

THE EVOLUTION OF REALITY

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To Westerners trained in the physical sciences, perhaps one of the most attractive principles of the Bahá'í Faith is that scientific reason and religious revelation are essentially in harmony. However, the actual meaning of this principle, in practical terms, is by no means clearly understood in any common sense among Bahá'ís today. George Land's article raises some interesting questions for those involved in the pursuit of such understanding.

As I see it, the basic assumption underlying Land's article seems to be that the development of human society through time follows natural and universal patterns, "systems" of growth and evolution that can be seen throughout the physical world: at the subatomic, molecular, and cellular levels; in the mineral, botanical, and zoological realms. While the specific details of Land's thesis are contemporary (i.e., systems theory), the perspective regarding the "natural" progress of human society is one that has been influential in Western culture since the Enlightenment. What I would like to explore is one of the difficulties a Bahá'í might encounter with such a perspective, namely: To what extent can we say that humans, especially as they endeavor to advance civilization, are "natural"? How one answers this question has great bearing on the meaning of justice, which to a Bahá'í, must serve as the foundation of the world peace towards which humanity is striving.

In the Bahá'í writings (as with all other sacred-mythological systems) the natural world is often used to describe human beings and human society symbolically. Such natural analogies are helpful illustrations of non-material realities, but when stretched beyond moderate limits, their accuracy disappears. 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of two objects of knowledge—sensible realities and intellectual realities. The latter cannot be directly and physically sensed, "but when we seek for explanations [of intellectual realities] in the external world, we are obliged to give them a sensible form" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 84). Consequently, the spiritual realities of humanity are often described with natural analogies.

This is because, although humans are, in some ways, in complete harmony with the natural world, we are also much more than natural. What distinguishes humans from animals, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is a higher spiritual dimension. Two aspects of this higher spiritual dimension are our ability to perceive intellectual realities and to will consciously, thus enabling us to "resist nature while all other creatures are captives of nature . . ." ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 189). The power of conscious thought and the presence of a free will are two spiritual characteristics of human beings that cannot be found among any other creatures in the natural world. To the extent that humans can think and can act through the conscious will, rather than simply

respond to their environments through natural instinct, we can say that human beings are more than merely natural.

In this light, there are three aspects of Land's exercise that, as a Bahá'í, I find questionable: (i) the reduction of human beings to merely natural creatures; (ii) oversimplification of the human reality (for violence is required to make complex realities fit simple theories); and (iii) a dangerously uncritical view of human history.

Land's thesis follows the pattern of many Enlightenment critiques of humanity, critiques that still hold authority in our culture today. They reduce the human being to the position of a clever animal controlled by material, historical, and economic forces over which it has little or no control. Throughout his article, Land fails to make distinctions between natural systems and human beings. His adherence to this position of non-distinction is rather clear in his discussion of the apparent incongruity between the laws of entropy (i.e., the physical world) and the evolutionary nature of human endeavor (which, from the Bahá'í perspective, derives its energy from the metaphysical world). In attempts to resolve this "contradiction," he goes so far as to commit, in his own words, the "heresy" of denying the second law of thermodynamics (20), changing the laws of physics to make human history appear in harmony with these laws. Yet, if one were to start with the assumption that human beings, and hence the history of human society, are more than just natural, then there is no contradiction whatsoever. Entropy does indeed rule the material world, but the human soul and human civilization (unlike our bodies and our buildings) are both fuelled by supranatural sources.

The second point is illustrated in Land's discussion of the religious practices of early civilizations. To make human history fit into the systems theory he has just outlined, oversimplifications have to be made. His portrayal of the wisdom of the early shamanic peoples is necessarily simplistic. Certainly, Bahá'ís believe that religious revelation is a progressive phenomenon, but to say that these peoples did not possess the same eternal truths, which all of the world's religions contain, and to imagine that they did not wonder, think, and possess wisdom is incorrect. In many ways, such an error could be seen as an act of historical violence against such peoples. However, if one tries to fit a complex reality (humanity) into a theory describing simpler realities (the material world), such violence is probably unavoidable.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, viewing history as a natural process, rather than a human process results in a dangerously uncritical judgment of history. Land's description of multinational corporations as "exciting" and motivated by "unconditional love" is one that seems to disregard the gross injustices present in the current global economic system. In viewing corporations only as part of a "paradigm shift" that is taking place in our "system," the author does not address the ethical issues that would allow us to

