

# Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings

## Part 2

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### 1: Introduction

In order to demonstrate how the work of Plotinus complements and offers new insights into the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Revelation, this paper expands and builds on some of the issues and ideas presented in "Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings, Part 1."<sup>1</sup> A project like this immediately raises two issues. The first is, what is meant by referring to a philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings? Does not Shoghi Effendi write that Bahá'u'lláh "has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be."<sup>2</sup> Does he not say that the Bahá'í Faith has "refus[ed] to be labeled a mere philosophy of life?"<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he writes,

For the Cause is not a system of philosophy; it is essentially a way of life, a religious faith that seeks to unite all people on a common basis of mutual understanding and love, and in a common devotion to God.<sup>4</sup>

In light of these statements, is not a project like this in danger of reducing the Writings to a man-made philosophy? In our view, such is not the case because this study recognizes that studying the philosophical aspects of the Writings does not exhaust Their contents; there is obviously more to the Writings than philosophy. However, we must clearly recognize that these philosophical aspects exist; there are passages referring to metaphysics and ontology, epistemology, ethics, the

philosophy of man, social and political philosophy and philosophy of history. Furthermore, Shoghi Effendi indicates that philosophical characteristics of the Teachings exist when he refers to the “philosophy of progressive revelation”<sup>5</sup> and the “Bahá’í philosophy of social and political organization.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, he encourages a questioner to correlate the Writings with contemporary developments in philosophy and only warns him or her away from what he calls “metaphysical hairsplitting.”

Philosophy, as you will study it and later teach it, is certainly not one of the sciences that begins and ends in words. Fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splitting is meant, not a sound branch of learning like philosophy.<sup>7</sup>

Correlation with other philosophical schools can only be done by focusing on the philosophic aspects of the Writings which is precisely what Shoghi Effendi is encouraging us to do. In addition, we have ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s use of philosophical knowledge, principles and arguments throughout His talks and letters, as, for example, in His proofs for the existence of God. In one such He proves the necessity of God by presenting the philosophical argument that the idea of an actual infinite regress of causes is “absurd.”<sup>8</sup> The impossibility of actual infinite regresses is a highly philosophical issue and brings in its train a variety of logical implications. Elsewhere ‘Abdu’l-Bahá proves the immortality of the soul with the argument that simple, i.e. noncomposite, things cannot decompose and die.<sup>9</sup> Such passages amply demonstrate that the Writings have well-developed philosophic features that require study.

The second issue raised by this project is what do we mean by a philosophical understanding of the Writings? In a nutshell, a philosophical understanding seeks rational knowledge of three things: what the Writings say explicitly or implicitly; the connections among various statements, and how they are related to other philosophies.

First, a philosophic understanding of the Writings seeks to discover what the Writings say explicitly or implicitly about a certain subject, and especially about subjects related to such branches of learning as metaphysics and ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man and philosophy of history and politics. Explicit statements on these subjects are easy to find but their hidden implications are not always readily apparent. For example, in regards to epistemology, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "the essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden."<sup>10</sup> He adds, "everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence."<sup>11</sup> The explicit epistemological meaning of these statements is clear but the implicit implications are equally important. For example, they guarantee the ontological integrity of all things, and especially of the human soul which no one but God can know in and of itself. Our freedom and spiritual independence and freedom from undue interference are guarded in this way.

Second, a philosophical understanding seeks to identify and study how the explicit and hidden connections among the teachings, so that we can discern more of the underlying unity of the Writings, i.e. their organic, interdependent structure. In other words, a philosophic understanding can help us recognize the Writings as an integral whole. This is important because the inability to see the organic integral structure of the teachings inevitably causes us to underestimate the strength of their rational coherence. Difficulties on these matters inevitably undercuts our ability to explicate and defend the Writings and to carry on meaningful dialogue with other thought-traditions.

Third, a philosophical understanding of the Writings allows us to discover the relationship of the ideas in the Writings to those in other philosophical schools. For example, given the emanationist metaphysics starting from a non-material source as the ultimately real, it seems clear that the Writings have significant similarities to some forms of idealism. But if so, what kind of idealism do they resemble—the

subjective idealism of Berkeley or the objective idealism of Hegel or Schopenhauer? And how do they relate to other great traditions, such as Thomism, Transcendentalism, existentialism, phenomenology and neo-Aristotelianism? Philosophic understanding can also help us understand why the Writings are so difficult to harmonize rationally with dialectical materialism, logical positivism or postmodernism. Knowing which philosophic traditions the Writings resemble can help us expand our understanding of the Writings by widening our intellectual horizons, sharpening our thinking about important questions and studying the Writings from new perspectives.

As an addendum, we should say that, paradoxically, a philosophical understanding of the Writings also helps us to appreciate the inherent limits of rational thought. The Writings do not just promote rational understanding but also the “understanding heart.”<sup>12</sup> Not everything can be fully understood or comprehended by reason alone, such as the deepest inner motives that cause us to accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation for this Age or our fullest love for the Manifestation and His plan for the world. As Pascal said, “The heart has reasons which reason cannot know.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, it should be explicitly noted that examinations of similarities between the Writings and philosophies that pre-dated them are emphatically not to be read as ‘influence studies’ and no statement made in this paper is intended in even the slightest degree to suggest any such influence. Influence studies and similarity studies are two different things. The mere notation and exploration of similarities as presented in a work or works is not the same thing as a study that traces the specific pathways by which one set of ideas affects another. This latter is an historical study involving questions of how, when, where, who, to what extent and even why, while the similarity study only takes note of the materials presented directly to the reader and explores whether they are alike or not. It should also be noted that there is no logical way to infer historical influence from similarity per

se. Many things are similar but are not, therefore, causally related or influenced either symmetrically or asymmetrically. Thus, it is clear that this similarity study offers no grounds whatever for inferences about influence.

## 2: The Theology of Aristotle

It is possible, of course, to study the agreements and convergences between the Bahá'í Writings and Neoplatonism from a strictly non-historical perspective, i.e. to study the two as separately developed and independent but strikingly similar systems of thought. In biology such a development is known as “convergent evolution.” However, in the case of the Bahá'í Writings and Neoplatonism, there is strong evidence that links the cultural world of late antiquity i.e. of Plotinus and Proclus to the cultural world of Bahá'u'lláh. This concerns the entry of Neoplatonic thought into the Muslim and, specifically, Persian world.

The first entry to Neoplatonism into Persia came in 529 AD when the Christian emperor Justinian I closed the School of Athens and the philosophers, the vast majority of them Neoplatonists, fled for protection to the Sassanid King Khosrau I. They brought with them numerous philosophical manuscripts including those of their master Plotinus. Their exile from Rome only lasted four years, but, at the very least, contact between Neoplatonism and the Persian cultural sphere had been established. Neoplatonist learning then continued in the Academy of Gundishapur which was an important Sassanid intellectual center.

However, there is a far more tangible link between Neoplatonism and the Muslim world, namely a text called *The Theology of Aristotle* which was “the most important direct source of Neoplatonic ideas in the Islamic world.”<sup>14</sup> This book, allegedly produced in Baghdad

in the Ninth Century CE, was actually a misattribution of Plotinus' *Enneads* to Aristotle. It was widely circulated and influenced generations of great Muslim philosophers including such Persians as al-Ghazzali, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Suhrawardi and Mulla Sadra. In other words, there is a clearly identifiable Neoplatonic influence in the cultural world in which Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived. Thus, it is understandable that Bahá'u'lláh sometimes expressed His revelation in a language recognizable to those familiar with this philosophical tradition.

In itself, the *Theology* was a paraphrase (it has even been called a 'forgery') with some additions of *Enneads* IV to VI. Some of the paraphrases are reasonably close to the original passages in the *Enneads*, but some in some cases the *Theology's* words stray far from the meaning of the original.<sup>15</sup> However, the Neoplatonic language used in the Writings is consistent with Plotinus' usages. The *Theology* was augmented by other, though less influential, Neoplatonic works such as the *Book of Causes* based on Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, as well as *The Letter on Divine Science* which also paraphrased portions of the *Enneads*. However, these other books lacked wide influence because they were not associated with Aristotle's prestige.<sup>16</sup>

The pervasive influence of *The Theology of Aristotle* also sheds a cultural and historical light on one of the interesting features of the Bahá'í Writings, viz. the mixture of elements that from a historical perspective can be called 'Platonic' and 'Aristotelian.' An idea which is historically associated with Plato is that the "the earth is the mirror of the Kingdom; the mental world corresponds to the spiritual world."<sup>17</sup> Plato, of course, taught that the material world was a reflection or shadow of the ideal spiritual world. Elements that are historically associated with Aristotle are four-fold causality<sup>18</sup>, actuality and potentiality<sup>19</sup> and arguments, such as the impossibility of an actual (as distinct from theoretical) infinite regress to prove the existence of a Prime Mover.<sup>20</sup> The co-existence of Platonic and Aristotelian

elements is significant because one of the major goals of Neoplatonists from Plotinus onward was to reconcile the ideas of the two Greek philosophical giants and fit them into a coherent whole. This harmonious use of both Plato and Aristotle points to another similarity between the Writings and Neoplatonism.

### 3. Discourse About God

In this section we shall examine Bahá'í and Neoplatonic discourse about God or the One. Our discussion will start with an observation by Eugene F. Bales that the *Enneads* employ “three modes of discourse”<sup>21</sup> about God.

The first mode of discourse is employed when he speaks of The One as though it transcends Being, Mind, Freedom, Will, Consciousness and Form and is thus void of all act and intelligible content. This mode of discourse I shall refer to as meontological.<sup>22</sup>

In this mode God is spoken of as transcending all the phenomenal attributes including not only the most fundamental one – being – but also form, which all phenomenal things must have to be particular things, as well as higher attributes such as mind and consciousness. The Writings, of course, warn us against any reduction of God to the level of a phenomenal being:

This appearance through manifestation [i.e. as a phenomenal being] would be for God, the Most High, simple imperfection; and this is quite impossible, for the implication would be that the Absolute Preexistent is qualified with phenomenal attributes. But if this were so, pure independence would become mere poverty, and true existence would become non-existence, and this is impossible.<sup>23</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá then goes on to say, "The preexistence of God is the preexistence of essence, and also preexistence of time."<sup>24</sup> In other words, God has "preexistence" and this "preexistence" is essentially His, i.e. it constitutes Him. This can be understood to mean that insofar as God is preexistent, He transcends 'being' or existence itself; He is the pre-condition needed for the being of created things to occur. For things to 'be,' they must be limited, i.e. have their own particular or limited being. However, since God is not limited in any way, He does not have being in this way. This is emphasized in the following statement:

To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being<sup>25</sup>, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.<sup>26</sup>

Here, too, we observe how God transcends, "is immensely exalted beyond," phenomenal attributes, and, therefore, beyond human conception. Clearly, the word "Being" in the phrase "Divine Being" is not used in the same way as when it refers to created beings since it is qualified by the word "Divine." This passage draws the obvious conclusion that since God surpasses ordinary attributes of being, He also surpasses human understanding:

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. We see that everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher.... Therefore, how can man, the created, understand the reality of the pure Essence of the Creator?<sup>27</sup>

The “lower” and “higher” refer to ontological dependence. That which is “lower” in the scale of being depends on that which is “higher,” and God, being independent of all things, is the highest and therefore, beyond comprehension by any created thing. Another way in which the Writings emphasize God’s transcendence of the ordinary attributes of being is by the use of such phrases as “the All-Bounteous, the Most Generous,”<sup>28</sup> “the Almighty, the All-Knowing.”<sup>29</sup> Phrases like this abound throughout the Writings. All of them indicate that God possess these attributes pre-eminently, in a way that surpasses the nature of all created things.

Perhaps the most dramatic statement of God’s transcendence vis-à-vis the created, phenomenal world is the following quotation:

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.<sup>30</sup>

A clearer and categorical statement of God’s transcendence is difficult to imagine, since there is “no direct intercourse” and “no resemblance whatever” between the Divine and creation. Implicit within this is the conclusion that none of the attributes that apply to phenomenal existence apply to God, i.e. that God’s mode of existence is utterly different in kind from ours.

Plotinus pursues this same line of thought from a more philosophical perspective. He writes,

The First must be without form, and if without form, then it has no Being. Being must have some definition and therefore be limited.; but The First cannot be thought of as having a definition and limit, for thus it would not be the Source [of form and limit] but the particular item indicated by the definition assigned to it.<sup>31</sup>

Here, too, we see the idea that the One transcends 'being' because 'being' implies existence as a particular thing and this, in turn, implies having limitation, i.e. definition and form. However, God surpasses definition and form and therefore exceeds the capacities of the human mind: "No vision taketh in Him..."<sup>32</sup> Because God exceeds form, limit and definition He cannot be merely one more thing among all the other thing. He is the pre-condition for their existence and consequently, He must transcend these attributes.

Furthermore, strange as it may seem, for Plotinus God transcends act or will in the ordinary human understanding of these terms (which will have to be amended later), because both of these imply deficiency or lack. We will something to be or to be done, we act in order to achieve goals because we do not yet have the thing, situation or condition for which we act. We are a subject acting to obtain a goal of some kind. However, since God is "self-subsisting,"<sup>33</sup> i.e. self-sufficient and lacks nothing, He transcends the ordinary sense of these terms. Another way of explaining this concept is to say that

the will of the One is not something which aims at an end, but [is] the end itself. There is no distinction of any kind between the will and its accomplishment.<sup>34</sup>

The logical basis for Rist's view is the absolute unity of the One or God which vitiates any distinction between intention (will) and act. In God, they are one.

Of course, the Writings refer to "the Divine Will that pervadeth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth"<sup>35</sup> but from our perspective, the qualifier "Divine" already indicates transcendence of any mere human conception of 'will.' To claim otherwise would be to posit deficiency in God. However, as Plotinus makes clear, in the case of the One, willing need not be motivated by lack or need for something; rather, the One wills and acts not out of need but from completeness and super-abundance.

