

**The Bahá'í Writings,  
Philosophy  
& the Environment**

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“The ancestor of every action is a thought.”  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

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“All that a man achieves and all that he fails to achieve is the direct result of his own thoughts.”  
James Allen

## Preface: A Restatement of the Obvious

Because the obvious is easy to overlook, it bears repeating that if we want to change the world we must change the people in it, and to change the people in the world we must change our inner environment. After all, the way we think and feel ultimately determines how we act in the world, in the social and in the natural environment. We cannot improve our relationship to the natural world if we do not improve our inner, psycho-spiritual environment. Bad thinking cannot lead to good action. Therefore, whatever enhances our inner psycho-spiritual environment, whatever develops our thinking and reflective skills and expands our empathetic capacities is an invaluable resource that we cannot afford to squander.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that philosophy is one of the most under-utilized resources in the quest for an improved psycho-spiritual environment and an improved relationship to the natural world. Unfortunately, I think this is also the case within the Baha'i community where philosophy is often associated with pursuits "that begin[] and end[] in words."<sup>1</sup> However, as Shoghi Effendi's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements make clear, if properly pursued, philosophy is "a sound branch of learning"<sup>2</sup> which inculcates habits of careful reflection that facilitate teaching, explicating and defending the Faith

My observations on philosophy's ability to improve our inner intellectual environment are based on three decades of teaching high school English and Comparative Civilizations by the method of philosophic inquiry. Socratic dialogue was part of the method, but so was a program I developed called "The Great Questions," a survey of the most basic philosophical questions individuals and cultures all to answer in one way or another and to one extent or another. The students' responses not only led me to the conclusion that all but a few young people are 'natural born philosophers' eager to discuss the questions that face all thoughtful human beings, but also demonstrated that philosophy has the power to draw out the latent gems of profundity hidden in these 'mines.'<sup>3</sup> In the appropriate 'consultative' atmosphere, where the quest for truth, not the quest for being right was paramount, the vast majority were enthusiastic participants.

The Great Questions program was inspired by the Bahá'í teaching that the human soul is inherently rational:

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names—the human spirit and the rational soul--designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Baha'i Community*, p. 445.

<sup>2</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Baha'i Community*, p. 445.

<sup>3</sup> *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

Because the human soul is a “rational soul” it seeks rational answers. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason,”<sup>5</sup> i.e. they want rational answers. According to him, even faith cannot flourish without reason: “If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.”<sup>6</sup> In this regard, one of philosophy’s strengths is its special cultivation of correct reasoning and the laws of reason; by teaching us to think analytically and to practice critique and above all, self-critique of ideas philosophy helps us discover the truth about reality—and this, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is its primary task: “Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man,”<sup>7</sup>

It must be emphasised at this point that the quest for rational answers does not exclude the heart since they are in mutual, dialectical inter-action with each influencing the other. That is why the two are so frequently mentioned together in the Writings. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá links them when he says, in regards to spiritual meetings,

Each of the meetings ye have organized, wherein ye *feel heavenly emotions and comprehend realities and significances*, is like unto the firmament, and those souls are as resplendent stars shining with the light of guidance.<sup>8</sup>

Reason and heart/feeling are distinct but inter-active since both feeling and thought are responses to our inner and outer environment. Just as faith must be harmonized with reason,<sup>9</sup> our hearts and minds must also be harmonized. Thus, the ‘Great Questions’ program touches more than just the intellect of students because the questions raised are answered from various viewpoints which has the effect of expanding students’ empathy and understanding.

### **Part 1: The Bahá’í Writings and Philosophy**

If we must make changes in our “inward life,” we inevitably raise the question ‘How can we do so?’ The most obvious answer is education—but that only raises the question, ‘What kind of education?’ In the words, of Shoghi Effendi, how can we bring about “a change of heart, a *reframing of all our conceptions* and a new orientation of our activities”<sup>10</sup>? Because it focuses on the process of careful reflection, philosophy can contribute a great deal to improving our inner environment and, by extension, our action in the world. Thoughtful people will act thoughtfully and that is precisely what we need in regards to the natural environment.

Mentioning philosophy inevitably requires a clarification of what the Bahá’í Writings say about it. Unfortunately, the role of philosophy has been subject to

<sup>5</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Bahá’i World Faith* – ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Section, p. 240.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 37; emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181: “If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.”

<sup>10</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

considerable misunderstanding among some Bahá'ís according to whom philosophy belongs to “[s]uch academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone [and] have never been and will never be of any worth.”<sup>11</sup> In their view, the pursuit of philosophy contradicts Bahá'u'lláh's injunction that to “acquire knowledge is incumbent on all, but knowledge of those sciences which may profit the people of the earth, and not of such sciences begin in mere words and end in mere words.”<sup>12</sup> This misunderstanding is not supported by the Writings.

