Creation and Evolution in Bahá'í Thought: A Reflective Essay on Ideas and Debates

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The Bahá'í teachings reinterpret the traditional narrative of creation found in the Book of Genesis. While rejecting a literalist interpretation of creationism, Bahá'í writings affirm the enduring symbolic and ethical value of scriptural creation stories. These accounts are not regarded as scientific explanations, but as metaphorical narratives that reflect the moral and spiritual struggle between good and evil. They retain significance across generations by nurturing ethical awareness, imaginative vision, and spiritual intuition.

Background and Context

Some scientific results and theories inevitably involve a degree of speculation and conceptual inquiry, particularly when they carry implicit or explicit implications for questions about life, meaning, and values. In our own time, advances in modern physics have raised profound philosophical and theological questions, to the point that many physicists themselves have actively entered these domains of thought. A similar dynamic exists in the biological sciences, especially in debates surrounding the theory of natural selection. Both physics and biology are pivotal not only in shaping the future trajectory of science but also in informing the history and philosophy of science. Their influence extends deeply into the social sciences and humanities, helping to shape values, worldviews, and even ethical frameworks.

Physics and biology have historically held a pivotal role in shaping the social sciences and humanities, influencing intellectual discourse on cultural values, ethical frameworks, and the broader worldviews that shape our understanding of reality. The late biologist Edward O. Wilson

[1] This article is a revised version of a section from a previous work on Bahá'í epistemology. I approach the subject with deep respect for science and a strong conviction that preserving the integrity of the scientific discipline is imperative. At the same time, I believe that the potential for controversy surrounding this concept should not lead us to adopt an attitude of disengagement or to shy away from active participation in the discussion. The topic is characterized by a diversity of perspectives, including firmly held positions whose advocates often regard their views as definitive truths, resistant to further examination.
I must acknowledge that my understanding of the experimental research on this topic is notably limited, as my perspective is primarily theological and philosophical, supported by a humble knowledge of the philosophy of science. Nevertheless, I see value in contributing to the dialogue from this vantage point, trusting that such engagement can enrich the conversation rather than diminish its rigor. I also recognize that this topic remains in its early stages of development, and future insights may profoundly reshape our current understanding.

clearly recognized this significance in his writings on the unity of knowledge and the need for convergence between the physical, biological, and social sciences.

At the heart of this ongoing debate lies a set of interwoven, perennial questions: *What is the nature of reality? What defines human nature? And how might science, philosophy, and religion engage in a sustained, mutually enriching conversation about these foundational issues?* These are not abstract queries confined to the academy—they bear directly on how societies frame ethics, construct meaning, and envision their future.

The current tensions and convergences within biology—especially in light of its intersections with the social sciences, philosophy, and even theological discourse—present both a challenge and an opportunity. If the emerging dialogue can move beyond entrenched polarities, an amicable resolution may open the way to a profound paradigm shift. Such a shift could recalibrate our understanding of evolution, human purpose, and the structure of reality itself, leading to a worldview in which materialist reductionism loses its dominance and religious thought sheds its more rigid dogmatic forms. In this reconfigured intellectual landscape, the empirical rigor of science and the moral-ontological insights of philosophy and religion could converge to form a more integrated, multidimensional framework for understanding life and the human condition.

Intelligent Design and Evolution

Building on this symbolic reading of scripture, the Bahá'í perspective also engages with contemporary debates around intelligent design and biological evolution. Although it shares with intelligent design the conviction that purpose, order, and directionality are inherent in creation, the Bahá'í view ultimately diverges in important ways.

Unlike intelligent design theory, which often rejects or minimizes the role of evolutionary processes, Bahá'í teachings affirm the gradual development of life in accordance with both natural and spiritual laws. In this view, human beings may have once occupied a place within the animal kingdom, but even at that stage, the "tree of life" is believed to have possessed spiritual determinants that facilitated the unfolding of latent human potentialities. Humanity, in this framework, is not a byproduct of blind chance but a primary agent of evolution—spiritual in

essence, physically embodied, and shaped by divine intention within a lawful and purposeful universe.

Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates:

"There is no doubt that initially there was a single origin... It is therefore evident that original matter was one and that one matter appeared in a different form in each element... This terrestrial globe in its present form did not come into existence all at once, but... gradually traversed different stages until it appeared in its present completeness."[2]

"There is no doubt that, like the embryo in the womb of the mother, the embryo of humankind did not appear all at once in this form... Rather, it gradually attained various conditions and assumed diverse forms... through passing from state to state... for this is according to the requirements of the universal order and the divine law."[3]

These statements affirm that evolution is a divinely guided, progressive process, akin to embryonic development. It is not merely a biological mechanism but an expression of divine law and universal order, in which physical and spiritual realities are interwoven.

Abdu'l-Bahá further emphasizes this unified vision:

"Universal existences can be likened and compared to particular ones, for both are subject to one natural order, one universal law, and one divine arrangement... it is clear that they have proceeded from one laboratory of might according to one natural order and one universal law."[4]

From Synthesis to Expansion

A careful review of Abdu'l-Bahá's comments reveals a framework that supports a synthesized understanding of creation and evolution. This perspective rejects both the literalism of creationism and the mechanistic randomness often associated with materialist accounts of evolution. Instead, it offers a vision in which the validity of evolutionary science is preserved

[2] Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions
[3] Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions

[4] Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions

within a spiritually coherent cosmology. Life is seen not as the result of blind chance or sudden divine intervention, but as the purposeful, law-governed unfolding of reality, progressing toward increasing complexity, consciousness, and moral awareness.

Evolutionary Creation in the Bahá'í Perspective

Extending this synthesis further, the Bahá'í concept of evolutionary creation [5]deepens the understanding of the relationship between divine purpose and natural process. Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized the profound harmony between the natural order and divine wisdom, affirming that the processes of the material world—including biological evolution—are not autonomous or accidental, but rather manifestations of God's will, operating through universal laws.

In this view, God is the Creator of the universe, and creation unfolds progressively in accordance with these laws. The increasing complexity of life is not the result of random chance, but a gradual realization of latent potentialities inherent in the fabric of existence. While this concept of progressive creation [6]is compatible with modern evolutionary theory, it imbues the process with meaning, direction, and spiritual purpose**.**

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[5] Sometimes called theistic evolution. Theistic evolution, as commonly articulated in the literature, seeks to harmonize theological understandings—particularly those rooted in the Abrahamic creation narratives—with the insights of contemporary evolutionary science. While this approach successfully integrates biological evolution with the belief in divine purpose, it often leaves underexplored the broader implications of evolution for social, moral, and religious development. In particular, it offers limited engagement with the question of how revealed truths are to be understood in relation to the dynamic and evolving nature of human history and culture. This raises important theoretical tensions concerning the continuity of spiritual principles within a framework that otherwise embraces change across nearly all domains of existence—including, for example, the tension between claims of finality in religious doctrine and the unfolding trajectory of human consciousness and civilization.

[6] Progressive is interchangeably used with evolutionary. The term *progressive* is often used interchangeably with *evolutionary*, but it more accurately captures the Bahá'í understanding of evolution. In the Bahá'í perspective, evolution is not merely a biological process but a purposeful unfolding toward greater maturity and complexity. It encompasses not only the development of life forms, but also the advancement of human society, the growth of consciousness, and ultimately, the progressive way in which God reveals guidance to humanity through divine revelation.

From a strictly scientific standpoint, *progressive creation*—understood as the purposeful unfolding of life through latent potentialities—is not falsifiable in the way that hypotheses in empirical science are. This is largely because the very notion of "progress" carries an inherent subjective dimension, often shaped by philosophical or theological assumptions about purpose, direction, and value. As such, progressive creation does not qualify as a scientific theory in the conventional sense. Nevertheless, this concept is not inherently incompatible with science. Rather, it functions as **a** philosophical or metaphysical framework, one that can coexist with modern evolutionary biology, especially when evolution is interpreted not as a purely random process, but as one shaped by law-governed regularities**,** developmental constraints, and emergent properties. While current scientific paradigms generally exclude non-

Moreover, this evolutionary vision transcends the biological realm. It encompasses the moral, social, and spiritual evolution of humanity. Just as life has developed through successive biological stages, human civilization has advanced through corresponding stages of moral refinement, cultural growth, and collective organization**.** The same creative forces that animate the natural world are seen as guiding the ongoing maturation of human society, ultimately preparing the way for a unified global civilization founded on justice, peace, and the oneness of humankind.

