

Principles of Bahá'í Education: A Brief Conceptual Review

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At present, what is taught under the heading of the principles of education is, in reality, an eclectic assemblage of perspectives and assumptions drawn from philosophy, psychology, and sociology, informed by an implicit materialist worldview and a reductive conception of human nature, and reinforced by a persistent structural separation between the social and natural sciences. This assemblage is then presented as a coherent conceptual framework for educational practice, despite the absence of an integrating philosophical foundation.

From the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith, the adoption of a unifying philosophy for education is contingent upon the following conditions:

The Spiritual Aim of Education

The first condition requires that the fundamental aim of education be understood as the spiritual growth and elevation of the human being. This calls for an emphasis on the inherent dignity and potential of humanity, together with a critical reassessment of narrowly materialistic theories of human development. The foundation of a renewed educational framework must therefore rest upon a spiritual understanding of human nature and the principles governing its moral and inner transformation. This objective draws upon the perennial purposes articulated within the world's religious traditions, purposes historically associated with the cultivation of human virtues and the comprehensive development of personality, leading to coherence between inner disposition and outward conduct.

From the Bahá'í perspective, when education is aligned with processes of spiritual and moral transformation, it gains the capacity to shape thought, emotion, and action in integrative ways, enabling individuals to attain higher degrees of personal maturity and ethical excellence. Figures regarded in religious history as exemplars of spiritual attainment are understood not as possessors of extraordinary supernatural powers, but as individuals who, through sustained

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spiritual education, aligned their personal lives with transcendent moral principles and with a unifying vision of humanity's collective purpose.

Within the hierarchy of education, the human being gains access to three interrelated systems of value: material, human, and spiritual.²

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Now observe that it is education that brings East and West under man's dominion, produces all these marvellous crafts, promotes these mighty arts and sciences, and gives rise to these new discoveries and undertakings. Were it not for an educator, the means of comfort, civilization, and human virtues could in no wise have been acquired. If a man is left alone in a wilderness where he sees none of his own kind, he will undoubtedly become a mere animal. It is therefore clear that an educator is needed.

But education is of three kinds: material, human, and spiritual. Material education aims at the growth and development of the body and consists in securing its sustenance and obtaining the means of its ease and comfort. This education is common to both man and animal.

Human education, however, consists in civilization and progress, that is, sound governance, social order, human welfare, commerce and industry, arts and sciences, momentous discoveries, and great undertakings, which are the central features distinguishing man from the animal.

As to divine education, it is the education of the Kingdom and consists in acquiring divine perfections. This is indeed true education, for by its virtue man becomes the focal centre of divine blessings and the embodiment of the verse "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness."² This is the ultimate goal of the world of humanity.

It is therefore clear and evident that man stands in need of an educator. This educator must undeniably be perfect in every way and distinguished above all men. For if he were like others he could never be their educator, particularly since he must at once be their material, human, and spiritual educator. That is, he must organize and administer their material affairs and establish a social order, that they may aid and assist each other in securing the means of livelihood and that their material affairs may be ordered and arranged in every respect.

He must likewise lay the foundations of human education—that is, he must so educate human minds and thoughts that they may become capable of substantive progress; that science and knowledge may expand; that the realities of things, the mysteries of the universe, and the properties of all that exists may be revealed; that learning, discoveries, and major undertakings may day by day increase; and that matters of the intellect may be deduced from and conveyed through the sensible.

He must also impart spiritual education, so that minds may apprehend the metaphysical world, breathe the sanctified breaths of the Holy Spirit, and enter into relationship with the Concourse on high, and that human realities may become the manifestations of divine blessings, that perchance all the names and attributes of God may be reflected in the mirror of the human reality and the meaning of the blessed verse "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness" may be realized.