In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises the early Christians as people who were able to transform their philosophy into positive self-transformation and proper action in the world.<sup>13</sup> They practiced Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to “Let deeds not words be your adorning.”<sup>14</sup> However, interpreting these words requires us to recall that according to the Writings, proper action must be based on knowledge and understanding. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is first “to know,” and then “to do” . . . . Consider how most animals labor for man, draw loads and facilitate travel; yet, as they are ignorant, they receive no reward for this toil and labor.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, appropriate knowledge and understanding are necessary pre-conditions for proper action. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá re-emphasises this when he says,

In the erection of a house it is first necessary to know the ground and design the house suitable for it; second, to obtain the means or funds necessary for the construction; third, to actually build it.<sup>16</sup>

In the following pages we shall explore what philosophy can do to prepare us for effective action by improving our inner environment through reflection and the other mental skills for which philosophy provides training.

Another statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also dispels the view that the Bahá'í Writings have a negative outlook on philosophy. He says,

All mankind *must* be given a knowledge of science and *philosophy*—that is, as much as may be deemed necessary. All cannot be scientists and philosophers, but each should be educated according to his needs and deserts.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 169.

<sup>12</sup> Compilations, *Bahá'í Scriptures*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* (Persian) # 5.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 382-3; emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 101; see also *BWF* 382.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 108; emphasis added.

It is important to note the imperative “must” in this statement; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá insists that such knowledge—albeit in varying degrees—be given to “all mankind.” To one extent or another, philosophical thinking is important for all. Specifically, he says that “Philosophy develops the mind,”<sup>18</sup> a topic we shall pursue below.

Significantly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides a definition of philosophy which clearly outlines its mandate: “Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man,”<sup>19</sup> In other words, philosophy, no less than science, is a way of learning about and understanding the real world. Insofar as such understanding is necessary, philosophy is necessary as well as one of our intellectual tools. Of course, he thinks philosophy is best pursued within the framework given by the Manifestations, i.e. a ‘divine philosophy.’ It is no accident that he wrote a book called *Divine Philosophy* in which part of this framework is outlined.

Nor did Shoghi Effendi think philosophy was in itself something that necessarily began and ended in words. He writes,

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>20</sup>

The Guardian recognises that philosophy *per se* is “a sound branch of learning” even while he recognises and rejects certain abuses and/or extreme developments of this subject which diminish its value. Furthermore, the Universal House of Justice gives great encouragement to philosophical studies when it writes,

It is hoped that all the Bahá’í students will follow the noble example you have set before them and will, henceforth, be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of *philosophy* and science.<sup>21</sup>

This statement implicitly recognises the influential reach of philosophy is as well as the importance for Bahá’ís to study and correlate the Teachings with contemporary developments in this field. Identifying such correlations is obviously a way of building bridges to other schools of thought and facilitating dialogues which inevitably introduce Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation to a wider circle of readers and thinkers – something which can only be good. Philosophy facilitates this process by allowing us to “find a point of entry into contemporary mind in order that [it] might be able to present the [Bahá’í] message in terms intelligible to their own age.”<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the extensive presence of philosophy in the Bahá’í Writings illustrates

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 212.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá’í Community*, p. 445; emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> The Universal House of Justice, 1997 Jul 20, *Scholarship and Related Subjects*; emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology*, p.3.

the importance of philosophy. *Some Answered Questions*, notably in the second half, deals with numerous philosophical issues often in technical philosophical language that must be learned and understood before the texts can be fully comprehended. The same may be said of *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, and, to varying degrees about *Paris Talks*, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* and *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. A good example of such a passage is the following:

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>23</sup>

This statement which is the basis of his argument for the immortality of the soul and the relationship between mind and body is steeped in the terminology and argumentation of Aristotle and is not fully comprehensible without some exposure to it. The appropriate knowledge of philosophy will, therefore, expand our understanding of the *Writings* and thus put us in a stronger position to explain and defend them convincingly to others. This in itself improves not only in our own inner environment but also that of our audience.

Understanding the philosophical principles explicitly and implicitly embedded in the Bahá'í Writings also facilitates inter-faith dialogue especially with those religions such as Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism which have highly developed philosophical traditions notably in ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and ethics. Without understanding the relevant philosophical principles in the Bahá'í Writings, we cannot effectively explicate let alone defend the Writings effectively—and that is bound to have a negative impact on our global intellectual and social environment. After all, as Bahá'ís we believe that the Writings contain the “healing medicine” needed by the world and this obligates us to be effective purveyors of this medicine. If we can clearly explicate what the Writings say such human problems as our relationship to the environment we have a better chance of influencing others and joining them in practical work to make changes in human thought, feeling and behavior.

Before identifying specific ways in which philosophy can be used to improve our inner environment and, thereby, contribute to a better relationship with the natural environment, we shall examine some of the foundations of environmentalism in the Writings.