Reconciling Common Ancestry with a Broader View of Evolution

From this perspective, the Bahá'í teachings affirm the principle of common ancestry—that all life originates from a single source. This aligns with one of the central conclusions of modern biology: life diversified from a common ancestor through gradual transformation over time.

Natural selection is not rejected in the Bahá'í view but is understood as operating primarily within the physical domain, where environmental pressures, competition, and adaptation influence the survival and diversification of species. It is regarded as one component of a broader, multidimensional framework of evolution—one shaped not only by these physical and ecological forces, but also by the intrinsic capacities inherent in living beings, the patterned dynamics of biological development, and spiritual principles embedded in the very structure of creation.

In this framework, the emergence of humankind marks the introduction of an additional dimension: the influence of the spiritual factor, or humanity's higher nature. Manifested in moral awareness, conscious choice, and the capacity for spiritual growth, this factor alters the dynamics of evolution by adding purpose, ethical responsibility, and cultural advancement as formative forces in human development, alongside purely physical mechanisms.

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observable phenomena, it remains conceivable that future developments in science, particularly in areas such as complexity theory, consciousness studies, or the philosophy of biology, may open space for more integrative models that account for purpose, directionality, and non-material dimensions of reality without abandoning empirical rigor.

The principle of common ancestry, supported by extensive genetic and fossil evidence, affirms the unity of all life. While natural selection is recognized as a valid mechanism driving adaptation and diversity, it does not fully explain the rise of consciousness, moral awareness, or the unique spiritual capacities of human beings. From a broader interpretive perspective, the development of life is seen as teleological, moving purposefully toward intrinsic goals. These goals reflect higher purposes embedded within the very structure of existence. Evolution, in this light, is both a material and a spiritual phenomenon: a dynamic interplay between natural processes and formative spiritual influences.

Scientific and Philosophical Perspectives: Rethinking Natural Selection

In recent decades, evolutionary biology has expanded far beyond the framework of classical Darwinism, producing what some scholars call the Extended Evolutionary Synthesis. This modern perspective retains the central principles of variation, inheritance, and natural selection, yet it incorporates additional mechanisms that reveal a richer and more complex picture of how life changes over time.

Research in evolutionary developmental biology (Evo-Devo) has shown that the genetic and developmental pathways shaping an organism's form are not infinitely malleable; rather, they are influenced by deep structural constraints and organizational patterns that channel evolutionary change. Epigenetics has further complicated the picture, demonstrating that gene expression can be modified by environmental conditions—and even passed to future generations—allowing for rapid, non-random adjustments to shifting circumstances. Meanwhile, complexity theory and studies of self-organization have revealed that intricate forms and functional order can emerge spontaneously through the inherent dynamics of biological and physical systems, without relying exclusively on competition for survival.

Other advances underscore the importance of cooperation as well as competition. Symbiogenesis**,** most famously articulated by Lynn Margulis, highlights how major evolutionary leaps—such as the origin of complex eukaryotic cells—often result from the integration of distinct organisms. Similarly, the phenomenon of convergent evolution, explored in depth by Simon Conway Morris, shows that certain complex traits, including intelligence, have arisen

independently in unrelated lineages, suggesting that lawful patterns and predictable outcomes may guide evolutionary pathways. Finally, the study of cultural evolution—through models such as gene–culture coevolution and dual inheritance theory—demonstrates that once symbolic thought, language, and moral systems appear, human evolution is increasingly shaped by shared knowledge, values, and cooperative institutions rather than genetic change alone.