distinguish between an "advance," which is marked by justice, and a mere change. Not all changes are good, and we as humans must reinforce those that promote justice and resist those that prevent justice. As human beings with free wills, we also have the responsibility to perform just actions. When Bahá'ís say that world peace is inevitable, what we are saying is *not* that we are riding a neat sine curve to global unity where every change is a good change (see Land's diagram, *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3.1, p. 29), but rather that our extinction is impossible. However, we can delay or postpone our eventual destiny (global unity) if, for example, we are foolish enough to launch a catastrophic global war or continue in our destruction of the earth's resources. Such scenarios stand before us as real possibilities, as consequences of our God-given free will. Thus, as Bahá'ís we are held together by the common conviction that at this critical time in history we must promote justice.

Land's analysis does not explore this dimension of history, for indeed, the idea of justice cannot be coherently integrated into a materialistic systems theory. Perhaps this observation may shed some light on Land's introduction of what he calls "Love." It is a word he doesn't define, and it seems more a theoretical appendage than an integrated part of his system. It is not unusual among Western social and historical theorists unconsciously to appropriate contemporary morality (i.e., lingering remnants of Christianity) in a non-integrated manner. For example, if we are to examine a fundamental yet unspoken assumption at the base of Marxist theory—that it is unjust to oppress a worker—we find an appropriation of Judeo-Christian morality that cannot logically be integrated into true materialism. Concepts such as workers' rights or definitions of "species-being" are non-demonstrable in any scientific sense. Luckily, perhaps because Judeo-Christian morality has embedded notions of justice so firmly in our culture, few people challenge the materialist defense of justice. But when Marxism has been applied to human society, this lack of theoretical support for justice has become clearly and painfully obvious to its victims.

The assumptions one holds about humanity, nature, and history have very real and terrifying political implications with regard to the meaning of justice. The clinical dehumanizing nature of modern industrial-technological society, the brutal arrogance of liberal imperialism, and the horrors of Stalinism are not all historical accidents. These are all children of the Enlightenment, born from the dominant assumptions that (i) human beings are merely complicated animals; (ii) individual and collective human actions can be completely understood through scientific methodologies; and (iii) humanity's collective growth through history is clearly visible and readily understood. Thus, for the past two hundred years "social science" has provided direction for "social engineering," and the result has been injustice and bloodshed (not to mention environmental destruction) on a scale unparalleled in human history. Should it be so surprising that the West's cultural obliteration of all boundaries between the divine, the human, and the

natural has also resulted in violence against all three? It seems imperative to me that Bahá'í thinkers in the West take care to distinguish clearly between those aspects of modern thought with which we seemingly concur and those aspects that rest solely upon materialistic assumptions.

If, as the author suggests, we see humans as complicated sugar crystals, this does not lead us logically to the conclusion that "unconditional love," to use Land's phrase (or world peace for that matter), is inevitable. On the contrary, notions such as justice and love are completely unnatural, in the sense that they have no place in the mineral or biological realms. They are human attributes, attesting to our distinct role and responsibility in the divine cosmic plan. Bahá'ís believe that human beings must be just to each other because it is "the best beloved of all things" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* 3) in God's sight; we have been created to be just. But if men and women are not seen as reflections of the divine, linked to a purpose and order that transcends the decay and transience (i.e., ever-increasing entropy) of the world, then justice loses all of its meaning. Why (or how) should I treat a sugar crystal justly?

To apply the methods used in the measurement of the physical universe to the study of the development of human beings and human society may yield some curious and interesting results, but when done in an unqualified manner, these methods tend to confound true understanding by failing to take into account the spiritual (i.e., supranatural) nature of the human being. Physics cannot explain justice; chemistry cannot explain love; and systems theory cannot explain humanity's historical progressive development. The physical world often is rich with analogies that may help us to understand the mystery of our existence, but these are nothing more than analogies—imprecise, incomplete, and potentially dangerous if taken simplistically and applied literally.

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