In our view, this concept of superabundance is the ontological significance of some of the imagery in the Writings:

This is the Ocean out of which all seas have proceeded, and with which every one of them will ultimately be united. From Him all the Suns have been generated, and unto Him they will all return. Through His potency the Trees of Divine Revelation have yielded their fruits....<sup>36</sup>

We might characterize this as the 'imagery of superabundance,' emphasized by the capitalization of such words as "Ocean." Other examples are "Ocean of everlasting bounty,"<sup>37</sup> "the Most Great Ocean,"<sup>38</sup> and "the ocean of My eternal wealth."<sup>39</sup> These suggestions of super-abundance are also implicit in such epithets of God as "the All-Possessing,"<sup>40</sup> "the All-Bounteous, the Most Generous,"<sup>41</sup> and "the Great Giver."<sup>42</sup>

The language and imagery we have examined in the Writings and the *Enneads* suggests that God's actions are the consequence of His super-abundance and His transcendence of all merely phenomenal qualities.

### 3.1 The Second Mode of Discourse About God

In his article on the modes of discourse about God, Bales identifies a second mode of discourse [which] is employed when Plotinus speaks of The Good [i.e. the One or God] as though it is within Being rather than beyond it, the essence of Act, containing all things potentially, as having some kind of Consciousness, Will, Mind and as being the Transcendent Self. This mode of discourse I shall designate ontological.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, the second mode of discourse treats the Good, the One or God as having presence in the phenomenal world instead of only transcending it. He quotes Plotinus:

Hence the Good is not to be sought outside [of the Good]; it could not have fallen outside of what is; it cannot possibly be found in non-Being; within Being the Good must lie, since it is never a non-Being. If that Good has Being and is within the realm of Being, then it is present, self-contained, in everything; we, therefore, are not separated from Being; we are in it; nor is Being separated from us; therefore all beings are one.<sup>44</sup>

In Plotinus' view, the Good cannot be entirely divorced from the phenomenal world of being because it would be without presence within creation, and this absence would effectively be equivalent to "non-Being" within creation. This is impossible since the Good cannot be "non-Being" anywhere: such an absence of the Good would be a deficiency. In the language of the Writings, the Good would no longer be "omnipresent"<sup>45</sup> and, therefore, lacking an essential divine attribute. Because the Good is also present (somehow) in the world of being, we are not separated from the Good and are joined together by its presence.

However, we must not conclude that Plotinus means that the Good literally incarnates itself in specific objects; rather the Good is present pre-eminently, i.e. in a manner consistent with its own divine nature. The Writings also reject the belief that God's presence in creation means that God is somehow divided or distributed in the particular objects of the world. `Abdu'l-Bahá categorically denies the Sufi view which requires that the Independent Wealth should descend to the degree of poverty, that the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms, and that Pure Power should be restricted to the state of weakness, according to the limitations of contingent beings. And this is an evident error.<sup>46</sup>

Although the Bahá'í Writings disallow incarnation as a mode of God's presence in creation, they explicitly recognize God's presence in the phenomenal world. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it."<sup>47</sup> Perceiving God "within" things is to see the presence of the Divine in them, and by extension, in the phenomenal world. Of course, the Divine is not present in the phenomenal world in the same way we are as incarnated beings. (The phrases "God before it" and, perhaps, "God after it" refer to the transcendence of God.) God's presence is also evident in the following quotation:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man.... Again He saith: "And also in your own selves: will ye not, then, behold the signs of God?"<sup>48</sup>

The concept of God's presence through the revelation of the "attributes and names of God" is clearly evident in this passage, which also asserts that this revelation is necessary for phenomenal things to exist. No kind of existence from the atoms to humankind is exempt from revealing signs of God. Furthermore, it is worth noting that humans have a privileged place for the divine presence to reveal itself: "And also in your own selves: will ye not, then, behold the signs of God?"<sup>49</sup> Elsewhere, God reveals that "We are closer to man than his life-vein."<sup>50</sup> A more dramatic way of emphasizing God's presence in humankind and in the phenomenal world is difficult to imagine.

The Neoplatonists recognize that God's "attributes and names" are present throughout creation. Proclus refines this insight into a universal principle of ontology:

Prop. 18. Everything which by its existence bestows a character on others itself primitively [originally] possess that character which it communicates to its recipients.<sup>51</sup>

Any cause, therefore, "communicates" some of its nature or character to what it causes and thus retains a presence in the effect. The operation of this principle is most readily evident in the creation of art, but it is really a principle that describes action at all levels of reality.

The Writings also portray God's presence in the phenomenal world through His Will and His actions:

"He doeth whatsoever He willeth in the kingdom of creation,"  
that thereby the sign of His sovereignty might be manifested  
in all things.<sup>52</sup>

Here we observe how God acts "in the kingdom of creation" rather than remaining transcendently distant from it; moreover, He does

so to manifest signs of His presence in the phenomenal world. In a similar vein, the Writings say,

...He doeth whatsoever He willeth and ordaineth whatsoever He pleaseth. Know thou moreover that all else besides Him have been created through the potency of a word from His presence, while of themselves they have no motion nor stillness, except at His bidding and by His leave.<sup>53</sup>

God wills and ordains, i.e. issues commands that lead to the creation of the phenomenal world among other things. Even more, nothing in creation has “motion” or “stillness” except by God’s “leave” or permission, i.e. all things depend on God’s permission to act or not. This emphasizes the extraordinary degree through which God’s power is present through the actions of all things. He actively operates within creation on an on-going basis in all our “motion ... or stillness.”

God is also portrayed as acting in the phenomenal world by means of progressive revelation according to which He takes part in human history by sending Manifestations to guide us through the next phase of our historical development. The Manifestation is the intermediary through which this is accomplished.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, God establishes a covenant with humankind and assists us in our troubles when He listens to or answers our prayers. He is portrayed as a “beneficent Father,”<sup>55</sup> which is another image involving presence-in-the-world, as is the image of God as the “compassionate physician,”<sup>56</sup> and “the Healer, the Preserver.”<sup>57</sup> These and other quotations make it clear that in addition to being utterly transcendent to the phenomenal world, God is also portrayed as having presence within it.

If the One or God has a will to cause specific acts in the phenomenal world, it seems logical to suppose that God, in some sense, has a self, i.e. an identity, desires<sup>58</sup> and a will. Otherwise, how, or why would it

act in creation? In this way, the One may be portrayed as being within the world. This is conclusion drawn by Bales, who claims that the Enneads' discourse about the Good proceeds "as though it is within Being rather than beyond it:"<sup>59</sup> the Good also is portrayed as having a 'self' which would, of course, make it the "Supreme Subject or Self."<sup>60</sup> Plotinus says, "He is what He is, the first self, transcendently The Self."<sup>61</sup> The One, therefore, has, to that extent, an identity and the will to express itself and its decrees, though to a greater degree than any created thing.<sup>62</sup> In the traditional language of theology, it has these attributes pre-eminently.

The Bahá'í Writings also seem to suggest—albeit more tenuously—that God has a self and refer to it in a number of passages. For example, in His discussion about the four kinds of love 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the third kind of love

is the love of God towards the Self or Identity of God. This is the transfiguration of His Beauty, the reflection of Himself in the mirror of His Creation. This is the reality of love, the Ancient Love, the Eternal.<sup>63</sup>

Not only do we observe God's presence "in the mirror of His creation" but also we have an explicit reference to God's "Self" and "identity." Indeed, in this case, we have a self-reflexive action by God, one in which He is both subject-actor and object-recipient. Such internal division is difficult to fathom vis-à-vis a transcendent God and is conceivable only to an entity within the world of being. Furthermore, the Writings state that God "hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, some of God's actions are portrayed as being consistent with a being which has a sense of self:

He bestoweth His favor on whom He willeth, and from whom He willeth He taketh it away. He doth whatsoever He



chooseth... He hath, however, caused you to be entangled with its affairs, in return for what your hands have wrought in His Cause.<sup>65</sup>

Elsewhere, God “willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth.”<sup>66</sup> Bestowing favor, willing, taking, causing and being pleased—these are the kinds of actions consistent with a self that is involved with creation. This raises the suggestion that God acts like a self or person insofar as He has an identity, conscious knowledge (“the All-knowing, the All-Wise”<sup>67</sup>), desires and will or intentionality. Of course, to say this is only to say that He does not lack these attributes, not that He is limited by them.<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, the possession of these attributes allows us to conclude that God’s relationship to us involves a personal aspect; that God is a ‘person’ in some pre-eminent way. Conversely, we might say that it would be mistaken to claim that the Bahá'í view of God is impersonal or non-personal. He is not only a power or ground-of-being, though He is these things as well. The personal aspect of God’s relationship to us is also evident in the Manifestation Who, as we shall see below, reflects the personhood of God into the phenomenal world. It is through the Manifestation that we relate to God personally.

### 3.2 The Third Mode of Discourse about God

Bales refers to the third mode of discourse about the One or God as “paradoxical.”<sup>69</sup> By this he means that it joins and “shows the relationship between the first two modes of discourse,”<sup>70</sup> it exhibits traits of both the transcendent mode of discourse and the imminent mode of discourse that indicates the One’s actions in the world. Bales’ paradigm case for the third mode in Plotinus is self-causation.<sup>71</sup> The One is said to be self-caused—but how can this be? For something to cause itself it would have to exist in order to bring itself into existence. But how can it do this before it exists? The cause and the caused are

identical: “his [the One’s] self-making is to be understood as simultaneous with Himself; the being is one and the same with the making.”<sup>72</sup> This is logically untenable, or, to use Bales’ term, “paradoxical.” However, by means of this paradox, Plotinus unifies the discourse of God as transcendent to being, i.e. transcendent to the phenomenal world as we have seen in the first discussion and the discourse of God as imminent or acting within being as we saw in the second.

Can such paradoxical concepts be found in the Bahá’í Writings? In our view, they can, both implicitly and explicitly. For example, both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refer to God as the “Self-Subsisting.”<sup>73</sup> Self-subsistence means independence of anything outside itself, i.e. absolute self-sufficiency, i.e. complete transcendence over the conditions of phenomenal existence in which such uncompromised self-sufficiency is impossible. In the phenomenal world of being self-sufficiency means being one’s own final, formal, efficient and material cause<sup>74</sup>—something that no phenomenal thing can be. Yet God is exactly that from the phenomenal perspective. Thus, like the concept of self-causation in Plotinus, the concept of self-subsistence paradoxically unifies two contradictory perspectives and modes of discourse.

Another example of such paradoxical concepts is found in the phrase that God is “the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!”<sup>75</sup> Unlike the previous example, the paradox is quite explicit here. As absolutely transcendent, God is “the most hidden of the hidden,” and yet as present throughout creation (God is seen in, before and after things as explained above), God is plainly manifest or visible if we have the desire to see. The transcendent and immanent modes of discourse are joined in this description of God as they are in the statement, “Nothing have I perceived except that I perceived God before it, God after it, or God with it” which we have already examined.<sup>76</sup> Here, too, God’s transcendence and immanence are joined in one paradoxical statement.

Perhaps the most important example of unifying the transcendent and immanent perspectives is found in the discourse about the Manifestation. It should be noted at this point that in the *Enneads* no counterpart to the concept of a Manifestation exists. The knowledge required to achieve freedom and salvation at the personal and social levels needs only individual effort and does not require guidance from someone through whom God speaks. Enlightenment comes to the individual seeker through mystical union with the One, which Plotinus describes as

the life of the gods and of the godlike and blessed among men, liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of the earth, the passing of the solitary to [the] solitary.<sup>77</sup>

The “solitary,” of course, refers in the first instance to the human seeker who is alone in his quest for enlightenment, and in the second, to the One who has no peer or likeness and is, therefore, alone.

Discourse about the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation includes and unifies transcendent and immanent elements. It may be objected that this subject has little or no connection to the transcendence and immanence of God; after all, the Manifestation is not God. While this is patently true of the Manifestation in His earthly station, the issue is more complex vis-à-vis His divine station. The following passage paradoxically joins both of these stations in the person of the Manifestation Himself:

When I contemplate, O my God, the relationship that bindeth me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things “verily I am God”; and when I consider my own self, lo, I find it coarser than clay!<sup>78</sup>

The transcendent aspect is in the Manifestation's statement, "I am God." As Baha'u'llah says,

Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: "I am God," He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto. For it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of God, His names and His attributes, are made manifest in the world<sup>79</sup>

However, Baha'u'llah's statement that when He considers Himself, He finds Himself "coarser than clay!" includes the immanent aspect of existence which His being also includes. Here is another example:

"Manifold and mysterious is My relationship with God. I am He, Himself, and He is I, Myself, except that I am that I am, and He is that He is." And in like manner, the words: "Arise, O Muhammad, for lo, the Lover and the Beloved are joined together and made one in Thee."<sup>80</sup>

The Manifestation embraces two contradictory identities, His own identity as a creation and His identity as God the Creator, and this duality-in-one necessarily requires paradoxical discourse as the foregoing passage illustrates. The second part of this passage also exemplifies the paradoxical discourse required by the Manifestation's duality-in-one. The "Beloved," of course, is God, "the Desire of the world"<sup>81</sup> and in this statement the lover and the "Beloved" are paradoxically one. We may, therefore, conclude that the Manifestation combines in one being both transcendent and immanent aspects and any discourse about the nature of the Manifestation is inevitably paradoxical. We observe this in the following selection:

Thus, viewed from the standpoint of their oneness and sublime detachment, the attributes of Godhead, Divinity,

Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence, have been, and are applicable to those Essences of Being [Manifestations], inasmuch as they all abide on the throne of Divine Revelation, and are established upon the seat of Divine Concealment.<sup>82</sup>

The Manifestation possess the “attributes of Godhead” and the “Inmost Essence,” i.e. the attributes of transcendence. It is worth noting that this passage contains another related paradox: the Manifestation is established both on the “throne of Divine Revelation” and “Divine Concealment”; He is both hidden and revealed, with the hidden referring to the transcendent aspect and the revealed to His worldly, immanent aspect.

Here is more evidence of the Manifestation’s possession of attributes of immanence in the world of being:

Viewed in the light of their second station—the station of distinction, differentiation, temporal limitations, characteristics and standards—they manifest absolute servitude, utter destitution, and complete self-effacement. Even as He saith: “I am the servant of God. I am but a man like you.”<sup>83</sup>

The attributes listed here are those of ordinary, limited beings: they are conditioned by time, have identifiable characteristics, have distinct form and, like all other contingent beings are “nothingness”<sup>84</sup> vis-à-vis God. This stands in sharp contrast to their transcendent attributes.