## **Part II: The Foundations of Environmentalism in the Bahá'í Writings**

Long before environmental issues came to the forefront of public consciousness, Shoghi Effendi issued a statement that not only lays out the philosophical foundations of environmentalism, but also establishes a guideline for pursuing it effectively and intelligently. He writes,

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<sup>23</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 239.

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. *His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.* The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.<sup>24</sup>

This declaration, is, of course, a specific application of the ontological principle laid down by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he says,

For all beings are connected together like a chain, and reciprocal help, assistance, and influence belonging to the properties of things, are the causes of the existence, development, and growth of created beings.<sup>25</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assertion portrays the universe as dialectical in nature, with each part influencing and being influenced by all the others. The importance of this is clear: Bahá’í environmental philosophy is built on the ontological foundation that humankind and the natural environment are aspects of a single cosmic process and cannot be regarded in isolation. Changes in one will inevitably be accompanied by changes in the other in an endless cycle of mutual interaction.

It is noteworthy that Shoghi Effendi draws special attention to our “inner life” in this process: “[Mankind’s] *inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.*”<sup>26</sup> This statement eloquently summarises the dialectical complexity of the process but, perhaps more important for our time, draws attention to the vital role that the “inner life” plays in dealing with environmental challenges. There is a tendency in our age to focus almost exclusively on external, technological fixes for all problems with both the human and natural environments and to ignore the necessity of transforming our “inner lives.” We think we can change the environment without changing ourselves and the way we think and feel.

Our thoughts and beliefs, assumptions, concepts, attitudes, feelings and values generate and shape our action in the external world, i.e. in both the social and natural environment. In other words, to look after the natural environment, we must take care of the psycho-spiritual environment within ourselves and, by extension, in the social order. We cannot expect to foster a better relationship to the natural environment if we do not recognise the necessity of developing a better psycho-spiritual environment both individually and socially.

Commitment to this whole dialectical process is, according to Shoghi Effendi, is one of the hallmarks and unique strengths of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings.

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<sup>24</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84; emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith*, p. 302.

<sup>26</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84; emphasis added.

No movement in the world directs its attention upon both these aspects of human life and has full measures for their improvement, save the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

And this is its distinctive feature.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, he adds,

We need a change of heart, a *reframing of all* our conceptions and a new orientation of our activities. *The inward life of man as well as his outward environment have to be reshaped if human salvation is to be secured.*<sup>28</sup>

Our “inward life” must be transformed by a “change of heart,” by “a *reframing of all* our conceptions” and by a reorientation of our worldly activities i.e. feeling, thought and action. Only in this way can we develop a new world-view that will let us build a healthy relationship with the natural environment and, thereby, secure our own future.

If establishing a healthy relationship to the natural environment depends on developing a new and better “inward life,”<sup>29</sup> how can this be done? How can we improve our psycho-spiritual inner environment or “inward life”? How can we develop minds and hearts that have the sensitivities, intellectual skills and habits and above all, the willingness to deal adequately and realistically with the challenges of our dialectical relationship with nature?

We cannot, for example, grasp superficially attractive but simplistic answers as some have done and merely slough off past progress to return to living in more primitive physical conditions. Few people will seriously adopt a return to ancestral ways and give up positive fruits of progress in medicine, personal and communication, transportation and travel or the advantages of a globalised economy. It is simply not in our nature to do so, as Shoghi Effendi asserts when he writes, humans

shape nature to meet our own needs, as no animal does. Animals adapt themselves to better fit in with and benefit from their environment. But men both surmount and change environment.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, we cannot expect humans to violate their own essential natures if we are to make sustainable changes in our relationship to the natural environment. Such pseudo-answers are not appropriate to our nature. Obviously, therefore, it is not a question of whether or not we shall change the environment but a question whether or not we shall change ourselves and the environment in ways that are appropriate to all aspects of the cosmic dialectic.

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<sup>27</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84; emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

<sup>30</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *Arohanui - Letters to New Zealand*, p. 85.

Nor can we rely exclusively on scientific “techno-fixes” since these inevitably have unforeseeable consequences in the cosmic dialectic. Science and technology are certainly part of the answer but they cannot, in themselves, re-focus or “re-orient”<sup>31</sup> our activities. They cannot transform our scale of values from one which puts material acquisition at the apex to one which puts spiritual, intellectual and creative development in this position. Nor can they bring recognition that material progress itself is not a guarantee of what existentialist philosophers call ‘authentic existence.’

### **Part III: How Philosophy Improves Our “Inward Life”**

Thinking about the philosophy’s role in developing a better relationship with the natural environment begins with the recognition that the most important renewable resources on the planet are human minds and hearts which make up our inner environment. Without improving our inner environment, no effort to improve our man-made or natural external environment will be sustainable or successful. After all, to paraphrase ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, knowing must precede doing. Therefore, let us explain the ways in which a study of philosophy—especially if guided by the Writings—improves the inner environment, our “inward life.”

