adequate understanding of the

truth about reality. They work as partners in a process – which is what both science and religion are – rather than make score-sheets of agreements and disagreements.

## Conclusion

This survey of SAQ has covered major subjects in ontology, onto-theology, epistemology and philosophical anthropology. From this survey, we have drawn three general conclusions.

First, SAQ's ideas on these four foundational subject areas are founded on and shaped by a consistent set of philosophical ideas. In other words, SAQ is more than a random collection of thoughts on various topics; instead it exemplifies a consistent underlying philosophy vis-à-vis ontology, onto-theology, epistemology and philosophical anthropology. In these areas, SAQ lays down basic principles from which a considerable portions of SAQ (and the other Writings) may be deduced or to which they can be rationally related. Close analysis shows the seemingly unconnected parts are joined at an often implicit level by a coherent underlying philosophy.

Second, this underlying philosophy has significant connections with the philosophy of the Athenian tradition, in terms of language and terminology, concepts and use of concepts, and the development of arguments. Of the available philosophical traditions, SAQ is most consistent with the Athenian tradition, both in its early and contemporary forms. Like SAQ, this tradition analyses reality in terms of essences, substances, accidents, potentials, actualities and four-fold causality; accepts the existence of God, and emphasises humankind's special place in creation, as well as virtue ethics.

To say that the philosophy embedded in SAQ is most consistent with the Athenian tradition is not to say that SAQ (or the Writings) are limited by past versions of this tradition. As shown most decisively in the work of Whitehead and his followers, but also in the work of Marcel, de Chardin, MacIntyre and Wild, as well as the developments in neo-Thomism, the Athenian tradition is not only flexible but capable of enormous, sometimes even radical, growth in new directions. Being part of this tradition does not imprison philosophy in the past but rather provides a philosophically sound vessel with which to embark on voyages of exploration.



Third, SAQ shows that the philosophy based on the Bahá'í Writings in general and SAQ in particular, can be a coherent and systematic basis for a dialogical (including critical) relationship with other philosophical approaches, with science, as well as with various intellectual disciplines. In other words, the philosophy embedded throughout SAQ and the other Writings represents a solid foundation from which Bahá'ís may engage other systems of thought both appreciatively and critically. It is, therefore, a valuable tool for inter-faith dialogue, for teaching and for apologetics.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CVI, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CVI, p. 213.

<sup>5</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of this view, see Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfán*, Vol. IV, 2003. Alastair McIntyre is a well-known example of a contemporary neo-Aristotelian. It must be emphasised that it is not necessary to be a Catholic to be a neo-Thomist, as illustrated by Mortimer Adler. We should also recall that many Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and Suhrawardi worked in the tradition begun by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.

<sup>7</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*.

<sup>10</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>12</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>13</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>14</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>15</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278. Note, too, how `Abdu'l-Bahá provides another guideline within which a Bahá'í philosophy must work when he says it is "futile to deny" that the existence of creation is an illusion compared to God's absolute, non-contingent existence.

<sup>16</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280; emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

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<sup>18</sup> See Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfán*

<sup>19</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.

<sup>20</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>21</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>23</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212-213.

<sup>24</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.

<sup>25</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

<sup>26</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

<sup>27</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

<sup>28</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

<sup>29</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 189-190.

<sup>30</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>31</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 247; emphasis added.

<sup>32</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178-179; emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.

<sup>35</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.

<sup>36</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130-131.

<sup>38</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 131.

<sup>39</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 131.

<sup>40</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 131.

<sup>41</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 249; emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.

<sup>43</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 123.

<sup>44</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 245-246; emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.

<sup>46</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.

<sup>47</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 243.

<sup>48</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.

<sup>49</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178.

<sup>50</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 129; emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 78.

<sup>52</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 79.

<sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178.

<sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.

<sup>55</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 179.

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- <sup>56</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146.
- <sup>57</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- <sup>58</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157-158.
- <sup>59</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158; see also SAQ 252.
- <sup>60</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- <sup>61</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>62</sup> "Pantheism and Panentheism" by Charles Hartshorne in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 11, p. 165-171. Both Whitehead and his follower Hartshorne are panentheists.
- <sup>63</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.
- <sup>64</sup> "Pantheism and Panentheism" by Charles Hartshorne in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, Vol. 11, p. 166.
- <sup>65</sup> See "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it." in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 178, for further evidence on this issue.
- <sup>66</sup> *New Scientist*
- <sup>67</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 179; emphasis added. See also 100, 143, 163, 202, 208,
- <sup>68</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178; emphasis added.
- <sup>69</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- <sup>70</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198 a, b.
- <sup>71</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 1, 1013 a, b.
- <sup>72</sup> John Wild, *Introduction to Realistic Philosophy*, p. 300.
- <sup>73</sup> John Wild, *Introduction to Realistic Philosophy*, p. 300.
- <sup>74</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- <sup>75</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 200b.
- <sup>76</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198a.
- <sup>77</sup> John Wild, *Introduction to Realistic Philosophy*, p. 302.
- <sup>78</sup> Abraham Edel, *Aristotle and His Philosophy*, p. 62. See also W.D. Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 77 which supports Norris, Edel and Wild.
- <sup>79</sup> Henry B. Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Appreciation*, p. p. 48.
- <sup>80</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 200.
- <sup>81</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 201.
- <sup>82</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J., *The One and the Many*, p. 201.
- <sup>83</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181; emphasis added.
- <sup>84</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3; emphasis added.
- <sup>85</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- <sup>86</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- <sup>87</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3.