The dual nature of the Manifestations, the possession of both transcendent and immanent attributes, inevitably makes any discourse about Their nature paradoxical insofar as it must combine these inherently contradictory aspects. Efforts to avoid this paradox can only end in developing a distorted understanding of the nature of Manifestations. Hence, from a Bahá'í viewpoint, a purely humanistic or secular understanding of Manifestations is inherently false.

A clear concept of these three modes of discourse is useful in at least three ways. First, it defuses misunderstanding and/or possible critique of the Writings. The Baha'i Scriptures do not contradict themselves in Their various ways of speaking about God, saying first one thing and then the opposite. Rather, They discourse about God in three distinct modes appropriate to three distinct viewpoints: the viewpoint of absolute transcendence of the phenomenal world; the viewpoint of immanence or presence within the phenomenal world; and the viewpoint of the Manifestation Who exemplifies both transcendence and presence. Because the three modes are based on three different point of view, the Writings cannot be contradictory in their discourse about the divine. Second, awareness of the three modes of discourse and the viewpoints from which they originate helps us think more precisely about any statements the Writings make about God by relating the modes of discourse to particular points of view. It enhances our understanding of God as presented in the Writings.

Third, the shared three modes of discourse about the Divine suggest that the Writings and the *Enneads* share some commonalities in their way of understanding God's way of being and relating to the world. Of course, these commonalities do not constitute an equivalence since Neoplatonism has no exact counterpart to the concept of the Manifestation which is central to the Bahá'í concept of how God relates to the world. Furthermore, this discourse can only reflect what human capacity allows us to know and, therefore, reflects our understanding of God's way of being as related to us through the revelation of His Manifestations.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, we should not overlook the fact that this mode of understanding, while limited, is still genuine understanding that reflects the realities of our human situation. There are truths available to us. Forgetting this all too easily leads to a relativism, skepticism and, at its worst, nihilism.

#### 4: Human Being: Body and Soul

We shall begin our examination of human being in the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* with a study of the relationship between the soul and body. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the soul is not located within the body:

the rational soul, meaning the human spirit, does not descend into the body—that is to say, it does not enter it [the body], for descent and entrance are characteristics of bodies, and the rational soul is exempt from this. The spirit never entered this body so in quitting it, it will not be need of an abiding place.<sup>86</sup>

Time and space, ascent and descent and entrance and departure are attributes of material things and soul or “the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality.”<sup>87</sup> Therefore, it does not enter or leave anything. This naturally raises the question of the soul's relationship to the body, about which 'Abdu'l-Bahá 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>88</sup>

Because this explanation is couched in Aristotelian philosophical terminology, a few preparatory remarks are in order. A substance in Aristotle's philosophy is, primarily, anything that “exists by itself” as a distinct and individual entity, be it a sensible or intellectual reality.<sup>89</sup> Every substance has attributes which depend on it, just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes how, in one view, the soul “depends upon the substance of the body.” Attributes are of two kinds: essential attributes are

those which a substance needs to have to be the thing it is, e.g. watertightness in a cup, and, accidental attributes are those which it may have but does not need to be what it is, e.g. the color of the cup. In the materialist view, in which the “body is the substance... [and]... the spirit is accidental,” the non-essential soul need not be present for the body to exist as a body.

'Abdu'l-Bahá takes a diametrically opposite position. In His view the “rational soul is the substance,” i.e. exists independently and the body is the accident, i.e. non-essential to the existence of the soul. Therefore, the body may pass away but the soul will survive:

The rational soul—that is to say, the human spirit—has neither entered this body nor existed through it; so after the disintegration of the composition of the body, how should it be in need of a substance through which it may exist?<sup>90</sup>

This statement has at least three major consequences. First, it demonstrates the soul's independence from the body, and, thereby, its immortality, a viewpoint Plotinus shares.<sup>91</sup> Proclus elevates this idea to a basic principle of Neoplatonism: “Prop. 186. Every soul is an incorporeal substance and separable from body.”<sup>92</sup> This is only possible because the soul is the cause of the body, i.e. without the soul there would be no body at all. As an attribute, body is dependent and cannot exist without the soul, i.e. it takes a soul to make an actual body as distinct from a conglomeration of elements or a mechanical device. This relationship of dependence is not reciprocal.

Third, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position is, in effect, a rejection of emergentism and reductionism. Emergentism is a group of philosophies based on the belief that new, irreducible and unpredictable attributes appear or emerge as material structures become more complex; while the 'emergents,' such as mind, consciousness or soul, cannot be reduced to their material substratum, they cannot exist without it either. This



is obviously not compatible with what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written here since the soul is the independent substance and the body the dependent accident. Emergentism should not be confused with the following statement in *Some Answered Questions*:

Moreover, 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.<sup>93</sup>

This differs from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position insofar as in emergentism the very existence of the soul depends on its material substratum. In the foregoing quotation, the appearance or presence—but not the existence—of the soul or spirit in the phenomenal world depends on a certain level of physical complexity. Second, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the soul is 'external' to the complex organism insofar as it is attracted from a higher ontological level than matter, whereas emergentism (and reductionism) views the soul as on par or dependent on matter. Reductionism holds that only attributes present in the original components of the material substratum of a complex structure are real and that all phenomena such as life or mind can be explained by or reduced to the qualities of the underlying matter. In effect, the soul is a property of matter. Clearly, this, too, contradicts 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements. Both emergentism and reductionism make the soul dependent on its material foundation and both reduce the soul to the same ontological plane as matter.

Fourth, the distinction between soul and body is not a distinction between two utterly different and independent substances, as in, for example, the philosophy of Descartes. In fact, there is only one substance—soul; the body is an attribute of that soul-substance when it appears in the material world. This, in effect, dissolves the mind-body problem since we are not dealing with two separate and unrelated

substances but with one substance—soul—and an accidental attribute—body. There is no ‘problem’ or ‘mystery’ about how a substance can communicate with or is linked to its own attributes; no ‘communication’—as if between two separate things—is necessary because attributes are essentially (permanently) or accidentally (temporarily) part of the substance. From the Bahá’í perspective, the so-called mind-body problem does not exist.

Let us now investigate the Neoplatonic view. According to Pauliina Remes, “given the overall causal and explanatory directions [of Neoplatonism], the body is not a separate substance but generated by the soul.”<sup>94</sup> Plotinus writes, “Soul on the contrary is that which engenders the Form residing within the Matter and therefore is not the Form.”<sup>95</sup> Leaving aside the philosophical technicalities regarding “Form,” this statement means that ultimately the soul causes the existence of the body, so the *Enneads*, like the *Writings*, reject emergentism and reductionism. This conclusion echoes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the soul as substance and the body as accident produced by the soul.

Furthermore, Plotinus shares the view that the soul is not in the body:

Neither the Soul entire nor any part of it may be considered to be within the body as in a space... the Soul is not a body and is no more contained than containing.<sup>96</sup>

Plotinus then proceeds to refine what he means by explaining that “the mode of the Soul’s presence to body is that of the presence of light to the air...”<sup>97</sup> He adds that this image is accurate because while the air constantly shifts, the light is “stable” and that “the air is in the light rather than the light in the air.”<sup>98</sup> Later, he adds, “a living body is illuminated by soul”<sup>99</sup> just as air is illuminated by light. For Plotinus, the body is ‘in’ the soul because the body is dependent on the soul for its existence; in his system of emanations, the spiritual is always

higher than the material if for no other reason than that the material is the lowest level of being. The physical depends on the spiritual to exist.<sup>100</sup> As William Inge puts it so aptly, “the Soul ‘is present’ with the Body, but not within it.”<sup>101</sup>

The analogous soul-body relationship in the Writings and the Enneads leads to some similar conclusions, the most obvious of which is the immortality of the soul.<sup>102</sup> Being spiritual makes the soul non-composite, and, therefore, immune to destruction. Another implication is that the soul is the active principle in its relationship to the body and that the body is passive. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the soul as thou observest, whether it be in sleep or waking, is in motion and ever active.”<sup>103</sup> Soul, says Plotinus, is “act and creation”<sup>104</sup> and “is the starting point of motion and becomes the leader and provider of motion to all else.”<sup>105</sup> In other words, even physical motion is a symptom of, or, perhaps material metaphor for, spiritual action. This, in turn, suggests that the material derives its value from the spiritual,<sup>106</sup> illustrating, thereby, how intimately ontology and value are related both in the Writings and in the Enneads. The value of anything depends on its ontological position in the cosmic hierarchy in which God or the One is the most valuable at the apex and matter being the least valuable at the lowest level. Value in this instance is determined by the degree of creativity something has or, conversely, how many other things depend on it. Since everything depends on God or the One, He has supreme value.

## 5: Psychology or Ontology?

At this point an objection may be raised. When Plotinus speaks of the soul, he sometimes seems to be speaking about the World Soul i.e. about ontology, and sometimes he seems to be speaking about the souls of individual humans, i.e. about psychology. This brings us to

one of the distinguishing features of Plotinus and Neoplatonism in general, namely, that the ontological or metaphysical and the psychological reflect one another. Pauliina Remes refers to

the internalization of the Platonic metaphysical hierarchy. In some manner, a human being encompasses, or is fundamentally related to, the metaphysical levels. She is not an outside spectator.<sup>107</sup>

R.T. Wallis, for example, observes that in Neoplatonism, metaphysics and psychology “cannot be sharply separated.”<sup>108</sup>

Viewed as a metaphysical reality each level is real in its own right; viewed as states of consciousness, on the other hand, the lower levels become imperfect ways of viewing the true realities contemplated by the ‘higher’ ones.<sup>109</sup>

Emilsson agrees, writing that “at the intelligible level, being and knowledge, ontology and epistemology, are unified.”<sup>110</sup>

These two viewpoints—the ontological and the psychological—are not contradictory and exclusive, but rather they are complementary because each promotes understanding of different aspects of reality. We can adopt both understandings simultaneously since one is reflected in the other. Of course, the higher is always paradigmatic for the lower; the lower always reflects the higher to the limits of its capacity. Proclus, the great systematizer of the *Enneads*, succinctly sums up this idea when he writes, “For each principle participates its superiors in the measure of its natural capacity and not in the measure of their being.”<sup>111</sup> In other words, to the limits of its ability, all things, including the human soul reflect the nature and activities of the World Soul. Bahá’u’lláh states,

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light... To a supreme degree is this true of man... <sup>112</sup>

Each thing reveals the “attributes and names of God” to the limit of its capacity. In *The Elements of Theology*, Proclus writes, “All is in all but in each appropriately to its nature”<sup>113</sup> Every level of reality is present in every other but in a manner that is appropriate to its capacities and limitations. Because “all is in all” the psychological reflects or participates in the ontological and, therefore, by looking inward, we can learn a great deal about the ontological nature of reality. This teaching of the “all in all” opens up far-reaching possibilities for a ‘subjective science,’ i.e. a ‘science’ of subjectivity which explores reality by a rigorous study of subjective consciousness. Such a development has obvious affinities to modern phenomenology.

## 6: Humankind as Microcosm

The idea of the “all in all” implicitly contains the notion that humankind is a microcosm. Pauliina Remes writes,

A basic feature that metaphysics reveals about Neoplatonic anthropology is that to be human is to exist on and in a sense encompass all metaphysics levels: the sensible realm of time and matter, and the hypostases, that is, the Soul, the Intellect and the One.<sup>114</sup>

In a manner appropriate to our nature, humankind ‘contains’ the phenomenal realm and even the hypostases. Of course, the phrase

“in a sense” suggests that we cannot accept this claim literally. Rather, it seems to mean that the phenomenal realm and the hypostases have a presence as signs or images within us, or, as the principles operative in the rest of reality also operate in us. One might also call this a ‘holographic likeness.’ In a holographic picture, every portion reflects the whole to a degree proportional to its segment of the whole, i.e. to its nature.

This view of humankind as a microcosm is explicitly adopted by Plotinus:

For the Soul is many things, is all, is the Above and the Beneath to the totality of life: and each of us is an Intellectual Cosmos, linked to the world by what is lowest in us, but, by what is the Highest, [linked] to the Divine Intellect: by all that is intellective we are permanently in that higher realm, but by the fringe of the Intellectual, we are fettered to the lower.<sup>115</sup>

Metaphysically speaking, human beings live in various levels of reality or, to put it psychologically, in various states of mind. We are an “Intellectual Cosmos” because we reflect or ‘contain’ the principles at work throughout created reality; we touch on both the “higher” and “lower” realms although it must be emphasized again, we do so in a manner proportionate to the capacities and limitations of our essential nature.

The idea of humankind as a microcosm is also found in the Bahá'í Writings:

Man is the microcosm; and the infinite universe, the macrocosm. The mysteries of the greater world, or macrocosm, are expressed or revealed in the lesser world, the microcosm... Likewise, the greater world, the macrocosm, is latent and

miniatured in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man. This constitutes the universality or perfection of virtues potential in mankind. Therefore, it is said that man has been created in the image and likeness of God.<sup>116</sup>

Similarly, we read, "Man is said to be the greatest representative of God, and he is the Book of Creation because all the mysteries of beings exist in him."<sup>117</sup> This passage may be understood to mean that humankind expresses or discloses all the principles operative throughout the macrocosm. In us, these principles are "latent" which is to say, hidden or concealed—like "mysteries"—presumably until such time as human evolution allows us to become conscious of and reveal them. Since the universe is "infinite," this evolutionary unconcealing process within humankind will endure infinitely. In all likelihood, the reference to "virtues" here refers not so much to virtues in an ethical sense, but virtues in the sense of powers or capacities inherent in the rest of creation as well as in humankind. Because God also possesses these capacities to a pre-eminent degree, humankind is an image of God as stated above by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh clearly tells us that even atoms contain signs of the revelation of God and that

[t]o a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.<sup>118</sup>

Here, too, we observe that humankind is a microcosm or image of God containing, at least potentially, "all the attributes and names of God." Of course, these attributes are present in us in a manner appropriate to our particular and limited human nature. Proclus' Proposition 103—"All things are in all things but in each according to its proper

nature”—appears to apply in the Bahá'í Writings as well not only vis-à-vis creation but also vis-à-vis the signs of God within us.