It is clear, however, that mere human power is incapable of fulfilling this great office, and that the results of human thought alone cannot secure such bounties. How can a single person, with no aid or assistance, lay the foundations of such a lofty edifice? A divine and spiritual power is therefore needed to enable him to carry out this mission. Behold! One sanctified Soul revives the world of humanity, transforms the face of the globe, develops the minds, quickens the souls, inaugurates a new life, establishes new foundations, orders the world, gathers the nations and religions under the shadow of one banner, delivers man from the realm of baseness and deficiency, and exhorts and encourages him to develop his innate and acquired perfections. Certainly nothing short of a divine power could accomplish this feat! One must examine this matter fairly, as this indeed is an occasion for fairness.

Material education orients the individual toward the understanding and application of scientific knowledge, technological competence, and engagement with the physical conditions of life; moral or human education directs the individual toward ethical discernment and responsible conduct; and spiritual education guides the individual toward transcendental principles arising from recognition of faith in a divine source. Education fosters genuine growth and vitality when material education is oriented by moral education, and when both, in turn, find their coherence and ultimate direction within spiritual education. In this ordering, intellect, thought, and ethical judgment are informed by faith and integrated within a unifying spiritual framework.

In the absence of spiritual education, the foundations of value systems tend to fragment, and more instinctual or utilitarian impulses increasingly shape human life. This is because the integrating center of spiritual education rests upon recognition of a transcendent moral source. When this center is weakened or removed, the harmonizing and unifying function of values diminishes, and ethical frameworks risk losing coherence and direction. In such contexts, moral reasoning may become increasingly relativized, and questions of meaning and purpose grow more uncertain. Contemporary moral challenges can thus be understood, in part, as the outcome of processes that have distanced individuals and societies from spiritual orientation. Historical

A Cause which all the governments and peoples of the earth, notwithstanding all their powers and their armies, are unable to promote and promulgate, one holy Soul promulgates without aid or assistance! Can this be accomplished through the agency of mere human power? No, by God! For example, Christ, alone and single-handed, raised the banner of peace and amity—a feat that the combined forces of all the mighty governments of the world are unable to accomplish. Consider how numerous are the divers governments and peoples—such as Italy, France, Germany, Russia, England, and the like—who have been gathered together under the same canopy! The point is that the advent of Christ brought about fellowship among these differing peoples. Indeed, some among the peoples who believed in Christ were so closely united as to offer up their life and substance for one another. Such was the case until the days of Constantine, through whom the Cause of Christ was exalted. After a time, however, and as a result of differing motives, divisions broke out again among them. Our meaning is that Christ united these nations, but after a long while the governments caused the resurgence of discord.

The main point is that Christ accomplished what all the kings of the earth were powerless to achieve. He united differing nations and changed ancient customs. Consider what great differences existed between Romans, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Israelites, as well as other peoples of Europe. Christ abolished these differences and became the cause of concord among these peoples. Although after a long while the governments disrupted this unity, Christ had indeed accomplished His task.

Our meaning is that the universal Educator must be at once a material, a human, and a spiritual educator, and, soaring above the world of nature, must be possessed of another power, so that He may assume the station of a divine teacher. Were He not to wield such a celestial power, He would not be able to educate, for He would be imperfect Himself. How then could He foster perfection? If He were ignorant, how could He make others wise? If He were unjust, how could He make others just? If He were earthly, how could He make others heavenly? ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*.

experience suggests that sustaining moral character over long periods has rarely been achieved without some form of spiritual foundation. Education that lacks spiritual and ethical dimensions risks becoming overly instrumental, serving predominantly material or utilitarian ends.

Educational institutions that do not articulate moral and spiritual aims may gradually shift from centers of learning and truth-seeking toward market-driven models, in which education is treated primarily as a commodity oriented toward competition and material success.

Ultimately, a renewed conception of education, grounded in a spiritual understanding of human existence, must affirm the continuity of existence beyond material life, understood through the reality of the soul, as a foundational component of spiritual education. Within this framework, spiritual education serves as the organizing principle through which material and moral education acquire coherence and direction, situating finite human life within a broader horizon of meaning that transcends the temporal, ephemeral conditions of material existence. Recognition of moral consequence across the limits of finite life thus provides a stable foundation for the formation of ethical responsibility and the cultivation of rectitude of conduct.