Philosophy encourages the habit of thoughtfulness, of careful, orderly and detached reflection so that our thinking about things will be just, i.e. appropriate to the subject matter and to reality. We must be impartial, and follow truth where it leads:

The first teaching of Bahá’u’lláh is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality. What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must *forget all hearsay and examine truth himself*, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not. Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination.<sup>32</sup>

According to this statement, the investigation of “truth or reality” is obligatory for all and to fulfill this responsibility we must not rely upon hearsay but see for ourselves. We must, moreover, hold to whatever truth we find, rather than allow it to be swept aside by other, extraneous considerations, which, so the statement implies, is a danger that besets all seekers of truth. This advice is given to improve our inner environment, our “inward life”

Without following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice, our thinking cannot be just i.e. could not give each side of a subject its appropriate due which would violate Baha’u’llah’s often expressed injunction to “Be fair in thy judgment.”<sup>33</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also says that in order to achieve justice in our thinking,

We must *set aside bias and prejudice. We must abandon the imitations of ancestors and forefathers. We ourselves must investigate reality and be fair*

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<sup>31</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 62; emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 285.

in judgment.<sup>34</sup>

From these statements (and many others like them) we can see that *the Writings are deeply concerned about the quality of our inner environment*. Our actions in the world are not likely to improve if our thinking remains biased, hasty and unquestioning.

To be “fair in our judgment” also means that we be impartial, i.e. detached from the outcomes so that we do not let our preferences mislead us. For example, in seeking knowledge of God, the seeker must “so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.”<sup>35</sup> The same impartiality or detachment in the search for truth should guide us in all our investigations and is, therefore, an essential aspect of our inner environment.

One of philosophy’s most powerful tools in improving the “inward life” is careful and systematic questioning. Indeed, questions are so important in the Bahá’í Faith that they have a feast in their honour—the Feast of Questions—for it is only by means of questions that we shall be able to investigate the truth for ourselves. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asks rhetorically,

Shall man gifted with the power of reason unthinkingly follow and adhere to dogma, creeds and hereditary beliefs which will not bear the analysis of reason in this century of effulgent reality?<sup>36</sup>

Obviously not. Doing so violates God’s gift of reason, “the rational faculty with which God hath endowed the essence of man”<sup>37</sup> and enslaves us to the past, i.e. robs us of intellectual freedom and capacity to act intelligently in our own circumstances. Skilful questioning, however, not only satisfies our need for rationality and freedom but also help us meet our obligation to find the truth. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “it is incumbent upon all mankind to investigate truth.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, without truth, unity cannot be achieved and this would frustrate one of the main *raisons d’etre* of the Bahá’í Faith. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “If such investigation be made, all should agree and be united, for truth or reality is not multiple; it is not divisible.”<sup>39</sup>

Careful questioning encourages other virtues explicitly listed and/or implied by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Most obviously, they help attain intellectual freedom from ancestral beliefs, and thereby free us from thoughtless imitations that cannot “bear the analysis of reason.”<sup>40</sup> Only in this way will we be able to investigate the truth for ourselves and come to our own conclusions. Even if these conclusions agree with an established belief, we will agree with them because we understand them ourselves and not merely because we have adopted them passively. We have, thereby, made these conclusions our own.

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<sup>34</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 346; emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 264.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 164.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 105.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 141.

By subjecting our own views to questioning we practice humility and self-critique by regarding ourselves as simply another seeker for truth. In practising self-critique we help ensure that our judgments are just and do not unduly privilege ourselves. Without self-critique we cannot hope to know reality. With it, our views will become more fair and just than before. Self-critique also helps develop the virtues of impartiality and objectivity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “In this day man must investigate reality impartially and without prejudice in order to reach the true knowledge and conclusions.”<sup>41</sup>

Another benefit of questioning skills is an increased ability to view issues from various points of view, which is exactly what the world needs to facilitate empathy and mutual understanding. Studying philosophy is especially useful in developing our powers of empathy and compassion because philosophy confronts us with carefully developed world-views expounded from widely different points-of-view. The powers of empathy developed in this way help to discover the truth about reality and may even help point the way to common ground among contending views. In a world evolving towards unity this is a vital skill.