One of the logical consequences of the doctrine of the microcosm is that turning inward is one way for humankind to encounter the Divine. In the Arabic *Hidden Words* Bahá'u'lláh says,

Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.<sup>119</sup>

In our view, a literal reading of this passage presents so many logical obstacles as to make it untenable. At the very least, it violates 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement

It [the sun, i.e. God] does not appear in the substance of things through the specification and individualization of things; the Preexistent [God] does not become the phenomenal; independent wealth does not become enchained poverty; pure perfection does not become absolute imperfection.<sup>120</sup>

If Bahá'u'lláh's statement cannot be taken literally, then it is inevitable that the phrase “Me standing within thee” refers to the signs of God or of the Manifestation abiding within the human microcosm. This is why it is so important to attain self-knowledge, not just of our ego and conscious selves but of our spiritual human nature as microcosms:

In this connection, He Who is the eternal King—may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him—hath spoken: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”<sup>121</sup>

Interpreting this passage literally instead of reading it as a reference to an inward sign of God adapted to our human capacities could lead—at its worst—to a potentially disastrous inflation of the human ego.



## 7: The Lower and Higher Aspects of Humankind

One of the consequences of being a microcosm is that human beings also have a higher and lower nature that corresponds to the general cosmic order with its higher, i.e. divine, and lower, i.e. material, aspects. This understanding of our dual or nature is evident in the Writings. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature.<sup>122</sup>

We might say that humans are “amphibious,”<sup>123</sup> i.e. they live in two worlds, though, of course, they must ultimately choose which of these worlds is to predominate and guide their development. This is made clear by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statement which associates all positive virtues with our higher nature and negative attributes with our lower nature. Similar ideas are expressed in the following passage:

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.<sup>124</sup>

This declaration takes an ontological perspective of humankind's duality, pinpointing our location in the hierarchy of being at the borderline between "materiality" and "spirituality." This borderline ontological location is reflected in our dual nature. It is noteworthy, too, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá associates "materiality" with imperfection and "spirituality" with perfection—a connection clearly made in the philosophy of Plotinus who not only associates the higher with the divine and the lower with the body but also holds that the soul occupies an intermediate position between higher and lower levels of reality:

But in spite of it all [being in a body] it has, for ever, something transcendent; by a conversion towards the intellectual act, it [the soul] is loosed from the shackles and soars... Souls that take this way have place in both spheres, living of necessity the life there and the life here by turns, the upper life reigning in those able to consort more continuously with the divine intellect, the lower dominant where character or circumstances are less favourable.<sup>125</sup>

Elsewhere He states that "every human Being is of two-fold character."<sup>126</sup> Pierre Hadot sums up the situation succinctly:

The human soul occupies an intermediate position between realities inferior to it—matter and the life of the body—and realities superior to it: purely intellectual life characteristic of divine intelligence and, higher still, the pure existence of the Principle of all things.<sup>127</sup>

According to Remes, Plotinus holds that "human beings are 'amphibious'—they live two kinds of life, those of the intellect and those of the composite."<sup>128</sup> The "composite"<sup>129</sup> refers to the view that the human body is matter and a form which endows it with animal life. 'Intellect,' of course, refers to the higher spiritual life of the *Nous* (translated as

'Spirit' by Inge) which finds its image in the human soul; 'intellect' does not simply mean the 'rational intellect.'

It is clear, therefore, that both the Writings and Plotinus position humankind between two contradictory types of reality, matter and intellect or spirit. This has some interesting philosophical consequences. Because humanity has two different natures we may conclude that humankind is inherently and constitutively self-contradictory, divided, paradoxical, or even absurd. Existentialism is, of course, the philosophy that has richly explored these aspects of our existence from both an atheist and theist perspective.<sup>130</sup> At the same time, in terms of process or dynamics, humankind might well be described as a dialectic since it would appear our entire lives are an on-going interaction of these two sides of ourselves as we evolve. This 'between' situation in which we find ourselves is an interesting connection point between the ancient philosopher Plotinus, the Writings and contemporary philosophy.

## 8: Actualizing Our Highest Potentials

The foregoing passages show that both the Writings and Plotinus maintain that our challenge as human beings is to actualize our higher potentials by cultivating that which is spiritual in us. 'Abdu'l-Bahá re-emphasizes this theme when He writes,

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. 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>131</sup>

He also says, “If a man’s Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint”<sup>132</sup> whose spiritual condition is contrasted to that of a “mere animal.”<sup>133</sup>

Plotinus expresses similar views:

Our task, then, is to work for our liberation from this sphere [the material world], severing Ourselves from all that has gathered around us; the total man is to be something better than a body ensouled—the bodily element dominant with a trace of Soul running through it and resultant life-course mainly of the body. There is another life, emancipated, whose quality is progression towards the higher realm, towards the good and divine... [so we may become]... the higher, the beautiful, the Godlike... <sup>134</sup>

Both passages emphasize the importance of overcoming our lower nature so that human beings may free the full powers of their specifically human natures to become “saints”<sup>135</sup> or “Godlike.” In other words, both agree that human beings do not have a natural destiny but rather a supernatural destiny—a view which follows logically from the fundamentally spiritual nature of humankind.

However, we must not be deceived into thinking that Plotinus and the Bahá’í Writings completely disparage the body, let alone recommend ascetic practices. Our challenge is neither to over or underestimate the body and to keep it in control. Plotinus writes,

He [the sage] will give to the body all that he sees to be useful and possible, but he himself remains a member of another order... [the body is] the thing which he tends and bears with as a musician cares for his lyre, as long as it serves him... <sup>136</sup>

This is an eminently practical attitude; we must do our best to look after our body properly but must not become obsessed about catering to it. The Bahá'í view on this subject is perhaps best summarized by Shoghi Effendi, who categorically states,

We are not ascetics in any sense of the word. On the contrary, Bahá'u'lláh says God has created all the good things in the world for us to enjoy and partake. But we must not become attached to them and put them before the spiritual things.<sup>137</sup>

Quite clearly, both the Writings and Plotinus both adopt an attitude of moderation in regards to the body.

## 9: Free Will

Both the Writings and Plotinus agree that human beings have free will. Having accepted free will as a basic datum of human nature, Plotinus proceeds to define what this freedom is:

We think of our free act as one which we execute of our own choice, in no servitude to chance or necessity or overmastering passion nothing thwarting our will... everything will be 'voluntary' that is produced under no compulsion and with knowledge.<sup>138</sup>

Elsewhere he adds, "Where act is performed neither because of another nor at another's will, surely there is freedom."<sup>139</sup> In many respects his ideas are quite modern insofar as they present a 'negative freedom,' i.e. freedom from outside interference. Furthermore, he requires knowledge for informed consent to an act. Interestingly enough, he requires not being in the grip of an "overmastering passion" as a criterion for a free act. That which hinders us from implementing "our own choice" may well come from within yet nonetheless, it is not

really 'us' and we could find ourselves as "slaves of passion."<sup>140</sup> This concept of negative freedom is also evident when he writes,

Effort is free once it is towards a fully recognized good; the involuntary [unfree] is, precisely, motion away from the good and towards the enforced, towards something not recognized as good; servitude lies in being powerless to move towards one's good, being debarred from the preferred path in menial obedience. Hence the shame of slavery is that... [is when] the personal good must be yielded in favour of another's.<sup>141</sup>

Freedom requires that we are not forced away or deterred by others from our desired good and that we have the capacity or power to achieve our good. Anything else is "servitude" or lack of freedom. However, Plotinus' view of free will is not limited to 'negative freedom' of non-interference. Absence of interference is a necessary condition for exercising our free will but it is not, by itself, sufficient. Plotinus writes,

Soul becomes free when it moves without hindrance, through Intellectual Principle [Nous], towards The Good: what it does in that spirit is its free act... That principle of Good is the sole object of desire and the source of self-disposal to the rest.<sup>142</sup>

According to Plotinus, full freedom requires a lack of external or internal hindrance but also requires that our acts be towards the Good. If they are not, then our so-called freedom is deficient or incomplete and we, in effect, are not entirely free. However, Plotinus' view goes further. Because he believes that all things naturally seek to approach the good in a way befitting their nature, he also thinks that anything which takes us away from the Good is, in effect, "enforced," "involuntary" and "servitude." Hence, insofar as we move towards the Good, we are fully free.

At this point, an obvious question arises: 'Does freedom not include the ability to do wrong?' Plotinus inclines to a negative answer because, in his view, the ability to make negative choices is not necessarily a virtue.

But when our Soul holds to its Reason-Principle, to the guide, pure and detached and native to itself, only then can we speak of personal operations, of voluntary act. Things so done may truly be described as our doing, for they have no other source; they are the issue of the unmingled Soul.<sup>143</sup>

R.T. Wallis writes,

Freedom for Plotinus consists in tending spontaneously and with full knowledge towards realization of one's true good, and thus contrasts with actions performed under compulsion or under constraint from man's irrational nature.<sup>144</sup>

Pauliina Remes summarizes Plotinus' position by saying,

Freedom is based on knowledge of universal good and intelligible principles that govern the universe, and is thus not primarily personal or subjective but tied strongly with the intelligible order.<sup>145</sup>

This constitutes a significant difference from modern concepts which closely associate freedom with personal, i.e. subjective, choice and action no matter how arbitrary it might seem. On this issue, John Rist writes, "in Plotinus' view true freedom is a direction of the soul to its source in the One."<sup>146</sup> Elsewhere, Rist points out,

Freedom then for Plotinus is not simply equivalent to the power of choice. Rather it is freedom from that necessity of choice which the passions impose. The soul that hesitates between good and evil is not free, nor is such a choice godlike.<sup>147</sup>

R.T. Wallis explains Plotinus' position like this:

Clearly, Plotinus does not accept the idea that freedom necessarily requires the possibility of choice among opposites. He writes, the "ability to produce opposites is inability to hold by the perfect good; that self-making must be definite once for all since it is the right."<sup>148</sup>

He seems to be saying that having the ability to do the bad also means being unable to hold to the good, i.e. being unable to achieve the perfection that is natural to us. Until we can hold to the good so closely that the bad is not even an option for us we are still enslaved, to one degree or another, to our passions. In this quest we are assisted by the fact that the good is natural to us because "[t]he spring of freedom is the activity of the Intellectual-Principle, the highest in our being; the proposals emanating thence are freedom."<sup>149</sup> As humans, the highest aspect of our being is our reflection of the Nous or "Intellectual-Principle" and consequently, our real freedom lies there. It is what we really want even though we may think we want something else. In the words of Lloyd P. Gerson, "We are only in control and therefore free when we identify ourselves as agents of rational desire."<sup>150</sup>

In short, we humans may pursue the pseudo-freedoms of our own desires or the genuine freedom offered by the quest for the One. The former seems genuine but is really restrictive and the latter may feel restrictive but is actually true freedom. This conclusion follows from our human nature which, in Plotinus's view, is an objectively real and with which we can live in harmony, i.e. freedom, or in disharmony i.e. slavery. Even though we choose to delude ourselves that slavery is freedom, it is slavery nonetheless.

The Bahá'í Writings clearly support the belief that humankind has free will. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that



[s]ome things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions; it is evident and clear that these actions are, for the most part, left to the will of man. But there are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes.<sup>151</sup>

Elsewhere, He writes, “But in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.”<sup>152</sup> What these passages make clear is that moral decisions are within human power but a large number of physical necessities are not. Ethical freedom exists, but freedom in other matters may be non-existent, such as the need to sleep or eat, or severely circumscribed. According to the Writings, we also have freedom of thought – which includes the freedom to think mistakenly, as indicated by Shoghi Effendi:

There is, unfortunately, no way that one can force his own good upon a man. The element of free will is there and all we believers—and even the Manifestation of God Himself—can do is to offer the truth to mankind.<sup>153</sup>

Because of free will, belief cannot be compelled even if it is for our own good. Shoghi Effendi also advises an inquirer that “The exercise of our free will to choose to do the right things is much more important [than speculation in astrology],”<sup>154</sup> thereby again drawing attention to free will in matters of morality. In the teaching of the independent investigation of truth the Writings clearly advocate freedom of thought for each individual, a freedom which is predicated on our ability to think and to exercise free choice. On this issue ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes,

When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail—that is to say, when every man according

to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs—  
development and growth are inevitable.<sup>155</sup>

From the foregoing discussion it is plainly evident that the Bahá'í Writings value the importance of free will, free choice and free thought.

### 9.1: The Limits of Liberty

Like Plotinus, the Bahá'í Writings do not embrace without qualification the concept that humans are well served by unlimited freedom or that everything which humans choose to call 'freedom' really is freedom in the truest sense of the word. The fact that we have free will as individuals does not necessarily mean that we should follow our inclinations in any direction or that the exercise of free will can, by itself, justify almost anything. Our freedom in the world—which is predicated on our free will—can easily be misused. As Bahá'u'lláh writes,

Consider the pettiness of men's minds. They ask for that which injureth them, and cast away the thing that profiteth them. They are, indeed, of those that are far astray. We find some men desiring liberty, and priding themselves therein. Such men are in the depths of ignorance.

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal... Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness.<sup>156</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that not everything we call “liberty” is necessarily “true liberty”<sup>157</sup>—a position similar to that adopted by Plotinus. False understanding of liberty may mislead us into forgetting “Noble have I created thee”<sup>158</sup> and thereby lead to harm, or even to “depravity and wickedness” that disgraces our higher nature. Certainly Bahá'u'lláh rejects the notion that liberty for its own sake can justify negative and self-destructive acts. That is why He says,

We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We, verily, are the All-Knowing.

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.<sup>159</sup>

This passage reemphasizes that Bahá'u'lláh denies any purely subjective concepts of freedom: an act is not necessarily free or not free because we personally think it is. Subjectivity alone does not determine what is or is not free. One of the other objective factors that must be taken into consideration are the Manifestation's commandments, which reflect what is best for human nature and development whether we personally like it or not. That is why Bahá'u'lláh says freedom is submission to His commands, “little as ye know it,” meaning that although we may not recognize a condition as being truly free, it may be free despite our subjective disagreement.