Within such a framework, human aims and conduct are understood in relation to moral accountability and consequences that extend beyond material life and are oriented toward alignment with a transcendent moral purpose. An educational vision of this kind fosters the formation of a generation with a fundamentally reoriented understanding of life and its meaning, one that ultimately overcomes the turmoil and anxiety associated with existential finitude and transience and comes to regard death as a threshold to harmony with broader processes of evolution and human perfection.

Education as a Living Social Process

In the Bahá'í Faith, education is not conceived as an abstract or purely theoretical enterprise, nor can it be confined to the ivory towers of academic institutions. Rather, education is understood as a living and dynamic process that must flow into streets and neighborhoods, imbuing the daily lives of ordinary people with meaning and purposeful learning. Accordingly, education is not limited to the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another; the transfer of knowledge must serve as a catalyst for transformation and development within the cultural life

and social fabric of the community. In this perspective, education is understood not merely as knowledge transmission or skill acquisition, but fundamentally as a process of moral formation, through which individuals cultivate ethical responsibility, social awareness, and a sense of shared purpose. Education, in this sense, functions as an instrument for the transformation of the world.

The Bahá'í Faith regards the establishment of an ideal society as inseparable from the spiritual growth and moral development of the individual, and it relates individual fulfillment to the collective advancement of humanity. On this basis, the principle of unity in diversity and the realization of a global civilization constitute a second major objective toward which education must be directed. This unity is grounded in the fundamental principle of the oneness of humankind. Far from being an abstract ideal, human unity provides a practical foundation for organizing social relations, fostering solidarity, promoting the common good, and advancing a new global civilization. Education is therefore called upon to promote international understanding and cooperation, respect for human rights, and aims such as the equality of women and men, economic justice, enhanced global communication, and the elimination of racial, national, and religious prejudice.

While education begins with the individual as a sovereign and morally responsible participant in the collective, it simultaneously recognizes the individual as a social being whose development depends upon principles of reciprocity and the network of relationships that bind persons to one another and to society as a whole. Education must therefore attend to an ideal balance that harmonizes the relationship between individual and society, part and whole.

Once education is aligned with the inseparable process of collective human evolution, it cannot be detached from the tensions, struggles, and transformations inherent in social life. Education must encourage individuals to seek their own well-being in the peace and prosperity of humanity as a whole, rather than withdrawing to a position of isolated security while others remain exposed to hardship. Genuine education emerges when individuals confront the realities of suffering and limitation, learn to interpret personal hardship within a wider moral horizon, and come to recognize the significance of their experiences in relation to humanity's shared ideals and evolutionary purpose.

Balancing Innate Capacities and Environmental Influences

The Bahá'í Faith affirms differences in innate character and capacity, yet it does not regard such differences as grounds for division, hierarchy of moral worth, or claims of inherent superiority or inferiority. Rather, these differences are understood as variations in degree, not as indicators of good or evil. This distinction is central to the Bahá'í understanding of human nature and moral development and may be examined through several interrelated considerations.

1. In many ancient systems of thought, differences in innate character were interpreted through a rigid dualism of good and evil, dividing humanity into those presumed to be inherently virtuous and those deemed inherently corrupt. Such interpretations, by attributing moral value directly to innate capacity, undermine human dignity and have historically served to legitimize discrimination and exclusion. The Bahá'í Faith explicitly rejects this framework and understands innate character as fundamentally natural, morally neutral in orientation, and universally directed toward perfection.

From birth, the human spirit is oriented toward the source of all perfection, namely God. Differences in innate character, therefore, do not signify a division between good and evil, but rather reflect variations in degree that correspond to each individual's potential role and function within the broader order of existence. Within this order, every being is expected to fulfill its function according to its capacity, contributing to the harmony of the whole. Differences in capacity thus testify to the coherence and perfection of creation, not to moral inequality or injustice.