One of the most important functions of questioning is to forestall any tendency to literal reading. Literalism is, ironically, the common intellectual vice of both religious fundamentalism and the new atheism.<sup>42</sup> This vice is especially destructive vis-à-vis religious texts: “The purpose of the prophetic words was not the outward or literal meaning, but the inner symbolical significance.”<sup>43</sup> Speaking of the story of Adam and Eve, he says,

if the literal meaning of this story were attributed to a wise man, certainly all would logically deny that this arrangement, this invention, could have emanated from an intelligent being.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, implicitly ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is teaching us that we must adopt metaphorical or symbolic readings when literal understanding leads to logical contradictions, a lack of internal consistency, or to physically impossible events such as Mt. Zion dancing.<sup>45</sup> However, this can become clear to us only if we carefully question the text in regards to its purpose, its logical coherence, its implicit assumptions, its evidence as well as our own way of reading the text.

In order to facilitate and sharpen understanding of questions, it is worthwhile identifying some of the more common question types. The best way to begin is to identify the two broadest categories of questions, closed and open. A closed question can be answered simply, for example by a ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ with a word or short phrase, or a fact.

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 75; see also 327, 361.

<sup>42</sup> Ian Kluge, *The Bahá’í Writings and the New Atheism*, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 246.

Virtually no debate is possible, e.g. 'In what year did the Báb declare His mission?' Closed questions are good for developing basic textual understanding i.e. they focus on basic reading skills. Open questions ask for opinions and viewpoints which must be explained and supported; they require reflection and, therefore, focus on thinking skills.

There are, however, also some particular kinds of questions worthy of attention. Among them are,

- 1: Purpose questions: what is the purpose, task or goal of a statement, plan, action?
- 2: Cause questions: what are the past causes that lead to a result?
- 3: Analysis questions: what are the parts or aspects? What role to these parts or aspects play? How are they put together (structure)?
- 4: Application questions: how can an idea, action, etc. be used in other contexts or applied in daily life?
- 5: Relevance question: Who or what is affected by the statement? How much? In what way?
- 6: Logic questions: does a statement violate the rules of logic, or show self-contradiction? Does it undermine itself? (e.g. 'All truth is relative.')
- 7: Perspective questions: is there another valid perspective from which to view an issue?
- 8: Clarification questions: what is the meaning or usage of certain terms, phrases?
- 9: Synthesis questions: how can this idea, plan, action work together with other ideas, plans etc.
- 10: Assumption questions: what are the implicit assumptions in a statement?
- 11: Analogy questions: are there similar ideas, plans, actions, attitudes?
- 12: Evaluation questions: is an idea morally defensible? Effective/ineffective? Suitable/not suitable? Valid/invalid? Cost/benefit? Profit/value?
- 13: Consequence/implication questions: what are the implications of an idea in other areas of thought?
- 14: Sufficiency questions: is there enough of the right kind of evidence?

- 15: Evidence questions: what kind of evidence is used? Scientific? Anecdotal? Authoritative? Reasoning/Logical? Historical? Statistical?
- 16: Reading questions: do we read a passage literally or metaphorically, or both in different sections? Why, for what reasons?
- 17: Viewpoint questions: are there viable alternative viewpoints in understanding a statement, an action/event or a plan of action?
- 18: Challenge question: are there facts, counter-examples<sup>46</sup> or alternatives that challenge a statement?

Systematic use of these questions in habitual reflection on what we encounter, fosters the kind of inner milieu that the Writings encourage i.e. analysis that is rational, impartial, independent, just, thorough, empathetic and committed to finding the truth. Of course, regular and consistent application of these questions is the key to achieving the inner environment characterised by these traits. Philosophical education is especially well-suited to this task because the questions it cultivates are adaptable to all areas of human thought and action.

Let us apply a sample of these questions to a particular passage from the Writings to show how our understanding may be deepened

XCIII. Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God. Each, according to its capacity, is, and will ever remain, a token of the Almighty. Inasmuch as He, the sovereign Lord of all, hath willed to reveal His sovereignty in the kingdom of names and attributes, each and every created thing hath, through the act of the Divine Will, been made a sign of His glory. So pervasive and general is this revelation that nothing whatsoever in the whole universe can be discovered that doth not reflect His splendor. Under such conditions every consideration of proximity and remoteness is obliterated....<sup>47</sup>

If, for example, we ask ‘What is the purpose of this passage?’ we may find ourselves discussing such issues as the sacralisation of nature as a divine creation – and our potential responses to that; the direct proof of God’s existence by the evidence of nature, or, evidence for the contingency of all natural things. We shall also encounter the sacralisation of nature if we question the consequences of this statement: how does this statement change our views on the value of nature?; how does it affect cost/benefit analysis of our treatment of nature? However, we are also led to an important ethical questions. For example, do even those who wilfully commit evil reflect God’s splendor? How are we to treat them in view of this?

If we ask a clarification question about the phrase “proximity and remoteness”

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<sup>46</sup> Counter-examples show exceptions to a rule or universal generalisation.