Concrete examples help to clarify His concept. For example, if people drive their cars on the basis of subjective freedom, the roads would be a worse carnage than they are. Ultimately, this kind of purely subjective freedom is no freedom at all because everyone would be stalled amidst the wreckage. The freest driving is made possible by everyone's submission to the rules of the road because there are objective laws

of physics that must be obeyed. The same is true in other areas of life. Are people who are compulsive shoplifters or eaters free even though they inflict untold harm on themselves and others? Subjectively, they might claim to make their decisions freely, but are they really? Ultimately, would they not be more free if they submitted to the laws forbidding shoplifting and the medical guidelines providing rules for healthy eating? After all, the 'laws' of physiology are as rigorously objective as the laws of physics as are the facts of our human nature.

To fully understand the second example, we must remember that both Bahá'u'lláh and Plotinus agree that human nature includes higher and lower aspects, and that our real or essential self is associated with our higher nature. Consequently, our "true liberty" is to do whatever strengthens our higher self, and 'false liberty' or unfreedom advances our animal nature. We cannot violate our essential nature and claim to be free in any but the most subjective meaning of the word.

Of course, such a line of argument raises an obvious question: 'What are we free from in the kind of freedom advocated by Bahá'u'lláh?' As with Plotinus, the answer is that we are free from slavery to our passions, to our lower animal nature and to the vagaries of the world. In other words, Bahá'u'lláh's pronouncement is on a convergent course with Plotinus' insofar as both recognize the distinction between true and false liberty and both advocate that submission to divine commandments and to our noble human nature gives us more genuine freedom than the arbitrary exercise of human preferences. It is obvious, of course, that approaching the Good in Plotinus and submitting to Bahá'u'lláh's "commandments" are virtually the same actions. After all, the divine commandments are intended to bring us to the Good.

Both Bahá'u'lláh and Plotinus seem to agree that liberty is not an end-in-itself and its own self-justification but rather is a means to

achieve the goals of developing the intellectual and spiritual nature of humankind, of liberating our higher selves. Modern sensibilities are likely to find this unsatisfactory because we think of subjective freedom of choice as the ultimate freedom. Appearances to the contrary, these two concepts of freedom are not necessarily mutually exclusive if we place them in a hierarchy. At the basic level there is freedom of choice, at which people have to make all kinds of choices regarding good and ill, their emotions, their values, purpose and goals and so on. This is the level of freedom as generally discussed in our society. However, at a higher level, we find what Emile Brehier calls "radical freedom,"<sup>160</sup> the kind of freedom apparent in Plotinus and the Writings, i.e. a freedom from the kind of choices that mark the first level and where individuals are no longer slaves of "passion." Such freedom is greater than its predecessor because the individual "is not a prisoner of any of the forms of reality."<sup>161</sup> This "true liberty" is achieved by following the divine commandments or, in Plotinus' terms, participating in our higher spiritual nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to be thinking of this kind of freedom when He says people must be educated so

that they will avoid and shrink from perpetrating crimes, so that the crime itself will appear to them as the greatest chastisement, the utmost condemnation and torment.<sup>162</sup>

When this level of sensitivity and awareness has been attained, the individual no longer experiences crimes or other human weaknesses as possible choices or temptations, and, thereby, no longer a matter of choice. Such individuals have transcended freedom-as-choice to a higher level where freedom finds its fullest expression in likeness to God by recognizing the Manifestation and by obeying His commands and, thereby, evolving to participating more fully in His attributes.

## 10: Who/What is the Self?

The issue of free will brings us directly to the subject of 'self,' i.e. the individual who acts and experiences subjectivity. We know that we share a universal human nature with other people, but what about our specific 'selves' who make decisions, have feelings, take actions and are particular, i.e. different from others? What about the "historical personality,"<sup>163</sup> the self-aware person whom I identify as 'me'? What is its origin? How is it related to our universal human nature?

To discuss this matter clearly vis-à-vis the Bahá'í Writings, it is first necessary to review what is said about the soul. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the essence of man is the soul"<sup>164</sup> which is to say, the soul is our unique distinguishing feature as human beings; the essence of a thing is precisely what gives it its identity as the kind of thing it is, in this case man. This is confirmed when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "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."<sup>165</sup> Rationality is one of the divine gifts as indicated when Bahá'u'lláh tells us to "Consider the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man."<sup>166</sup> This, in turn, suggests that the essence of man and rationality are strictly correlated, i.e. rationality is an essential attribute. The human soul cannot be human without it.

In Plotinus, the situation is similar. The rational soul is the human essence, i.e. what makes us the kind of being we are.<sup>167</sup> Plotinus states,

The true man is the other, going pure of the body, natively endowed with the virtues which belong to the Intellectual Activity... This Soul constitutes the human being.<sup>168</sup>

In Plotinus' philosophy, the human soul is an emanation or projection of the Nous or Intellect and thus reflects its rational nature; John

Deck calls it an “emissary from the Nous [Intellect].”<sup>169</sup> A similar line of reasoning is at work when Plotinus says “the soul is a rational soul by the very same title by which the All-Soul is called rational.”<sup>170</sup> The All-Soul is that aspect of the third hypostasis, i.e. Soul from which the human soul is emanated; since the hypostasis is rational by nature, so is the human soul. According to Pauliina Remes, “For Plotinus, every person has a single, rational and self-aware soul;<sup>171</sup> Plotinus identifies “the self primarily with the core self, the reasoning capacity.”<sup>172</sup> Like the Writings, he also associates the rational self with the ‘higher self’ that will “illuminate the life of the lower self.”<sup>173</sup> This, by implication makes the rational soul the higher self.<sup>174</sup> In Plotinus’ words, “the We (the authentic human principle) loftily presides[s] over the Animate,<sup>175</sup> i.e. our animal nature.

At this point it is already clear that the Writings and Plotinus agree on two issues: the identification of the soul as humankind’s essence and the essential rationality of the soul. However, these are the universal aspects of the soul that apply to all human beings, but this does not tell us anything about our individual identity or ‘personality.’ How does this arise? What are its foundations and what is its ultimate destiny?

### 10.1: The Descent in Plotinus

For Plotinus, the origin of our personal existence is the inevitable result of the soul’s fall into the imperfect phenomenal world. The following passages from Pauliina Remes summarizes Plotinus’ position:

Our home and origin in the intelligible universe, gazing closely at the One or God, yet becoming a human being with a personality, individual characteristics and body, as well as a place and a task in the universe, unrelentingly ties us to the realm below perfection. Thus belonging to something high and perfect, without any individualizing characteristics, is

contrasted with being an individual with one's particular existence and personal features. Personality and individuality are understood as essential to our nature, yet connected to imperfection.<sup>176</sup>

The "intelligible universe" is, of course, the *Nous* (sometimes translated as Intellect or Spirit) which contains all potentially existing things: "the Intellectual-Principle [*Nous*] is the authentic existences and contains them all – not as in a place but as possessing itself and being one thing with this content."<sup>177</sup> The "intelligible objects" or the "Authentic Beings" are, akin to Plato's Ideas, i.e. models which nature, a lower level of reality, aspires to and imitates in concrete individual examples. This is "intelligible realm" from which the soul descends; our personality is a consequence of this descent. From this, it is clear that personality or individuality begins with the soul's existence as a separate entity.

According to Plotinus, the association of personality with the imperfection of material existence happens because

[t]he evil that has overtaken them has its source in self-will, in the entry into the sphere of process and in the primal differentiation with the desire for self-ownership. They [the potential souls] conceived a pleasure in this freedom and largely indulged their own motion;... they came to lose even the thought of their origin in the Divine.<sup>178</sup>

Once again, we observe the correlation of the descent into the phenomenal world and the desire for "self-ownership" and "self-will," both of which are attributes of personality. The soul becomes so entranced by these desires that it forgets its divine origin. Plotinus' word for this is *tolma* which means audacity with a suggestion of hubris. This casts the descent of the soul in a decidedly negative light. He also believes that the soul enters phenomenal reality to actualize its potentials "by



exhibiting those activities and productions, which remaining merely potential... might as well have never been...<sup>179</sup> While this is a more positive reason for the descent, it is not the explanation emphasized by Plotinus. Finally, Plotinus claims the soul descends partly to “bring order to its next lower [level],”<sup>180</sup> i.e. to act as a form for lower levels of reality. This may be called the soul’s cosmic function. The Bahá'í Writings share these views, though not this attitude towards phenomenal existence.

## 10.2: The Descent in the Writings

How well Plotinus’ doctrine of *tolma* coincides with the Writings depend on how it is understood. If we interpret *tolma* metaphysically, i.e. as an actual choice made by a pre-existing soul, then there is no correspondence. In the Writings, the soul makes no such choice before coming into existence on the “material plane.” However, if it is interpreted psychologically, as a person’s self-assertion towards God, i.e. as an exertion of self-will and hubris, then there is a correspondence. This fall occurs not before birth but can happen at any time in our lives whenever we over-value the blessings of the material world and obey our physical instead of our spiritual impulses.

According to the Writings, self-actualization of potential capacities is the reason for our appearance in the phenomenal world.

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. So when a man travels and passes through different regions and numerous countries with system and method, it is certainly a means of his acquiring perfection... It is the same when the human spirit passes through the conditions

of existence: it will become the possessor of each degree and station. Even in the condition of the body it will surely acquire perfections.<sup>181</sup>

As in the *Enneads*, the soul may use its life in the phenomenal world to actualize potentials, or acquire “perfections.” However, unlike the *Enneads*, the Bahá'í Writings view self-actualization as the major cause for our appearance in the material world, and, thereby, retain a more positive outlook on this event. It is not a result of audacity (*tolma*) or any other defect as with Plotinus.

the journey of the soul is necessary. The pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment. Without training and guidance the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.<sup>182</sup>

It is evident that the Writings and Plotinus have different emphases in their explanations for the appearance of the soul in the phenomenal world. As we have already seen, for Plotinus, the appearance in the world is a fall, the self's desire to exert its own unique powers even though this will separate us from the higher realm of the Nous. Although it is an issue of contention whether or not Plotinus thinks that earthly existence degrades the soul, it is apparent that his attitude is ambivalent, being neither whole-hearted embrace nor complete rejection. The following quote illustrates this:

Under the stress of its powers and of its tendency to bring order to its next lower, it penetrates to this sphere in a voluntary plunge; if it [the soul] turns back quickly all is well; it will have taken no hurt by acquiring knowledge of evil and coming to understand what sin is, by bringing its forces into manifest play by exhibiting those activities and productions,

which remaining merely potential... might as well have never been...<sup>183</sup>

We observe both positive and negative elements here. On one hand, all will be well if the soul “turns back quickly” so it will “take no hurt by acquiring knowledge of evil and... sin.” Clearly existence in the phenomenal world is not an unalloyed gift nor a necessary phase in the actualization of human capacities. On the positive side of the ledger, Plotinus thinks the soul also provides order to the lower levels of reality, and also actualizes its latent abilities in the phenomenal world. However, Plotinus’ belief that matter is the ontological foundation of evil<sup>184</sup> casts a lugubrious shadow over his view of the material world.

The Bahá'í Writings differ from the *Enneads* insofar as they are not tinged with any ambivalence about the value of our bodily existence or about our exposure to sin and evil. In regards to the latter, Bahá'u'lláh teaches us to pray, “O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine to such as are nigh unto Thee.”<sup>185</sup> The exposure to worldly evil is conceived as a positive challenge to stimulate the growth of the soul. Only when the soul becomes too attached to the physical world does material existence become “a prison for heavenly souls.”<sup>186</sup> Similar statements can be found in Plotinus, but, as noted before, they are overshadowed by his belief that matter is characterized by inherent ontological evil, a belief not shared by the Bahá'í Writings which see the ‘evil’ of matter as relative and not absolute.<sup>187</sup>

Plotinus also mentions that the soul descends partly to “bring order to its next lower [level],”<sup>188</sup> an idea that is similar to what the Bahá'í Writings say about humankind’s cosmic role: “For the enlightenment of the world dependeth upon the existence of man. If man did not exist in this world, it would have been like a tree without fruit.”<sup>189</sup> Even more dramatically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

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>190</sup>

Without humankind, the phenomenal world would lack its highest possible development or purpose, i.e. its final cause, and would, thereby, remain incomplete. Of course, in the four-fold causality accepted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá,<sup>191</sup> if the final cause is missing, there can be no formal cause and, therefore, no order. This is virtually identical to Plotinus' idea that without man, the lower world would lack "order" or form since man is the formal cause bringing order. In each case, the human soul has a cosmic function.

According to Plotinus, the soul undertakes a "voluntary plunge." As Gerard O'Daly says, for Plotinus "Human existence is willed, it is a decision;"<sup>192</sup> "historical human existence is willed by a good soul – it is a realization of essence on a lower level."<sup>193</sup> This view, which somewhat lightens the typically gloomy outlook Plotinus has on material existence, has no counterpart in the Bahá'í Writings. According to the Writings we do not choose our existence here, although we do choose how to conduct ourselves once we have arrived. Plotinus believes in this choice to re-enter the material world because he advocates re-incarnation, in which souls have to decide when and how to return. The Writings reject this option.<sup>194</sup>

## 11: Given Attributes Not a Blank Slate

What the Writings and the Enneads have to say about the soul has relevance for a long-standing debate between those who believe humans are a blank slate and those who think that humans arrive with certain characteristics or structures pre-given. In our view, there can be no question that for the Writings and Plotinus, humans are not blank slates but rather pre-determined in some essential ways. It is worth recalling here that both the

Bahá'í Writings and Plotinus agree that it is the soul which “generates” and individuates the body and not vice versa as is so often assumed.<sup>195</sup> In other words, the body cannot be “a part of us in any essential way,”<sup>196</sup> which implies that the personality is original to the soul itself. Furthermore, the soul is the essential human being, not the body: “the authentic man will be as Form to this Matter or as agent to this instrument, and thus, whatever the relationship be, the Soul is the man.”<sup>197</sup> A survey of both the Writings and the *Enneads* makes it clear that both reject the ‘blank slate’ theory of human nature.