At the same time, the Bahá'í conception of good and evil differs fundamentally from traditional moral dualisms. In Bahá'í thought, good is understood as essential and real, rooted in being itself, whereas evil is not an independent reality, but rather a lack, absence, or privation of good—much as darkness is the absence of light. Evil, therefore, does not arise from differences in innate character or capacity, but from a failure to align one's acquired character, actions, and choices with the spiritual principles that govern human existence. Moral deviation is thus understood as disharmony rather than essence, as privation rather than substance.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá further clarifies this distinction by differentiating between two forms of human capacity:

*“Now, someone might say that, since the capacity and aptitude of souls differ, how can one reproach the wicked, for it is their capacities themselves that are different? Such difference in capacity must inevitably lead to a difference in character. But this is not so, for capacity is of two kinds: innate and acquired. The innate capacity, which is the creation of God, is wholly and entirely good—in the innate nature there is no evil. The acquired capacity, however, can become the cause of evil.”*³

This distinction provides the foundation for an educational philosophy that rejects moral determinism and affirms human responsibility. Human beings are not fixed by nature nor condemned by innate limitation; rather, they are educable agents whose moral character is shaped through choice, effort, and education. It is not innate character that gives rise to moral disorder, but the absence, distortion, or inadequacy of education, which can derail the natural process through which innate capacities are meant to unfold in harmony with spiritual principles.

Education, from this perspective, serves not merely to transmit knowledge or develop skills, but to foster alignment between innate potential and acquired character. When education fails to perform this formative function, innate capacities may be misdirected, resulting in ethical dissonance and social imbalance. Moral development, therefore, depends not on the elimination of difference, but on the cultivation of harmony between human capacities and the spiritual laws that sustain individual and collective life.

2- Historically, differences in aptitude have been closely intertwined with the emergence, consolidation, and transformation of social hierarchies. Across both ancient and modern contexts, systems of discrimination have frequently been justified through interpretations of human difference that conflate variation in aptitude and capacity with inherent worth. Within such systems, social position was treated as a reflection of intrinsic value rather than as a contingent social construct shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. More broadly, wherever discrimination has taken root, it has often been sustained by attributing differences in

³ Abdul Baha, Some Answered Questions

intelligence or natural aptitude to particular groups. At various historical moments, this mode of thought has been explicitly articulated within political and social philosophy; at other times, it has operated more subtly as a pervasive cultural assumption shaping institutions and social norms. In the twentieth century, these ideas found particularly stark expression in racist doctrines that asserted the inherent superiority of certain groups and employed such claims to justify exclusionary policies and systemic violence.

Against this background, the Bahá'í Faith regards the elimination of prejudice and discrimination as foundational to the construction of a just and sustainable civilization. Central to this vision is the recognition of the innate oneness of humankind and the realization of human unity as a practical organizing principle of social life. Within such a society, individuals with diverse aptitudes are enabled to flourish, and the merit of their contributions is acknowledged, while a heightened spirit of moral responsibility, altruism, and mutual concern shapes collective life. In this social order, ability and talent are recognized and valued, yet essential oneness and solidarity permeate patterns of behavior, ensuring that individual excellence is harmonized with the common good.

In the organic conception of social order articulated in the Bahá'í teachings, humanity is likened to a living body whose diverse members function in interdependence and balance, each contributing according to capacity to the health and coherence of the whole. From this perspective, differences among individuals are not sources of hierarchy or exclusion, but conditions for cooperation and complementarity. Every individual, regardless of aptitude or social position, is understood to possess a unique and indispensable role in the collective task of building a unified and flourishing civilization.