<sup>47</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184.

we might explore the irrelevance of spatial categories in discussing spiritual realities. We might also ask clarification about the whole issue of being a “sign of the revelation.” What precisely does this mean? Does this refer to the actual natural object or body, to its essence or soul, to its qualities or attributes, or does it refer to all of these things or something else entirely? It is obvious that each question forces us to dig deeper into the Writings and thereby encourages the quest for truth and all its attendant virtues.

If we ask about the hidden assumptions, several possibilities emerge. For example, the passage seems to assume idealism, i.e. the view that all natural, material things are the products of something immaterial, in this case God and His Divine Will. Does it then also assume that matter itself is created by the “act of the Divine Will”? Is matter the residue of the divine Will? Since God chooses “to reveal His sovereignty,” does that assume God is a personal and intentional Being, or is this statement only a metaphor? By answering these questions we can pursue investigations into the ontological teachings i.e. theory of reality of the Faith.

From this brief sample, it becomes apparent that the study of philosophy can inculcate the habit of careful, precise and orderly questioning that leads not only to a better understanding of the Writings but is also conducive to a more considered and reflective relationship to nature. We will not be content with one-dimensional thinking that only concerns itself with one aspect—such as profitability or physicality—in deciding whether or not a project is really worth doing. There are, for example, questions of values to consider. Because it specialises in and has a great deal of experience with questioning, philosophy has a unique contribution to make in teaching us better intellectual habits or, in Shoghi Effendi’s words, thereby achieve “a reframing of all our conceptions and a new orientation of our activities.”<sup>48</sup>

In order to promote a better inner environment that will lead to improved understanding and action vis-à-vis the natural environment, the Bahá’í Writings also promote a different way of thinking, i.e. dialectical thinking. Again, philosophy helps develop this kind of thinking not only by inculcating the habits of careful, systematic reflection and intellectual exploration, but also by providing a methodical understanding of how dialectics can be put into practice.

In the Writings, dialectics takes two forms. First, in its classical or applied form, dialectical thinking involves reasoning by an exchange of view-points, questions and counter-arguments as illustrated in the Plato’s dialogues. Each side submits propositions and counter-propositions that are questioned in the quest for truth which unites both sides. A proper Socratic dialogue is not an ‘argument’ in which participants try to score points against each other so that their own viewpoints may win whether they are true or not. All parties in a Socratic dialogue aim at truth and all participants are considered equal. One viewpoint or another may be refuted but that is important only insofar as it is part of establishing the truth. Sometimes a new, more inclusive viewpoint or synthesis will emerge that includes previously opposing views and thus unanimity on a subject is

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<sup>48</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

attained. Because Socratic dialectics are focused on attaining truth, not victory in argument, they encourage impartiality or fair judgment.

The Bahá'í Writings promote dialectical thinking in the Socratic sense and develop it even further in the process of consultation which goes beyond Socratic dialectic because of the spiritual framework within which consultation works. Each participant is valued not only as a fellow seeker for truth or a solution but is also regarded as a revelation of God “according to [their] capacity.”<sup>49</sup> The discussion is framed by an atmosphere of care and mutual respect which in itself helps to diffuse the point-scoring that bedevils too many discussions. This encourages a “free, frank loving”<sup>50</sup> but “unfettered”<sup>51</sup> dialogue. According to Bahá'u'lláh,

The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. *Take ye counsel together in all matters*, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.<sup>52</sup>

It is noteworthy that consultation, which includes the art of careful questioning and discussion found in the Socratic dialogue “leadeth the way” and thereby bestows “understanding”—from which “compassion” and empathy develop. As we understand the views of others better, our capacity for compassion expands.

How then, do dialectical thinking and especially consultation improve our inner environment and, by extension, lead to better action vis-à-vis the environment? As already stated, they encourage the virtues of impartiality and fair judgment, objectivity, self-criticism and humility, intellectual empathy and the quest for truth as the only legitimate goal. This develops the kind of inner environment or “inward life” that can act more sensitively in regards to all aspects of the external environment.

Obviously, dialectical thinking in the form of consultation affects our relationship with the human and natural environment insofar as it trains us to think of these relationships as dialectical or dialogical. The human and/or natural environment becomes one of the partners in the consultation-dialectical process; as such, they require respect, empathy and compassion for their ‘interests’ which must be taken into consideration.

However, the Bahá'í Writings also seem to endorse a second level of dialectical thinking which originated with Hegel and, in its materialist form, with Marx and Engels. Of course, the Writings categorically reject the materialism of the latter. However, the Writings, as we shall see share a commitment to a view of reality as a process involving two sides or aspects in interaction. Both must be considered.

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<sup>49</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184.

<sup>50</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, p. 20.

<sup>51</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, p. 176.

<sup>52</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 168; emphasis added.

(As a note of caution it needs to be said that we should not expect the Bahá'í version of dialectical thinking to be a perfect replica of what we find in Hegel and/or Marx and Engels. It would take further study to determine how far the similarities could be pressed. For example, is the transformation of the Baha'i community caused by "entrance by troops" the sublation of quantity into quality? Can we regard the changes in our inner life derived from material sacrifices as an example of the sublation of quantity i.e. money as mere money, into quality i.e. money as an expression of spirituality?)