In the case of Plotinus, this is evident from passages such as the following:

One Reason-Principle cannot account for distinct and differing individuals: one human being does not suffice as the exemplar for many distinct each from the other not merely in material constituents but by innumerable variations of ideal type: this is no question of various pictures or images reproducing an original Socrates; the beings produced differ so greatly as to demand distinct Reason-Principles.<sup>198</sup>

Every soul has its own reason-principle or forming-principle, i.e. it is given its individuality from the very beginning. (The World Soul or Soul of All Things contains—albeit not in any spatial sense—all possible reason-principles.) No one individual can be the model for all others of its type and account for all the diversity within a type. This implies that, in the last analysis, our individuality is not a product of the physical body or of historical and/or cultural circumstances or choices. Our individuality has ontological foundations and is given to us.

The same is clear when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*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>199</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly rejects the idea that the personality or individuality is caused by the “instrumentality of the body.” As with Plotinus, our existence as persons is not dependent on the body or on our physical condition. Instead, our “personality” or individuality is an inherent aspect of the human soul; it is absolutely correlated with our existence<sup>200</sup> and, in that sense, is ‘given’ to us. Soul, not matter, individuates. Thus we are individual, particular persons from the very start of our journey through the phenomenal world. From our very beginnings, we have a unique, given ‘self’ although it may take a life-time of development to actualize even a portion of its infinite potentials.

This inherent aspect of ourselves is also referred to as the “inmost true self”, as, for example, in the following statement from Bahá'u'lláh:

Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed.<sup>201</sup>

Like the soul and “innate character,” the “inmost true self” is endowed with divine bestowals which suggests that humans are not blank slates but rather come into being with certain divinely given structures and potentials or capacities. These form both our species-essence as human beings and our individual-essence as particular persons.

In addition, these various statements strongly imply that the terms “inmost true self,” “rational soul,” and the “innate character” refer to the divinely given essence of man.

Another feature of humankind's given or pre-determined nature is our location in the ontological scale of being. Plotinus tell us that

Humanity, in reality, is poised midway between gods and beasts and inclines now to the one order, now to the other; some men grow like to the divine, others to the brute and the greater number stand neutral.<sup>202</sup>

One of the innate, essential, human attributes is that we “are revealed as the medial and mediating tensions between conflicting and diverging opposites.”<sup>203</sup> These words could also apply to the following statement by `Abdu'l-Bahá:

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.<sup>204</sup>

In both the Writings and Plotinus our ontological position as the meeting point of “gods and beasts” and “materiality” and “spirituality” determines an essential aspect of our nature as human beings. This nature is given, i.e. it is not decided by personal will or culture, and cannot be eradicated or amended by fiat or legislation; indeed, this ontological position is pre-determined by the One or God as one of the essential attributes of our being. It is the ontological pre-condition for our existence as beings endowed with moral choice. All we can do is choose which of these two aspects of our nature we shall develop.

In the Bahá'í Writings, the ambiguity concerning the soul's ontological position at the border between the material and the spiritual is, as we have seen in a previous section, also reflected in our dual nature.

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature.<sup>205</sup>

We are constituted by two contradictory natures and this gives us a certain ambiguity; Pauliina Remes describes humankind as “amphibious.”<sup>206</sup> Lest we disparage this ambiguous or amphibious state, it should be noted again that this ambiguity is the ontological pre-condition for our freedom of choice and is, thereby, one of the pre-conditions of our existence as humans. In any case, our “higher nature” is what we have inherited from God. This rational soul, our original personality or “inmost true self,” always remains in us and is always available if we turn our lives towards God or the One.

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>207</sup>

The narrative that is constructed by the history of our choices may be called our ‘historical self.’ When the rational soul chooses to turn to God, we may become one of the “angels.”<sup>208</sup> However, when the rational soul chooses to turn towards phenomenal, material reality, we develop an “ego.”<sup>209</sup> and give in to “the natural inclinations of



the lower nature"<sup>210</sup> which "is symbolized as Satan—the evil ego within us."<sup>211</sup> Shoghi Effendi says,

The ego is the animal in us, the heritage of the flesh which is full of selfish desires. By obeying the laws of God, seeking to live the life laid down in our teachings, and prayer and struggle, we can subdue our egos. We call people "saints" who have achieved the highest degree of mastery over their egos.<sup>212</sup>

It appears that the term 'ego' (as used here) describes the rational soul, self or personality when it turns away from God and the Manifestation.<sup>213</sup> Because it is a consequence of our turning away from God, we might say that the 'ego' is a construct of the rational soul which has become too attracted to and dependent on phenomenal reality. In this condition, we confuse our "inmost true self" and our rational soul with the ego, the "idol of self and vain imagination,"<sup>214</sup> a confusion which impedes spiritual progress. Blinded by this "idol" we no longer are aware of our higher nature and our higher potentials.

## 12: The Hierarchical Self

The inherently ambiguous nature of the human soul complicates the matter of personal identity insofar as the relationship between the lower and higher self is concerned. In Plotinus, the lower aspects of the soul are associated with its connection to the animal body and the material world. However, the soul has not completely fallen into physical existence. Plotinus writes,

Even our human Soul has not sunk entire; something of it is continuously in the Intellectual Realm, though if that part, which is in this sphere of sense hold mastery, or rather be mastered here and troubled, it keeps us blind to what the upper phase holds in contemplation.<sup>215</sup>

In other words, even though the soul exists in the phenomenal world, one aspect of the soul remains in the Nous (Intellect or Spirit). The higher self never enters or falls into the phenomenal world where the other, lower aspects of self are to be found. This leaves the self in an ambiguous situation, divided or perhaps even torn between these two aspects and, thereby, inevitably conflicted to one degree or another. The conflict about which facet of self to favor or develop constitutes the narrative of our lives as ethical beings.

Does Plotinus' doctrine of the higher self remaining in the Nous (the intelligible realm) have a counterpart in the Bahá'í Writings? Initially, the answer appears to be negative, but further reflection suggests that there may be a line of reasoning that could at least close the distance between the two viewpoints. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out."<sup>216</sup> This statement leads to a crucial question: if the phenomenal world is a shadow of the Kingdom, do human beings also have their 'heavenly counterpart'? If such is the case – and that remains to be proven – then one could, indeed, claim that there is a higher version of ourselves in the Kingdom, i.e. a 'higher self' that is has not fallen into phenomenality. This higher self could be interpreted as the ego with which we converse in inward consultation:

A man may converse with the ego within him saying: "May I do this? Would it be advisable for me to do this work?" Such as this is conversation with the higher self.<sup>217</sup>

If we interpret the "higher self" as the "higher nature"<sup>218</sup> of the rational soul, there is little agreement with Plotinus' position. In this case, our interpretation might be called psychological because it concerns an aspect of our inner constitution. However, if we read these passages ontologically, one could make a case that a 'heavenly' version of ourselves exists in the Kingdom even though we currently dwell in the phenomenal world; this "higher self" is what we consult

in inner deliberations. This view would be closer to Plotinus' position. In the last analysis, however, the extremely abstract nature of this issue makes it doubtful that any final resolution can be reached even by further study.

There seems little doubt that in the Bahá'í Writings our true self is our "higher nature" or the personalized "rational soul." This is the self that should be in control of our embodied lives. However, in the phenomenal world, the given, personalized "rational soul" operates in the phenomenal world through the instrumentality of the body, i.e. the soul's accidental physical attribute.<sup>219</sup> Of course, our spiritual, higher nature should be in control, allowing the soul's physical nature its due, but no more.

Consequently, the Bahá'í Writings seem to present our identity in the phenomenal world as a two-fold hierarchical structure. The foundation of this structure is the rational soul, or "inmost true self" with its divinely bestowed personality. This foundation is given to us by God. The second level consists of what the "rational soul" chooses to make of itself through its powers such as the mind<sup>220</sup> as well as its other gifts and potencies. This might be called the 'historical self' or acquired self. It is constituted by our decisions to move towards or away from God by the way we live. If we have chosen to turn away from our higher selves and God, we develop an 'ego' in (the negative sense) which keeps us focused on the material world and keeps us veiled from the Kingdom. With such an 'ego' we develop a false consciousness which supports a false identity often based on being under control of our "lower nature." Finally, such a false identity inevitably causes inner dissonance for individuals, an inherent and contradiction between the higher potentials which are always available, and the lower choices that betray these potentials in one way or another. This conflict cannot be resolved without turning towards God. On the other hand, if we choose to turn towards our higher selves and God, our 'historical' self' and our rational soul will be in harmony with

each other to one degree or another. We will be more like polished mirrors and, we might say, we will also be 'genuine' because are one with our highest self. In either case—genuine or false—the 'historical self' is the self we bring into the next world.

As to the soul of man after death, it remains in the degree of purity to which it has evolved during life in the physical body, and after it is freed from the body it remains plunged in the ocean of God's Mercy.<sup>221</sup>

A similar idea can be found in the *Enneads*:

the entire form, man, takes rank by the dominant [part of ourselves which has ruled our lives], and when the Life-Principle leaves the body it is what it is, what it most intensely lived.<sup>222</sup>

In other words, the identity we take into the next life is the one we have created on the "material plane."

With Plotinus, the situation regarding identity is similar but not identical. He holds that human existence has three degrees or levels: first, there is the person as found in the Nous or intelligible realm; second, this higher self illuminates the person who lives by sensation; third is the lowest part of the vegetative functions of growth and reproduction. These three are unified under the form of the highest, i.e. humanity.<sup>223</sup> We take our identity from that aspect of ourselves which we choose to develop: "each person is that by which he acts, though he is all as well."<sup>224</sup> That is to say, even though we are human beings, our acquired identity is shaped by the degree according to which we habitually choose to act. Some people act mainly on the vegetative, i.e. the lowest biological level; others live in the materialist world of sensations and tangible realities; and still others actualize their uniquely human potentials. It is important to remember that

each person contains all of these levels to the degree appropriate to our nature but of these three, the real self, is the “higher soul... [which]... constitutes the man,”<sup>225</sup> i.e. the soul at its highest level which faces the ethical task of freeing itself from entrapment in the material world:

Our task then is to work for our liberation from this sphere...the total man is to be something better than a body ensouled...there is another life, emancipated, whose quality is progression towards the higher realm towards the good and divine...<sup>226</sup>

These words, which harmonize well with the Writings, describe the challenge confronting the real self of “Authentic Man.”<sup>227</sup> The history of meeting these challenges and making ethical decisions<sup>228</sup> constitutes the ‘historical’ self. Here, too, we observe the two-part hierarchy of self that we found in the Bahá'í Writings. At the foundation is the ‘pure’ person as existing in the Nous or intelligible realm, who must then choose and act in the material world, and through choices and actions develop a ‘historical self.’ This ‘historical self’ is the second stage of this hierarchy. Moreover, as with the Writings, this historical self can be in harmony or disharmony with its higher original; it can be an ego or false consciousness, or, to use a Bahá'í metaphor, a polished mirror.

### 13: A Normative Ethical Telos

The Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* share another important attribute: they both hold to

a normative telos: not just any kind of life, choices and actions count as self-constitution. The normative ideal, the inner self understood as the wholly actualized and integrated reason is

supposed to regulate the process... unified by the active and goal-directed self-constitution on the part of the agent. Nor is the rationality in question just any kind of exercise of one's cognitive capacities. It involves understanding the essential structures of the intelligibly ordered cosmos... <sup>229</sup>

The “normative telos” referred to by Remes is a goal or end-state that is appropriate for all humans since, in varying degrees, we share the same basic nature and, therefore, the same ultimate good, i.e. resemblance to the One or God, and rational freedom from domination by the material realm whether it be the external world or their own bodies. Our actions must be in conformity with the nature of the cosmos and our own human nature. Contrary to prevailing attitudes,

[w]hat is sought is not an individual identity with worldly ties and personal experiences but something over and above it, a free self-determination not bound by the restrictions of the phenomenal realm.<sup>230</sup>

Not any action will do, no matter how sincerely motivated it may be. To achieve the desired effects, it is imperative that our actions accommodate themselves to the objective criteria and requirements of cosmic and human nature. In the Bahá'í Writings, this “normative telos” makes itself apparent in the virtues that we are expected to strive for to the best of our ability. No consideration whatever is given to our personal preferences or agreement:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.<sup>231</sup>

In this passage, Bahá'u'lláh informs us that if we wish certain things—“sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting”—we are

required to achieve certain virtues. Nothing in the content nor in the tone of this categorical statement suggests that our preferences are even slightly relevant. Because we have a certain nature as human beings, certain virtues are objectively necessary for us to achieve our goals; moreover, because these virtues are objectively necessary, there is an imperative to achieve them.

A similar outlook prevails in Plotinus. The operation of a “normative telos” is evident even in the *First Ennead*, which informs us that certain virtues are necessary in order to actualize our highest human aspects. There is no choice about what these virtues are; they are made necessary by the facts of our human nature. In particular, Plotinus emphasizes *sophrosyne*, i.e. self-control and moderation acquired through self-knowledge. If we wish to be fully human, then we must know our own nature as human beings and as individuals. This knowledge makes the actualization of these virtues possible. (Bahá'u'lláh expresses a similar idea when He says that “man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement.”<sup>232</sup>) For Plotinus, to be virtuous as human beings and escape the evils of embodied existence we must strive to resemble the One.<sup>233</sup>

it would be good, it [the soul] would be possessed of virtue if it threw off the body's moods and devoted itself to its own Act—the state of Intellection and Wisdom—never allowed the passions of the body to affect it—the virtue of Sophrosyny [moderation guided by self-knowledge]—knew no fear at the parting from the body—the virtue of Fortitude—in which state is Righteousness.<sup>234</sup>

We observe that Plotinus prescribes certain actions in order to acquire certain virtues; both of these are normative for all human beings simply because we share a universal human nature. Our actions are not

virtuous because they are sincere or express us but because they are appropriate to the kind of beings we are.

## 14: Sculpting the Self

Plotinus uses the analogy of the sculptor to explain how we must proceed to acquire the virtues we seek in order to be at our best:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there... never cease chiseling your statue until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendour of virtue...<sup>235</sup>

In other words, we must consciously undertake to reform ourselves in such a way as to let our highest potentials appear. This, of course, requires us to know not just ourselves and our human nature, but also what beauty is. That beauty becomes apparent when “[we] find yourself wholly true to [our] essential nature,”<sup>236</sup> i.e. when our acquired historical self harmonizes with our divinely given higher self. Moreover, Plotinus believes that our philosophical knowledge and insight depend on the kind of lives we live and the kind of people we are: “first, let each become godlike and each beautiful who cares to see God and Beauty.”<sup>237</sup> Our understanding of God or the One and the universe, our cognition of reality, depends on the virtues we have acquired.