In parallel with these scientific developments, various philosophical and theological traditions have advanced interpretive frameworks that transcend reductionist accounts of evolution. Teilhard de Chardin**,** Jesuit theologian and paleontologist, envisioned evolution as a spiritual ascent toward greater complexity and consciousness, culminating in the *Omega Point*—a state of ultimate moral and spiritual unity. For Teilhard, the rise of human self-awareness marked a shift in which cultural, ethical, and spiritual forces became the primary drivers of change. Michael Polanyi, philosopher of science, argued that life and mind transcend mere physical explanation, emphasizing tacit knowledge, creativity, and emergent properties as evidence of higher levels of order and meaning. Process philosophy, articulated by Alfred North Whitehead and developed by Charles Hartshorne, conceives of the universe as a dynamic unfolding in which God and creation are in continuous interaction; with the emergence of self-aware beings, moral purpose, value, and creative freedom become active forces shaping evolution.

As part of the wider scientific and philosophical re-evaluation of evolutionary theory, an influential meeting was convened from 7–9 November 2016 at the Royal Society in London, jointly organized with the British Academy, under the title *New Trends in Evolutionary Biology: Biological, Philosophical and Social Science Perspectives.*[7] The workshop formed part of a growing international dialogue—relevant to the integrative perspective outlined here—on whether classical Darwinism, and its later "Modern Synthesis" formulation rooted in mutation, genetic variation, and natural selection, is sufficient to account for the full complexity of life's unfolding.

The steering committee, which included eminent scholars such as Sir Patrick Bateson, Nancy Cartwright, John Dupré, Kevin Laland, and Denis Noble, assembled a diverse mix of scientists

[7] https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsfs.2017.0051

and philosophers to foster cross-disciplinary exchange. While reaffirming the reality of evolution, participants explored whether the Modern Synthesis should be expanded to incorporate insights from developmental biology, epigenetics, niche construction, and systems theory.

Central to the discussion was the concept of Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES), a broadened framework that integrates evolutionary developmental biology (Evo-Devo), epigenetic inheritance, phenotypic plasticity, niche construction, and systems dynamics alongside natural selection. The EES emphasizes multilevel causation, reciprocal feedback between organisms and environments, and the active role of living systems in shaping their own evolutionary pathways.

The discussion at the Royal Society parallels the Bahá'í approach, which likewise seeks to move beyond reductionist models by integrating multiple dimensions of causation and purpose. In both cases, natural selection is acknowledged as an important mechanism, yet understood as only one element within a broader, multi-layered evolutionary process. The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis highlights developmental, ecological, and cooperative dynamics within biological systems, while the Bahá'í perspective adds a further spiritual dimension—one that directs evolution toward higher complexity, moral awareness, and unity. Together, these scientific advances and philosophical–theological perspectives converge on the view that the emergence of consciousness, moral responsibility, and cultural agency transforms the very nature of evolution, introducing purpose, ethical direction, and civilizational development alongside, and in some respects transcending, the mechanisms of physical evolution.

Toward an Integrative Vision

The Bahá'í conception of evolution embraces the continuity of life and the empirical insights of modern science, while also restoring to the evolutionary narrative a sense of spiritual purpose, moral direction, and ontological depth. From this perspective, evolution is not merely a chain of biological events, but a cosmic and spiritual journey in which humanity plays an active role as an agent of a divinely ordained process of moral and social transformation. Human nature is

understood as inherently spiritual and ethical, endowed with an inner impulse toward excellence, the cultivation of virtues, and the refinement of character.

The human story unfolds along two interwoven strands: the struggle for physical survival and the parallel quest for moral and spiritual advancement. Biological evolution itself is interpreted as the outward expression of spiritual energy—a gradual realization of potentialities latent within the original seed of creation. The analogy of a tree offers a vivid image of this process: just as a tree's growth and fruit-bearing depend on life forces invisible to the eye, the spiritual dimension of human evolution operates beyond the reach of direct empirical observation. Fossils and genetic records can illuminate the physical pathway of evolution, yet they cannot disclose the invisible spiritual determinant that animates it.