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- <sup>88</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6; emphasis added.
- <sup>89</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>90</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 89.
- <sup>91</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 89.
- <sup>92</sup> Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 384.
- <sup>93</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- <sup>94</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- <sup>95</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- <sup>96</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 241.
- <sup>97</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 39.
- <sup>98</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 48.
- <sup>99</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 76.
- <sup>100</sup> Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 887.
- <sup>101</sup> Ted Honderich, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 887.
- <sup>102</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 264.
- <sup>103</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 518-519.
- <sup>104</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208-209; emphasis added.
- <sup>105</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208-209.
- <sup>106</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 129.
- <sup>107</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- <sup>108</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235; emphasis added.
- <sup>109</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- <sup>110</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- <sup>111</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- <sup>112</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199; emphasis added.
- <sup>113</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.
- <sup>114</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 195-196.
- <sup>115</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.
- <sup>116</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- <sup>117</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.
- <sup>118</sup> W. Norris Clarke, S.J. *The Philosophical Approach to God*, p. 59.
- <sup>119</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.
- <sup>120</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 197.
- <sup>121</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.
- <sup>122</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 196.
- <sup>123</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- <sup>124</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- <sup>125</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 180.

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- <sup>126</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.
- <sup>127</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 180.
- <sup>128</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- <sup>129</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- <sup>130</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217-218.
- <sup>131</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 151.
- <sup>132</sup> [20.15] “Surely the hour is coming— I am about to make it manifest— so that every soul may be rewarded as it strives:”
- <sup>133</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- <sup>134</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- <sup>135</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- <sup>136</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- <sup>137</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- <sup>138</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- <sup>139</sup> In Aristotle substance and essence are convertible terms. See Edel, *Aristotle and His Philosophy*, p. 122. See also Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 162.
- <sup>140</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- <sup>141</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146, 147, 148,
- <sup>142</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146.
- <sup>143</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- <sup>144</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- <sup>145</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146-147; emphasis added.
- <sup>146</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148; see also 147.
- <sup>147</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148; emphasis added.
- <sup>148</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.
- <sup>149</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- <sup>150</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.
- <sup>151</sup> The argument from perfection is the fourth of Aquinas’ five proofs for God in the *Summa Theologica*.
- <sup>152</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>153</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.
- <sup>154</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>155</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>156</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>157</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>158</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.
- <sup>159</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 177.
- <sup>160</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.

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- <sup>161</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 177.
- <sup>162</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263-264; emphasis added.
- <sup>163</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.
- <sup>164</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 108.
- <sup>165</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 2.
- <sup>166</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 14.
- <sup>167</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 14.
- <sup>168</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 237.
- <sup>169</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233.
- <sup>170</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.
- <sup>171</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.
- <sup>172</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.
- <sup>173</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239-240.
- <sup>174</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- <sup>175</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- <sup>176</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- <sup>177</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148-149.
- <sup>178</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 207; emphasis added.
- <sup>179</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 156.
- <sup>180</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- <sup>181</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 202.
- <sup>182</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 114.
- <sup>183</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 113.
- <sup>184</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 180; emphasis added. See also SAQ p. 282.
- <sup>185</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 173.
- <sup>186</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 207.
- <sup>187</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 4.
- <sup>188</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- <sup>189</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 202-203.
- <sup>190</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- <sup>191</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- <sup>192</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 207.
- <sup>193</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- <sup>194</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- <sup>195</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.
- <sup>196</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.
- <sup>197</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 230.

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- 198 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- 199 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- 200 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 201 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 168.
- 202 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.
- 203 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 114.
- 204 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 152.
- 205 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 145.
- 206 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154; emphasis added.
- 207 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 153.
- 208 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9-10.
- 209 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154.
- 210 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 152.
- 211 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 116.
- 212 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 230.
- 213 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 230.
- 214 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 230.
- 215 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154.
- 216 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 153.
- 217 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 151.
- 218 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154.
- 219 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 152.
- 220 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 218-219; emphasis added.
- 221 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154.
- 222 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157-158.
- 223 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158.
- 224 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 154.
- 225 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 218.
- 226 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 227 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 228 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- 229 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- 230 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.
- 231 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.
- 232 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.
- 233 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.
- 234 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217-218.
- 235 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 253.