The Bahá'í Writings have much the same emphasis in associating personal virtue and cognitive knowledge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá summarizes the remarks of Galen, a non-Christian philosopher and medical scientist:

In our time there is a certain people called Christians, who, though neither philosophers nor scholastically trained, are



superior to all others as regards their morality. They are perfect in morals. Each one of them is like a great philosopher in morals, ethics and turning toward the Kingdom of God.<sup>238</sup>

The Christians' cognitive knowledge of ethics depends on the moral condition they have achieved. To appreciate the full significance of this, we must recall that 'ethics' in this context means the objective knowledge of what actions are objectively appropriate to human nature and not merely rationalized preferences, acting in 'good faith' or sincere self-expression. We also see this more objective outlook when Bahá'u'lláh says, "man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty."<sup>239</sup> This self-knowledge is a pre-condition for following the "straight path [which] is the one which guideth man to the dayspring of perception and to the dawning-place of true understanding."<sup>240</sup> This emphasis on the connection between attaining personal virtue and cognitive philosophical knowledge is a typical feature of classical Greco-Roman philosophy with its recognition of philosophy as a way of life and not just a matter of theoretical knowledge.<sup>241</sup>

Furthermore, the Bahá'í Writings, albeit in different language, have a concept parallel to Plotinus' image of the sculptor of self. Just as the sculptor chisels away and smoothes over unacceptable aspects of his art work, Bahá'ís are told to sacrifice, i.e. give up those aspects of self that impede making moral progress. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Until a being setteth his foot in the plane of sacrifice, he is bereft of every favour and grace; and this plane of sacrifice is the realm of dying to the self, that the radiance of the living God may then shine forth. The martyr's field is the place of detachment from self, that the anthems of eternity may be upraised. Do all ye can to become wholly weary of self...<sup>242</sup>

It is through sacrifice that we ‘carve’ or ‘sculpt’ ourselves, removing undesirable attributes as a sculptor removes unwanted marble from a statue. Such removal is the “dying to self.” We also have to practice “detachment from self” by looking and judging ourselves objectively, not by our personal preferences but by the criteria provided by the divinely revealed Writings. Another statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes these points:

With reference to what is meant by an individual becoming entirely forgetful of self: the intent is that he should rise up and sacrifice himself in the true sense, that is, he should obliterate the promptings of the human condition, and rid himself of such characteristics as are worthy of blame and constitute the gloomy darkness of this life on earth—not that he should allow his physical health to deteriorate and his body to become infirm.<sup>243</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s injunction tells us to “obliterate” the unwanted aspects of ourselves, just as Plotinus’ sculptor chisels away unwanted marble. (Of course, neither the Writings nor Plotinus approve of asceticism, as we have already discussed above.) The underlying idea in both cases is the same: we must exercise our free will and our power to shape ourselves according to a standard that appropriately adapts us to the ontological structure of reality and to the eternal spiritual realm instead of merely to our temporary residence in material reality.

Pauliina Remes’ statement about the *Enneads* is equally true of the Bahá’í Writings:

In contrast to modern accounts of selfhood as a process or a story in time, for Plotinus the end is – or should be – fixed. Only a process leading towards what is good and beautiful counts as true self-constitution. The normative ideal acts also as a regulative principle. Embodied selfhood is always a

process towards ideal unity, rationality and virtue, a lifelong exercise in becoming what we are... What is sought is not an individual identity with worldly ties and personal characteristics but something over and above it.<sup>244</sup>

In other words, the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* share a common understanding of what constitutes true or genuine selfhood. We should not give unqualified assent to the notion that 'genuine' selfhood is merely any life-story whatever; every person inevitably has a life-story but every life-story does not constitute a genuine, true self according to the criteria laid down by the Writings or the *Enneads*.<sup>245</sup> Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to know ourselves clearly indicates that self-deception about ourselves is possible,<sup>246</sup> as do the countless passages about being led "astray." For the Writings and the *Enneads* the goal is to seek an identity that does not exclude but transcends material and worldly considerations. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "become yourselves the saints of the Most High!"<sup>247</sup> In this sense, both the Writings and the *Enneads* share what may be called the 'perennialist' concept of self, i.e. the concept that genuine selfhood requires trying to meet certain ethical and spiritual standards in order to prepare us for a better lives in the future. These standards are almost universal and re-appear in all of the world's major religions. The re-appearance of these generally similar concepts of self in various forms are, of course, one of the implications of the essential unity of religions.

## 15: Union with God

The ultimate human goal according to the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* is nearness to or unity with God, but what this actually means must be carefully explored in each case. Both agree that the closer we are to God or the One, the more truly we are ourselves, the more authentic we become; in other words, we become more like our

essential, spiritual selves and achieve our higher destiny. The Bahá'í Writings tell us that

The greatest attainment in the world of humanity is nearness to God. Every lasting glory, honor, grace and beauty which comes to man comes through nearness to God. Every lasting glory, honor, grace and beauty which comes to man comes through nearness to God. All the Prophets and apostles longed and prayed for nearness to the Creator.<sup>248</sup>

The matter could not be stated more clearly; this “attainment” has no equal in the phenomenal world, meaning that no amount of knowledge, technological progress, creative cultural sophistication or political wisdom can compensate for its lack. This goal is irreplaceable. However, in the Bahá'í Writings, “nearness to God” does not imply even the slightest suggestion that human beings can in any way or from any perspective become ontologically one with God.<sup>249</sup>

there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute.<sup>250</sup>

The ontological difference between an absolutely independent God and an absolutely dependent human is unalterable. Proclus seems to suggest the same idea when he writes,

Prop. 9. All that is self-sufficient either in its existence or in its activity is superior to that which is not self-sufficient but dependent upon another existence which is the cause of its completeness.<sup>251</sup>

Things cannot be superior or even equal to that on which they depend as long as the dependency relationship lasts. In the case of the One,

or God, this is bound to be eternal. It is, therefore, inconceivable that humans and God could become ontologically one and any such assertions must be rejected as mistaken understandings. To assume such a union has taken place, is, in effect, to elevate ourselves to the rank of the Manifestations.<sup>252</sup> A merger of self and God may be experienced psychologically, but, as the foregoing passage shows, this experience must not be interpreted ontologically. Consequently, for Bahá'ís, “nearness to God” means, for example, something like a merger of our individual wills into the will of the Manifestation, or a psychological loss of self-consciousness in a vision of the Divine splendour, or our ecstasy of spiritual insight and knowledge of the mysteries of creation,<sup>253</sup> or our elation at escaping from the prison of the ego. (This is not, of course, intended as a complete list of possibilities.) In each of these examples, there is a loss of self/ego, i.e. a psychological state which is not to be confused with an actual, i.e. ontological, union with God. On this matter, psychology—the experience of union with the Divine—does not reflect itself in ontology.

The mediator between God and humankind is the Manifestation Whose “double station”<sup>254</sup> enables Him to represent God as “One Whose voice is the voice of God Himself” as well as the human station. Given the impossibility of ontological union with God, the only way to achieve “nearness to God” is through our relationship to the Manifestation:

In all the Divine Books the promise of the Divine Presence hath been explicitly recorded. By this Presence is meant the Presence of Him Who is the Dayspring of the signs, and the Dawning-Place of the clear tokens, and the Manifestation of the Excellent Names, and the Source of the attributes, of the true God, exalted by His glory. God in His Essence and in His own Self hath ever been unseen, inaccessible, and unknowable. By Presence, therefore, is meant the Presence of the One Who is His Vicegerent amongst me.<sup>255</sup>

The Báb states,

[t]here is no paradise more wondrous for any soul than to be exposed to God's Manifestation in His Day, to hear His verses and believe in them, to attain His presence, which is naught but the presence of God, to sail upon the sea of the heavenly Kingdom of His good-pleasure, and to partake of the choice fruits of the paradise of His divine Oneness.<sup>256</sup>

These passages leave no doubt that attaining the presence of the Manifestation is what the Writings mean by attaining the presence of or "nearness to God." This concept obviously affects the Bahá'í understanding or interpretation of concepts such as 'union' with God, 'mystical' experiences of God as well as cataphatic as well as apophatic theology. For example, if attaining the "Divine Presence" means attaining the presence of the Manifestation, what is involved in the latter, especially for those Who never knew Bahá'u'lláh personally? In what sense and to what extent is a Bahá'í cataphatic theology possible since the Manifestation can be known, at least to some extent? Or, conversely, must Bahá'í theology necessarily be apophatic? These and other questions await further exploration.

In Plotinus, the issue of "nearness to God" is less clear than in the Bahá'í Writings. Whether or not the human soul merges with the One ontologically or only psychologically by losing consciousness of itself is not easily settled. For example, it is possible to argue that the following passages show that there is complete ontological union.

In this seeing [of the One], we neither hold and object nor trace distinction; there is no two. The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it...<sup>257</sup>

Even more dramatically, Plotinus writes,

she [the soul] has seen that presence [of the One] suddenly manifesting within her, for there is nothing between; there is no longer a duality but a two in one; for, so long as the presence holds, all distinction fades; it is the lover and the beloved here... the soul has now no further awareness of being in a body and will give herself no foreign name, not man, not living being not being... <sup>258</sup>

When the soul becomes united with the One, it does not lose consciousness of being a separate identity but rather it loses its separate existence and thus become indistinguishable from the One. It has, so to speak, been ontologically 'up-graded' from a dependent and contingent to an independent and non-contingent. This situation raises questions about how this identity can be regained after the moment of union is over. If the self is lost ontologically, how can it be regained without continuing to exist in some way? Questions of this kind prompt scholars such as J.M. Rist reject the notion of the soul's 'obliteration' in the One.

while the soul as a spiritual substance can be enveloped by the One, enraptured, surrendered, wholly characterized so as to become infinite and not finite, it is neither obliterated nor revealed as the One itself... <sup>259</sup>

In some way, the distinct soul continues to exist even while new hitherto unimaginable potentials become actualized in this state of union; however, the soul does not disappear or become the One. This position is strengthened by its logical consistency with Plotinus' characterization of the One. For example, Plotinus states that "the Supreme as containing no otherness is ever present with us,"<sup>260</sup> meaning that even though the One is always with us, it does not, thereby,

contain any “otherness,” i.e. other substances or individuals. “We are ever before the Supreme”<sup>261</sup> says Plotinus; we can contemplate it and lose ourselves in the contemplation but we can never be it. If we could, the One would contain ‘otherness.’ Pauliina Remes takes a similar position.

The problem with the idea that the human soul could *unite* with the One is the fact that the One is supposed to be complete and self-sufficient. If it were possible to ‘add’ something to it, its completeness and uniqueness might be compromised... The One remains beyond substance and human soul.<sup>262</sup>

In other words, the concept that the union of self and the One is ontological contradicts the essential, self-sufficient nature of the One as well as its being beyond the category of “substance.” Indeed, if the One is infinite in its self-sufficiency, how can anything be added to that which is infinite? Remes also claims that “[t]here is no danger of getting lost in the One”<sup>263</sup> because the formless and limitless nature of the One is inherently incompatible with the nature of the rational soul which “grasps things through limits and definitions—through rational or intellectual activity.”<sup>264</sup> If the soul loses its inherent, essential nature, it would no longer exist, and that, once again, raises extremely difficult questions about how the limited rational soul could return to existence after the end of its union with the One. Plotinus himself recognizes this difficulty:

yet, there comes the moment of descent... and after that sojourn in the divine, I ask myself how it happens that I can now be descending, and how the Soul ever enter into my body...<sup>265</sup>

There are no obvious answers to the many questions surrounding the question of union with the One. For example, is the body the ‘anchor’ during the time of union? How can the individual soul or higher self



re-constitute itself after it has lost its distinguishing essential and personal attributes in the One? Re-constituting oneself after the self has been ontologically eliminated seems contradictory since it requires one to exist when one does not! Or is there a remnant of self? But if the latter is the case, the union is not fully ontological but at least partly psychological since a remnant remains even though it may not be conscious of itself as different from the One.

While this difficult issue in Neoplatonic studies is one for specialists to solve, if, indeed, that is possible, we can say that the Bahá'í Writings are only compatible with the psychological interpretation of the union with the One. From the Bahá'í perspective, any suggestion that the created can attain the ontological status of the Creator is inadmissible because the absolutely dependent can never become absolutely independent. Such an assertion would be equivalent to claiming the same ontological status as God:

*Beware, beware, lest thou be led to join partners with the Lord, thy God. He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal, eternal in the past, eternal in the future, detached from all things, ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting.*<sup>266</sup>

In short, the Bahá'í Writings do not allow us to change our ontological status. The claim that we can unite with God ontologically violates the principle that God is "one and alone" since such a claim makes it possible for us to 'end' God's aloneness and His 'one-ness.' It also means that God is no longer "detached from all things" and "unchangeable" since the mergence with the human soul suggests that something has been 'added' to the Divine. This, in turn, undermines the concept of God as "self-subsisting" since the very possibility of 'adding' anything to God means that God was in some way 'deficient' before the addition was made, and, therefore, dependent on

the addition to be complete. A similar point can be made for “ever-abiding.” If it is possible to ‘add’ anything to God, He cannot be “ever-abiding;” nor can He be “eternal” in the past and future because there would a ‘before’ and ‘after’ the union. Finally, if a soul, i.e. a dependent creation can raise its ontological status to ‘independent’ from ‘dependent,’ then obviously God is not “without peer or equal.”