In any case, we may observe evidence of dialectical thinking in the following passage by Shoghi Effendi:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. *His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it.* The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.<sup>53</sup>

In short, as noted before, both aspects of the process must be considered. Humankind and the environment, though seemingly opposed, are one, an organically linked unity with two inter-acting aspects. In some respects, these aspects are in opposition; each shapes the other. Humankind acts, and nature reacts and this reaction in turn shapes and affects humankind which then responds to nature which reacts and so on. Sometimes the results are destructive but at other times, the previous oppositions achieve a newer, higher synthesis in which the interest of both sides are met at a higher level or synthesis. (Solar power may be an example of a higher synthesis: the interests of humankind for electricity are met as well as nature's, i.e. other life forms' 'interest' in being minimally impacted.)

What we observe here, and elsewhere in the Writings, are the basic elements of dialectical thought, the first being that everything is in process or involved in change. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "The material world is subject to change and transformation"<sup>54</sup> and adds,

Know that *nothing which exists remains in a state of repose, that is to say, all things are in motion.* Everything is either growing or declining, all things are either coming from non-existence into being, or going from existence into non-existence . . . This state of motion is said to be essential--that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.<sup>55</sup>

Dialectics sees reality as a process, but more than that, it sees each individual thing as being a process in itself an inter-action between two aspects which to one degree or another are in opposition. For example, Bahá'u'lláh says,

<sup>53</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84; emphasis added.

<sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 161; see also 259,

<sup>55</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 233; emphasis added; *Paris Talks*, 88.

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.<sup>56</sup>

This statement perfectly illustrates Hegel's principle of the 'interpenetration of opposites' or the 'unity of opposites': the active and recipient are "the same, yet they are different." They are essentially one but they take opposite roles and from their inter-action the "world of existence came into being." The "heat" of course represents the energy arising from this inter-action and this energy is the stuff from which the material world is made.

However, there are numerous other dialectical pairs in the Writings. For example, a human being is an interaction and often a conflict between our animal and spiritual aspects. Without the spiritual aspect of this dialectical process, man "is merely an animal."<sup>57</sup> To become human, the spiritual aspect must become active. Thus, our generic human and individual identity is a result of a dialectic process between animal and spiritual. Both must be considered and appropriately included. Furthermore, as in Hegelian dialectics, there is a conflict among these 'opposites' to see which shall dominate—the spiritual or the animal. In those who evil, their animal proclivities dominate and control their spiritual side.

Like all other animate and non-animate things, humans are also a dialectic between actuality—what we are at the moment—and potential—what we could be in the future. Here, too, we see a struggle of opposites: the potentials, drawn by the attractive power of God, exerts its pressure to be actualized and what is already actualized trying to preserve or conserve itself as it is. Another dialectical pair seen in the Writings is that of matter and form. Matter is the "raw material" to which form is given in order to make it a specific, individual thing. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

The sun is born from *substance and form*, which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection<sup>58</sup>

By itself, matter/substance has no form, is formless and anarchic, non-specific and non-individual and limitless. Form brings limits and thereby makes matter a specific something, which is what matter resists being. The recalcitrance of matter to receiving form is, as we know from human experience, one of the sources of evil in our existence.

The matter/form dialectical pair also informs the teaching of progressive revelation, although the term "form" is used here as "outward appearance" or "historical expression" and substance as "the essential nature" of all religion. Nevertheless, the dialectical situation is not changed. There is interaction and/or conflict between the two until a new Manifestation arrives to establish a new synthesis that maintains the substance or essential nature of religion in a new outward historical form or expression.

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<sup>56</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 140.

<sup>57</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 317.

<sup>58</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 89; emphasis added; also SAQ 280; See also BWF, 240, 297.

We should understand that this is only a broad formulation and more study is needed to establish its details.

Another dialectical pair in the Writings is the two sexes, male and female, which are described as the wings of one bird, i.e. humankind. They are obviously in inter-action, influencing each other and being influenced, with different opposed view-points and interests yet united with intertwined destinies. Neither will be able to reach its fullest development without commensurate progress in the other. When we regard the two sexes dialectically, we find that their differences or “oppositions” are part of a process of mutual inter-action that leads both of them to a higher state of being or, in Hegelian terms, a higher synthesis. The same will happen to the human environment as this process proceeds.