- <sup>236</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3.
- <sup>237</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>238</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.
- <sup>239</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 144.
- <sup>240</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 144.
- <sup>241</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 251; see also 3, 9,
- <sup>242</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 264.
- <sup>243</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 129.
- <sup>244</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208; emphasis added.
- <sup>245</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- <sup>246</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- <sup>247</sup> See Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfán*, Vol. Nine, 2008.
- <sup>248</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 298.
- <sup>249</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 298.
- <sup>250</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 299; emphasis added.
- <sup>251</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 64.
- <sup>252</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 145; emphasis added.
- <sup>253</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6; emphasis added.
- <sup>254</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.
- <sup>255</sup> Descartes, *Regulae*, Rule III.  
[www.mtsu.edu/rbombard/RB/Spinoza/cnd.html](http://www.mtsu.edu/rbombard/RB/Spinoza/cnd.html). See also *Philosophical Meditations*.
- <sup>256</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 298.
- <sup>257</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 298.
- <sup>258</sup> Meriam-Webster Dictionary, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liable](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liable)
- <sup>259</sup> See Ian Kluge, "Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings."
- <sup>260</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9; emphasis added.
- <sup>261</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 64.
- <sup>262</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 64.
- <sup>263</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 163.
- <sup>264</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- <sup>265</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>266</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.
- <sup>267</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 73.
- <sup>268</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.8; italics added.
- <sup>269</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.
- <sup>270</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217.



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- 271 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.
- 272 See Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings" (Lights of Irfán Vol. 9, 2008) and "Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings."
- 273 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- 274 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- 275 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220; emphasis added.
- 276 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- 277 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- 278 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- 279 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- 280 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- 281 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158.
- 282 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158.
- 283 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158.
- 284 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 146.
- 285 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 286 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 287 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 288 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222.
- 289 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- 290 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- 291 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 250.
- 292 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 293-294; emphasis added.
- 293 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 293.
- 294 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 294.
- 295 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 209; emphasis added.
- 296 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- 297 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 253.
- 298 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 241.
- 299 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 241.
- 300 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263.
- 301 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 156; emphasis added.
- 302 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.
- 303 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 229; see also 287.
- 304 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 144.
- 305 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- 306 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 242.
- 307 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.

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- <sup>308</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- <sup>309</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 242.
- <sup>310</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 228.
- <sup>311</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 229.
- <sup>312</sup> Malebranche and Leibniz are the major western philosophers associated with this doctrine; among early Muslim proponents were al-Ashari and al-Ghazali.
- <sup>313</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 209.
- <sup>314</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- <sup>315</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 218.
- <sup>316</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 218.
- <sup>317</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
- <sup>318</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
- <sup>319</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157.
- <sup>320</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>321</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>322</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>323</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>324</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 173.
- <sup>325</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 173; emphasis added.
- <sup>326</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 172.
- <sup>327</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xxiv.
- <sup>328</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- <sup>329</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224; emphasis added.
- <sup>330</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119; emphasis added.
- <sup>331</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 193.
- <sup>332</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 189.
- <sup>333</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- <sup>334</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.
- <sup>335</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119.
- <sup>336</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 223.
- <sup>337</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 223.
- <sup>338</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 229.
- <sup>339</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 229.
- <sup>340</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 229.
- <sup>341</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240; emphasis added.
- <sup>342</sup> In the Western tradition, the second view is most closely identified with Duns Scotus, and the first with Thomas Aquinas.

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- 343 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.
- 344 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.
- 345 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.
- 346 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.
- 347 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208; emphasis added.
- 348 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217; emphasis added.
- 349 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 120.
- 350 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 115; emphasis added.
- 351 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.
- 352 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.
- 353 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.
- 354 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 200.
- 355 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 200.
- 356 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 201.
- 357 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 201.
- 358 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 201; emphasis added.
- 359 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 201.
- 360 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.
- 361 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.
- 362 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 212.
- 363 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 213.
- 364 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.
- 365 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214.
- 366 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214.
- 367 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214.
- 368 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 214-215.
- 369 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248.
- 370 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 156.
- 371 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 249.
- 372 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248.
- 373 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248.
- 374 Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 187.
- 375 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300; emphasis added.
- 376 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.
- 377 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215-216.
- 378 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 216.
- 379 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215-216.
- 380 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235-236; emphasis added.

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- 381 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 48; emphasis added.
- 382 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 47.
- 383 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 144.
- 384 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 92.
- 385 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 302.
- 386 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300.
- 387 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300; emphasis added.
- 388 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 238. emphasis added.
- 389 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 300-301; emphasis added.
- 390 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 223.
- 391 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224.
- 392 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 163.
- 393 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.
- 394 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.
- 395 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8; emphasis added.
- 396 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.
- 397 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.
- 398 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9; emphasis added.
- 399 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.
- 400 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9.
- 401 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 9.
- 402 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 74-75.
- 403 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 64.
- 404 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 272.
- 405 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 19. It would be curious to know how Edward Said would respond to this and similar statements.
- 406 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 237.
- 407 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 230.
- 408 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233-234.
- 409 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- 410 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 193; see also 194.
- 411 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- 412 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 100.
- 413 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199.
- 414 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 198.
- 415 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- 416 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 184.
- 417 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 199; emphasis added.

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<sup>418</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 100.

<sup>419</sup> For example, in the 1970’s scientific consensus was that the earth was cooling not warming. Another example would be the reversal of the view that neutrinos have no mass.

<sup>420</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “*Nonoverlapping Magisteria*,” *Natural History*, March 1997.

<sup>421</sup> Ian G Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion*, p.24.