## 16: Sympathy

One of the key principles of Plotinian thought is that of ‘sympathy,’ i.e. “the view that since the world is a living organism, whatever happens in one part of it must produce a sympathetic reaction in ever other part.”<sup>267</sup> In other words, creation is a unity made up of inter-active parts none of which exist or can exist in isolation. The Stoics called this view “cosmic sympathy;”<sup>268</sup> it was a point of agreement among all ancient philosophies except the materialists and atheists. According to Plotinus, every created thing

while executing its own function, works in with every other member of the All from which its distinct task has by no means cut it off; each performs its act, each receives something from the others, each one at its own moment bringing its touch of sweet or bitter.<sup>269</sup>

In short, directly or indirectly, everything influences everything else in some way and thereby helps make the world what it is. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá teaches the same idea:

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. It is confirmed through

evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association.<sup>270</sup>

The concept of a “chain” reminds us of the ancient concept of the “great chain of being”<sup>271</sup> which holds all elements of creation together in a coherent order based on ontological levels. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement, reciprocal interactions are the “causes of existence” which means that nothing can exist or come into existence in isolation. Such interactions are also necessary for “development and growth,” suggesting thereby that self-actualization of all latent potentials requires the presence of a community of beings and is not something that can be done alone – or for oneself alone. In one way or another, at least some actions must be adapted to the community context in which things find themselves.

However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not think that the interactive process in the phenomenal, material world is self-directed but rather requires guidance:

a universal power inevitably existeth, which encompasseth all, directing and regulating all the parts of this infinite creation; and were it not for this Director, this Co-ordinator, the universe would be flawed and deficient. It would be even as a madman... every separate part of it performing its own task with complete reliability... Thus it is clear that a Universal Power existeth, directing and regulating this infinite universe. Every rational mind can grasp this fact.<sup>272</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that the powers of sympathy and influence in the phenomenal, material world do not function randomly or capriciously; their actions are necessary but are not sufficient to explain the order we observe. To provide a complete, adequate explanation a “Universal Power” is needed which cannot only provide cosmic order

by guiding the interactive processes through law, but can also help explain the origin of physical laws, and the origin of the capacity to influence and be influenced. Obviously, such a power must transcend the phenomenal world.

Plotinus agrees. In the *Enneads*, he compares things of the universe to members of a “dance-play”<sup>273</sup> in which each dancer plays a part in order that is “the coordinating All.”<sup>274</sup>

The Circuit does not go by chance but under the Reason-Principle of the living whole; therefore, there must be a harmony between cause and caused; there must be some order ranging things to each other's purpose or in due relations to each other.<sup>275</sup>

Change and motion, the interactive process of things, (“the Circuit”) creates a rational order through influence or sympathy, i.e. the “harmony between cause and caused.” Without that harmonized sympathy or influence, the cosmic process would be random and capricious and the Universe could not be a “living whole” let alone a rational order.

## 17. Conclusion

In the two parts this paper, we have focussed on major areas of similarity between the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* in regards to ontology, epistemology, ethics and philosophical anthropology. Naturally, this study is not complete, but it does provide an initial foray into this hitherto largely unexplored field of studies. From this investigation we are able to draw three conclusions.

First, the similarities between the Writings and the *Enneads* are numerous and far-reaching on the foremost issues. In this sense, the philosophy embedded in the Writings and the philosophy explicated

by the *Enneads* are 'sister-philosophies,' i.e. they bear a close family resemblance to one another.

Second, these foundational similarities open new worlds to explore in regards to the philosophy embedded in the Writings and classical Neoplatonic and Greco-Roman philosophy, a field that is currently subject to dramatically increased interest. The relevance is not limited to specific teachings but also includes such issues as the nature of philosophy and how philosophy should be pursued.

Third, the similarities between the Writings and the *Enneads* form a solid foundation for in-depth philosophical dialogue with three major religious traditions whose philosophical expression over the centuries has been heavily influenced by Neoplatonism: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Such dialogue is important because it concerns the intellectual basis on which their teachings and attitudes are built.

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NOTES

- 1 Lights of 'Irfán volume 11 (2010), pp. 149–202.
- 2 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 19.
- 3 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 196.
- 4 Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*, #201.
- 5 Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 432.
- 6 Shoghi Effendi, *The Lights of Divine Guidance Vol. 1*, p. 55.
- 7 Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445; emphasis added.
- 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- 9 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 91.
- 10 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- 11 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
- 12 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, p. 52.
- 13 This is why I believe the Writings advocate a moderate rationalism, as philosophically opposed to an extreme rationalism/positivism for which only rational knowledge is true knowledge, or irrationalism in which there is ultimately no real knowledge at all but only a plethora of competing relative opinions.
- 14 Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, p. 1.
- 15 Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus*, p.
- 16 R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p. 163.
- 17 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Question*, p. 283.
- 18 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- 19 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 219.
- 20 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- 21 Eugene F. Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One" in *The Structure of Being: A Neoplatonic Approach*, ed. by R. Baines Harris, p. 41.
- 22 Eugene F. Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," p. 41.
- 23 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- 24 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- 25 The significance of this use of "Being" will be discussed below.



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- 26 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XIX, p. 46–47; emphasis added.
- 27 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 146–147; emphasis added.
- 28 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 13.
- 29 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XIV, p. 35.
- 30 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 66; emphasis added.
- 31 Enneads, V, 5, 6.
- 32 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XIX, p. 47.
- 33 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, X, p. 13.
- 34 J M Rist, Plotinus: The Road to Reality, p. 78.
- 35 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, II, p. 5.
- 36 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LI, p. 104; emphasis added.
- 37 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XII, p. 24.
- 38 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXIX, p. 71.
- 39 Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, From the Persian, #11.
- 40 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 41.
- 41 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 13.
- 42 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 5.
- 43 Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in The Structure of Being, p. 41.
- 44 Enneads, VI, 5, 1 in Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in The Structure of Being, p. 41.
- 45 `Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 286.
- 46 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 295.
- 47 Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 102; emphasis added.
- 48 Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.
- 49 Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.
- 50 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XCIII, p. 185.
- 51 Proclus, The Elements of Theology, Prop. 18; see also Prop. 27.
- 52 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, CXXXVI, p. 295; emphasis added.
- 53 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 110; emphasis added.
- 54 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 66.

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- 55 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 66.
- 56 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 19; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 56.
- 57 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXLVIII, p. 237.
- 58 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, L, p. 103; *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 36; *The Hidden Words*, (Persian) #19.
- 59 Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 41.
- 60 Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 45.
- 61 *Enneads*, VI, 8, 14 in Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 45.
- 62 *Enneads*, VI, 8.
- 63 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 180.
- 64 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXI, p. 50; *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXVIII, p. 175.
- 65 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CIII, p. 209.
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- 67 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIV, p. 35.
- 68 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- 69 Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 41.
- 70 Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 41.
- 71 *Enneads*, VI, 8, 20.
- 72 *Enneads*, VI, 8, 20 in Bales, "Plotinus' Theory of the One," in *The Structure of Being*, p. 47.
- 73 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, X, p. 13; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 192.
- 74 *The Writings accept the four-fold analysis of causality; see Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- 75 Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 248.
- 76 *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, XC, p. 178.
- 77 *Enneads*, VI, 9, 11.
- 78 Baha'u'llah, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 234.
- 79 *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, XXII, p. 53.

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- 80 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 66–67; emphasis added.
- 81 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, LV, p. 109.
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- 83 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXII, p. 53–54.
- 84 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 281.
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- 87 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 84.
- 88 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 239.
- 89 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 84.
- 90 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 239–240.
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- 93 `Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 200.
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- 95 Enneads, IV, 3, 20.
- 96 Enneads, IV, 3, 20.
- 97 Enneads, IV, 3, 22.
- 98 Enneads, IV, 3, 22; emphasis added.
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- 102 Enneads IV, 7, “The Immortality of the Soul.”
- 103 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 8.
- 104 Enneads, IV, 7, 8.5.
- 105 Enneads, IV, 7, 9.
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- 107 Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism*, p. 101.
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- 110 Eyjolfur Kjalar Enilsson, *Plotinus on Intellect*, p. 2
- 111 Proclus, *The Elements of Theology*, Prop. 172.
- 112 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XC, p. 177; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 270.
- 113 Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, Prop. 103; see also Prop. 195.
- 114 Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self*, p. 25.
- 115 *Enneads*, III, 4, 3; emphasis added.
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- 117 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 236.
- 118 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.
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- 121 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 101.
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- 124 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.
- 125 *Enneads*, IV, 8, 4; see also III, 4, 2.
- 126 *Enneads*, II, 3, 9.
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- 131 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235; emphasis added.
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- 133 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.
- 134 *Enneads*, II, 3, 9.
- 135 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.
- 136 *Enneads*, I, 4, 16.
- 137 Shoghi Effendi, *The Lights of Divine Guidance*, Vol. 2, p. 69.

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- 138 Enneads, VI, 8, 1.  
139 Enneads, VI, 8, 4.  
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142 Enneads, VI, 8, 7; emphasis added.  
143 Enneads, III, 1, 9.  
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145 Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus On Self*, p. 183.  
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147 J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, p. 137.  
148 Enneads, VI, 8, 10.  
149 Enneads, VI, 8, 3.  
150 Lloyd Per Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 162.  
151 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248  
152 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 248; see also p. 250.  
153 Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 447.  
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155 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197.  
156 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 335.  
157 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336.  
158 Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words (Arabic)*, #22.  
159 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336.  
160 Emile Brehier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, p. 186.  
161 Emile Brehier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, p. 186.  
162 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 268–269; see also *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 136.  
163 Gerard J.P. O'Daly, *Plotinus Philosophy of the Self*, p. 27.  
164 `Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 128.  
165 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.  
166 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXIII, p. 164.

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- 168 Enneads, I, 1, 10; see also IV, 7, 1.
- 169 John Deck, Nature, Contemplation and the One, p. 50.
- 170 Enneads, IV, 3, 3.
- 171 Pauliina Remes, Plotinus on Self, p. 11.
- 172 Pauliina Remes, Plotinus on Self, p. 207.
- 173 Pauliina Remes, Plotinus on Self, p. 56.
- 174 John Deck, Nature, Contemplation and the One, p. 66.
- 175 Enneads, I, 1, 7; emphasis added.
- 176 Pauliina Remes, Neoplatonism, p. 113.
- 177 Enneads, V, 9, 6; emphasis added.
- 178 Enneads V, 1, 1.
- 179 Enneads, IV, 8, 5; emphasis added.
- 180 Enneads, IV, 8, 5.
- 181 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 200; emphasis added; see also The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 295.
- 182 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 296.
- 183 Enneads, IV, 8, 5; emphasis added.
- 184 See Ian Kluge, "Neoplatonism and the Baha'i Writings," Part 1, Lights of Irfan Vol. 10, 2010.
- 185 Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, CXXXIII, p. 220.
- 186 Abdu'l-Baha, Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha v1, p. 109.
- 187 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 263.
- 188 Enneads, IV, 8, 5.
- 189 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 120; see also Some Answered Questions, p. 201.
- 190 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 201.
- 191 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 280.
- 192 Gerard J.P. O'Daly, Plotinus' Philosophy of the Self, p. 38.
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- 194 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, Chapter 81, p. 282.
- 195 Enneads, IV, 3, 9.

- 196 Gerard J.P. O'Daly, *Plotinus' Philosophy of Self*, p. 29.
- 197 *Enneads*, IV, 7, 1.
- 198 *Enneads*, V, 7, 1.
- 199 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240; emphasis added.
- 200 This cannot help but have obvious and far-reaching effects on the way we think about such topics as abortion or human genetic research.
- 201 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 67; emphasis added.
- 202 *Enneads*, III, 2, 8.
- 203 Gerard J.P. O'Daly, *Plotinus' Philosophy of Self*, p. 31.
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- 205 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.
- 206 Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism*, p. 106.
- 207 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 240.
- 208 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, v 1, p. 145.
- 209 This use of the word 'ego' should not be confused with other usages such as the "intelligent ego," i.e. "your spirit" with which we consult during reflection. See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 242.
- 210 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 287.
- 211 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 287.
- 212 Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* p. 453.
- 213 See Ian Kluge, "Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings Part 1" for "The Principles of 'Turning Towards God'" in *Lights of Irfan*, Vol. 11 for a detailed explication.
- 214 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXV, p. 291.
- 215 *Enneads*, IV, 8, 8.
- 216 *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 178; see also *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- 217 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 179; emphasis added.
- 218 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.
- 219 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.
- 220 `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 209.
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- 222 Enneads, III, 4, 2.  
223 Enneads, III, 4, 2.  
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225 Gerard J.P. O'Daly, Plotinus' Philosophy of the Self, p. 40.  
226 Enneads, II, 3, 9.  
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228 Enneads, VI, 7, 6.  
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230 Pauliina Remes, Plotinus on Self, p. 210–212,  
231 Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words (Arabic), p. 3.  
232 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 35.  
233 Enneads, I, 2, 1.  
234 Enneads, I, 2, 3.  
235 Enneads, I, 6, 9.  
236 Enneads, I, 6, 9.  
237 Enneads I, 6, 9.  
238 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 331.  
239 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 35  
240 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 35.  
241 Pierre Hadot, What is Ancient Philosophy?; see also Pierre Hadot,  
Philosophy as a Way of Life.  
242 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 76; emphasis added.  
243 Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 180; emphasis added.  
244 Pauliina Remes, Plotinus on Self, p. 211.  
245 This is not to say that individuals have the insight or right to make  
these judgments about others.  
246 Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 35.  
247 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks 61.  
248 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 147; emphasis added.  
249 See Ian Kluge, "Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings," in Lights of Irfan,  
Vol. 9, 2008, for a detailed exploration of this topic.  
250 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XXVII, p. 66.



## Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings: Part 2

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- 252 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXII, p. 54.
- 253 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 57.
- 254 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- 255 Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 118; emphasis added.
- 256 *The Báb*, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 77.
- 257 *Enneads*, VI, 9, 10.
- 258 *Enneads*, VI, 7, 34.
- 259 J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality*, p. 227.
- 260 *Enneads*, VI, 9, 8.
- 261 *Enneads*, VI, 9, 8.
- 262 Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self*, p. 249.
- 263 Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self*, p. 253.
- 264 Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self*, p. 253.
- 265 *Enneads* IV, 8, 1.
- 266 *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCIV, p. 192.; emphasis added.
- 267 R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p. 70.
- 268 This concept is often associated with Stoic philosopher Posidonius (135 BCE to 51 BCE).
- 269 *Enneads*, II, 3, 7.
- 270 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178–179.
- 271 Most famously explicated on A.O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (1936).
- 272 *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 48–49
- 273 *Enneads*, IV, 4, 33.
- 274 *Enneads*, IV, 4, 33.
- 275 *Enneads*, IV, 4, 33.