This vision reflects the Bahá'í philosophical framework, particularly Abdu'l-Bahá's concept of potentiality and actuality, in which latent capacities embedded within creation progressively manifest over time. In this light, evolution is both material and spiritual, a dynamic interplay between natural processes and divine purpose, culminating not only in biological complexity and consciousness, but in the eventual emergence of a unified global civilization grounded in justice, peace, and the full realization of humanity's highest potential.

Distinctive Features of the Bahá'í Perspective on Evolution

While the Bahá'í perspective shares many foundational themes with theistic evolution—such as the harmony of science and religion, the spiritual nature of humanity, and the purposeful unfolding of life, it offers distinctive contributions that set it apart from other theistic or philosophical frameworks. These unique features arise from its metaphysical depth, its theology of progressive revelation, and its integration of evolution with moral, social, and civilizational development.

1. Unity of Spiritual and Physical Evolution as a Single, Lawful Process

Unlike many theistic evolution frameworks that portray divine intervention as episodic or external to natural processes, the Bahá'í teachings view physical evolution and spiritual development as continuous and interdependent dimensions of one coherent system. There is no

dichotomy between nature and divine will; rather, divine purpose is embedded within natural law itself. This perspective avoids both deism and supernaturalism by affirming a law-governed, purposeful unfolding of life that is simultaneously scientific and spiritual.

2. Theological Foundation: A Dynamic and Progressive Framework

A distinctive feature of the Bahá'í view is that its theological foundation for understanding evolution is inherently dynamic and progressive. Because divine revelation is seen as unfolding through successive Messengers—such as Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh—the concept of change and advancement is built into the framework itself. This prevents the emergence of a theological or philosophical quandary when engaging with evolutionary science. In this perspective, evolution is not only the biological progression toward greater complexity but also a sacred historical process in which each Messenger discloses new moral and spiritual capacities latent within humanity. This unites the story of life with the unfolding of sacred history, integrating moral direction, ethical refinement, and the collective advancement of human consciousness into the broader evolutionary narrative.

3. Teleology Directed Toward Global Unity and Civilization

While many theistic evolution perspectives focus on individual moral growth, the Bahá'í teachings place global unity and justice at the heart of evolutionary purpose. Human evolution is incomplete until it culminates in a peaceful, just, and spiritually unified global civilization. This gives the Bahá'í perspective a unique socio-historical telos, where the end-goal of evolution is not only inward transformation, but the outward construction of a world civilization that reflects divine values.

4. The "Tree of Life" and the Metaphysics of Potentiality

The "tree of life" metaphor, frequently invoked in Bahá'í writings, conveys a metaphysical vision in which spiritual potentialities are embedded within material forms, awaiting their gradual actualization. This conception resonates with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reinterpretation of Aristotelian metaphysics and finds parallels in the thought of the Persian philosopher Mullā Ṣadrā, particularly in the principles of potentiality (*quwwa*) and actuality (*fiʿl*). Just as a tree's

growth follows an inherent yet unseen blueprint, human evolution is understood to be guided by spiritual forces that lie beyond the reach of empirical observation. In this view, potentiality is not merely a dormant capacity but an ontological openness to higher degrees of being, while actuality is the unfolding and intensification of existence itself. This process is inherently teleological, directed toward perfection and ultimate nearness to the Divine. Such a framework imparts distinctive ontological depth to the evolutionary narrative, enriching scientific accounts with a sense of purpose and meaning rarely articulated in other expressions of theistic evolution.

5. Epistemological Humility and the Harmony of Science and Religion

The Bahá'í Faith emphasizes that science and religion are complementary systems of knowledge. Religion without science leads to superstition, while science without spiritual insight results in materialism. This principle fosters an epistemological humility and a methodological pluralism, where both reason and revelation play integral roles in advancing human understanding. Few traditions articulate this relationship so systematically, nor insist so consistently on the mutual refinement of scientific and spiritual truth.

Together, these five features reveal a uniquely integrative vision of evolution—one that encompasses biological development, moral progress, metaphysical insight, and collective destiny. In doing so, the Bahá'í teachings offer not merely a reconciliation of science and faith, but a transcendent synthesis that redefines evolution itself as the unfolding of both life and light.