Yet another dialectical pair shaping humankind is that of individual/community; both individual and community shape each other and undue emphasis on one of the pair creates serious social distortions. For example, within the individual/community pair, we find the dialectical pair of liberty/true liberty in the Writings. The desire for liberty, symbolized by “the animal”<sup>59</sup> inter-acts in opposition to “true liberty”<sup>60</sup> which “consists in man’s submission to His commandments.”<sup>61</sup>

Here, too, we observe an inter-active process of ‘oppositional’ pairs that eventually lead to a higher synthesis in which both the interests of the individual and the community are preserved.

The dialectical pair material/divine in regards to a civilization also pervades the Writings.<sup>62</sup> In our social development we have the dialectical pair us/other which has dramatically influenced the course of our material and spiritual history. This pair is also at work in the concept of progressive revelation. The material conditions and the divine influx through the Manifestation interact to form or synthesise a new, more advanced religion and civilization—which in turn is sublated into a higher form by a subsequent revelation. Indeed, progressive revelation, can also be seen as illustrating the interaction of the dialectical pair matter/form, i.e. of the matter of previous dispensations in a new form. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Every community in the world findeth in these Divine Teachings the realization of its highest aspirations.”<sup>63</sup> Of course, no synthesis can last forever, because if it did, we would exist “in a state of repose” which is impossible according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Whenever a synthesis is reached, the process begins again. Vis-à-vis progressive revelation, a new dispensation is inaugurated.

Most importantly perhaps, dialectical thinking encourages us to look for the unities hidden beneath apparent opposites and to build on these unities. It also teaches us to regard most oppositions as part of a process that will eventually lead to a synthesis of

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<sup>59</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 63

<sup>60</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb -i-Aqdas*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb -i-Aqdas*, p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 165.

<sup>63</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 26.

some kind. (In any dialectical synthesis some oppositions are left behind as out-dated remnants of an earlier phase of development.) This process or dialectical way of understanding not only refers to discussions but all aspects of life including our relationship to nature is also of great benefit because it requires us to see everything in terms of a process that will have many, often unforeseeable consequences of which we must be careful. This is exactly what has been lacking in our thought and actions regarding the natural environment. But there are still other advantages to dialectical thinking.

The synthesis achieved by the Bahá'í dispensation also points to another characteristic of dialectical thinking—change moves in expanding spirals towards the never-attainable goal of full or absolute actualization. In other words, the Bahá'í Writings include the essentials of all other religions albeit in a new, more historically appropriate form. The spiral widens—and will do so forever as the universe and humankind evolve. The same is true for human society: the dialectical pair us/other has become more inclusive as humankind evolves.

Dialectical thinking also maintains that all things are connected to and interact with each other. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

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>64</sup>

This statement emphasises things would not exist, develop or grow; nothing is isolated from anything else. Consequently, dialectical thinking encourages us to think in terms of “wholes” rather than in terms of isolated “parts,” in terms of systems rather than individual components, and in terms of inter-actions not just our actions. This is precisely why it is so important for us to adopt dialectical thinking if we want to improve our relationship with the natural environment.

Our task is to follow the guidance of the Writings and learn to think dialectically i.e. in terms of continuous cycles of inter-action, especially between humankind and the natural environment. We can no longer afford to believe that our actions vis-à-vis nature can be “concluded” or “closed” simply because we think them so. We must also learn to think of ourselves as part of this process and not detached from it.

It may be objected that according to the Bahá'í Writings, humans as conscious spiritual beings, are in some sense ‘above nature:

The exigency of nature demands that he should be restricted to the earth; but he, by breaking the laws of nature, soars in the atmosphere high above it. By the

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<sup>64</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 178 – 179; emphasis added.

application of his intellect he overcomes natural law<sup>65</sup>

However, we must remember that even when we control nature, we are inevitably involved in a dialectical, i.e. inter-active process so we must still exercise care in how we control nature and to what purpose.

#### **Part IV: Conclusion**

In the foregoing pages, we have seen how the proper study of philosophy can help us reframe our concepts, develop a “a new orientation to our activities”<sup>66</sup> and achieve a “change of heart.”<sup>67</sup> These developments to our inner environment are essential to each one of us if we are to develop a more positive relationship to the natural world. However, once aware of what philosophy can do to evolve our inner environment and, thereby, our actions in the outer environment, we face a simple choice. On one hand we can leave the reframing of concepts, developing a new orientation and changing our hearts to relatively haphazard development in which some will progress more readily than others. This, unfortunately sets a stage for new conflict. On the other hand, we can encourage and facilitate this evolutionary process by teaching, philosophy, as Abdu’l-Bahá suggests,<sup>68</sup> to everyone to their capacity. Especially if we do this for the young, we are more likely to raise a thoughtful generation than we have been in the past, and if the world needs anything, it is more thoughtful people. Without that there is no hope for us or for the natural environment.

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<sup>65</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 359 ; see also, 30, 178, 352; also *Paris Talks* 37, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

<sup>67</sup> Compilations, *The Compilation of Compilations* vol. I, p. 84.

<sup>68</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 108.