3- In contrast to earlier perspectives that treated innate capacity as fixed and immutable, the Bahá'í Faith understands human cognition and capacity as dynamic, developmental, and open-ended. This view resonates with emerging global perspectives that increasingly regard mental and physical limitations not as permanent constraints, but as conditions to be progressively addressed through advances in science, technology, education, and well-being. At every level of understanding, the potential for growth and the unfolding of latent capacities remains present, and the realization of this potential depends not only on material progress but fundamentally on

education as a formative process that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

“As to the differences of character arising from education, they are great indeed, for education exerts an enormous influence. Through education, the ignorant become learned, the cowardly become courageous, the crooked branch becomes straight, the acrid and bitter fruit of the mountains and woods becomes sweet and succulent, and the five-petalled flower puts forth a hundred petals. Through education, barbarous nations become civilized, and even animals take on human-like manners. Education must be accorded the greatest importance, for just as diseases are highly communicable in the world of bodies, so is character highly communicable in the realm of hearts and spirits. The differences caused by education are enormous and exert a major influence.”⁴

4- The development and manifestation of human capacities through education is therefore not merely an intellectual or technical undertaking, but a fundamentally ethical and spiritual process. The purpose of both individual and collective life cannot be reduced to the simple realization of innate potential or the accumulation of skills and competencies; rather, it involves the cultivation of human perfections, including moral discernment, responsibility, and the progressive refinement of character. Education, in this sense, serves as the primary means through which latent capacities are oriented toward constructive ends and integrated within a coherent moral framework.

When differences in understanding, aptitude, or achievement are transformed into grounds for pride, dominance, or social stratification, the formative purpose of education is compromised. In such contexts, capacities that might otherwise contribute to personal growth and social well-being can be redirected toward ego-centered self-assertion and the pursuit of status or dominance. A sound educational framework, therefore, seeks not the elimination of difference, but the harmonization of diverse capacities within a shared ethical horizon, ensuring that the development of human potential remains aligned with the common good and the advancement of society as a whole.

⁴ Abdul Baha, Some Answered Questions

5- The Bahá'í perspective on education reflects the view that individual development is inseparable from the collective evolution of humanity. As the evolutionary history of the human species unfolds, it gives rise to new intellectual, moral, and social capacities that shape the horizons of possibility available to each individual life. Conversely, as individuals develop in alignment with these broader evolutionary processes, their actions and contributions feed back into and help shape the ongoing transformation of the collective. Within this reciprocal dynamic, the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm, and human capacities expand through conscious participation in the evolving moral and spiritual order of human society.

Integrating Material and Spiritual Criteria in Educational Research

The fourth condition for a comprehensive educational theory is the integration of scientific and spiritual criteria in educational inquiry and research. Approaches shaped exclusively by materialistic assumptions and mechanistic methodologies risk detaching scientific knowledge from the deeper subjective and moral dimensions of human existence. Scientific understanding and empirical investigation, while indispensable, require a broader interpretive framework that includes spiritual and ethical values in order to apprehend the full nature of reality.

Accordingly, within the Bahá'í perspective, scientific, philosophical, and empirical forms of knowledge are understood as complementary and must be brought into unity, so that the objective and subjective dimensions of reality are harmonized within an integrated vision of human nature. Such integration provides the basis for a genuinely holistic and universally applicable model of education.

The Ultimate Purpose of Knowledge

The fifth condition advances the proposition that knowledge possesses an intrinsic orientation toward the transcendent, and that learning attains its fullest significance through movement toward an ultimate source of meaning and purpose, understood as the knowledge of God.⁵

⁵ The metaphysical assumptions informing this framework, particularly regarding the nature of reality, human purpose, and the relationship between material and non material dimensions of existence, are not argued in full within the scope of this essay. Rather, they are taken as orienting premises drawn from the Bahá'í worldview and from broader philosophical traditions that affirm the intelligibility and purposiveness of existence. A systematic

Accordingly, the nature, hierarchy, and various branches of knowledge must be examined in relation to their ultimate ends, so that scientific theories and philosophical reflection are situated within an encompassing and coherent framework of meaning and values.

This orientation is not imposed externally upon the pursuit of knowledge, but emerges through sustained and systematic reflection on the nature of existence and human experience. From this standpoint, the organization of knowledge can be understood as corresponding to a hierarchy of inquiry, ranging from the study of relatively static phenomena to the investigation of increasingly complex, integrative, and relational dimensions of reality. Although this perspective departs from strictly materialist interpretations of knowledge, it remains consistent with rigorous scientific and philosophical reasoning, while at the same time encouraging a critical reexamination of prevailing assumptions about the nature of reality and the scope of human understanding.

Within this framework, the overarching aim of Bahá'í education is the alignment of one's worldview with an integrated understanding of the purpose and meaning of existence. Education therefore transcends the boundaries of any single academic discipline and is not reducible to a specialized field among others. Rather, it functions as a generative arena for inquiry and understanding, serving as a catalyst through which knowledge is produced, interpreted, and transferred across domains. In this sense, education functions as a foundational structural framework that is not merely derivative of the sciences or humanities, but actively gives coherence to their emergence, interaction, and application.

From the study of material phenomena to the cultivation of reflective consciousness, all forms of inquiry are understood as contributing to a unified conception of reality. Education, accordingly, is conceived as a lifelong and society-wide process that extends beyond formal institutions and unfolds within the broader context of social life itself, such that the world functions as an interconnected learning environment embedded across the full range of human activity.

defense of these assumptions lies beyond the present inquiry, which is concerned primarily with their implications for educational theory.

Education and the Crisis of Values

The sixth condition underscores the need to analyze contemporary educational challenges in direct relation to broader patterns of cultural decline and the fragmentation of value systems. From this perspective, the crisis of modern education is not an isolated or purely technical problem, but a secondary expression of a more fundamental condition: the progressive separation of educational practice from the spiritual and moral dimensions of contemporary civilization. The erosion of spiritual and ethical values—long regarded as the sustaining core of culture and social order—has contributed to the internal weakening of social institutions, including those devoted to education.

The roots of the educational crisis therefore lie not simply in pedagogical shortcomings or institutional inefficiencies, but in the denial or marginalization of moral and spiritual frameworks that once provided coherence, orientation, and purpose. As these frameworks have fragmented, the moral order underpinning modern civilization has been destabilized, with direct consequences for educational aims and outcomes. Accordingly, meaningful educational reform cannot be pursued in isolation from the wider task of civilizational renewal. Educational goals must be articulated within a comprehensive philosophy of cultural transformation, one that seeks to restore coherence between knowledge, values, and the broader purposes of human life.

At the same time, reference to spiritual and moral decline should not be interpreted as a call to revive antiquated religious orthodoxies, to oppose scientific and technological progress, or to deny the historical advancement of civilization. Nor does it imply resistance to the achievements of modernity or the emancipatory potential of science and reason. Rather, the concern is directed against two opposing but equally limiting tendencies: on the one hand, the soft tyranny of materialism, which reduces human purpose to utility, consumption, and technical efficiency; and on the other, rigid or authoritarian forms of orthodoxy that, under the banner of spirituality, seek to impose dogmatic control of a theocracy. Spiritual renewal, in this sense, is conceived not as regression, but as a critical and integrative process, one that affirms scientific inquiry and human dignity while resisting both reductive materialism and coercive ideological or religious domination.

Concluding Remarks

From the perspective of the Bahá'í Faith, the future of education is marked by profound promise and possibility. Although contemporary educational thought is often characterized by uncertainty, fragmentation, and competing paradigms, the Bahá'í view understands education as the primary foundation of both individual development and social transformation. Its future is seen as inseparable from spiritual growth, moral advancement, and the progressive realization of a global civilization grounded in unity and justice.

Bahá'í education aspires to embody the integration of theory and practice, bringing coherence to domains often treated as oppositional. It seeks to reconcile rational inquiry with spiritual insight, discipline with freedom, and humility with excellence of character. In doing so, it draws upon the accumulated wisdom of diverse cultural traditions, integrating insights from both Eastern and Western intellectual heritages. At the same time, it affirms unity at the level of purpose while embracing the plurality of methods, perspectives, and fields of knowledge through which human understanding advances.