

Reflections on the Epistemological Views of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

MIKHAIL SERGEEV

Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept.

— ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Abstract

The paper discusses ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s epistemological views by addressing the four sources of knowledge as explored by Him in various talks and books. These categories include sensory perception, reason, intuition, and tradition. This discourse systematizes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s epistemology in the context of global philosophy, focusing on a number of issues that are of special concern for modern western thought. These concerns deal with subjects such as the importance of scriptures and the limitations of human knowledge. The paper also analyzes the distinction between objective and subjective knowledge, and between human and divine knowledge.

Résumé

L’auteur examine la position épistémologique d’Abdu’l-Bahá en abordant les quatre sources de la connaissance telles qu’Abdu’l-Bahá les a explorées dans ses causeries et ses écrits. Ces catégories comprennent la perception sensorielle, la raison, l’intuition et la tradition. Dans son exposé, l’auteur systématise l’approche épistémologique d’Abdu’l-Bahá dans un contexte philosophique global, en mettant l’accent sur un certain nombre de questions qui présentent un intérêt particulier pour la pensée occidentale moderne. Ces questions portent notamment sur l’importance des textes sacrés et les limites de la connaissance humaine. L’auteur établit également la distinction entre la connaissance objective et la connaissance subjective, et entre le savoir humain et le savoir divin.

Resumen

El ensayo discute las perspectivas epistemológicas de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá al tratar las cuatro fuentes de conocimiento explorados por Él en varias charlas y libros. Estas

categorías incluyen percepción sensorial, razonamiento, intuición y tradición. Este discurso sistematiza la epistemología de 'Abdu'l-Bahá en el contexto de filosofía global, enfocando en un número de asuntos que son de interés especial para el pensamiento occidental moderno. Se trata de temas tales como la importancia de las escrituras sagradas y las limitaciones del conocimiento humano. El ensayo también analiza la distinción entre el conocimiento objetivo y subjetivo, y entre el conocimiento humano y divino.

It has been traditional in modern philosophy to begin the exposition of any philosophical system with a thinker's view on epistemological issues. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet and founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and the leader of the Bahá'í Faith after the death of His father, was not a systematic philosopher and did not write a treatise on the theory of knowledge. However, He touches upon epistemological problems in the context of various religious and philosophical topics He discusses in many of His talks and books. 'Abdu'l-Bahá dwells upon epistemological themes in several chapters of *Some Answered Questions* (1904–06), as well as in the *Tablets of Divine Plan* (1916–17) and the “Tablet to Dr. Auguste Henri Forel” (1921). He also makes important remarks with regard to the theory of knowledge in a series of presentations on the Bahá'í teachings delivered in Europe and North America and subsequently recorded in *Abdu'l-Bahá in London* and *Paris Talks*, as well as in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

The aim of this paper is to present a systematic reconstruction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's epistemological views that are scattered throughout many of His writings and utterances.

TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Generally speaking, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge: “One is subjective and the other objective knowledge—that is

to say, an intuitive knowledge and a knowledge derived from perception” (*Some Answered Questions* 157).¹ He continues:

The knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence—that is to say, either by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart. . . . But the second sort of knowledge, which is the knowledge of being, is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself. (*Some Answered Questions* 157)

Reflecting on various aspects of inner or intuitive knowledge, 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out that human insight comes to fruition in the course of meditation, which “is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves” (*Paris Talks* 175). 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues: “Through the faculty of meditation man . . . receives the breath of the Holy Spirit—the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation. . . . Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food. . . . This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very Kingdom of God” (175).

The intuitive power of the human spirit can manifest itself in a wakeful state as well as during sleep by means of dreams and visions. “How often

1. Later on page 227 'Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the same point: “Know that the power and the comprehension of the human spirit are of two kinds—that is to say, they perceive and act in two different modes. One way is through instruments and organs: thus with this eye it sees; with this ear it hears; with this tongue it talks. . . . The other manifestation of the powers and actions of the spirit is without instruments and organs.”

it happens," 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, "that it [the spirit] sees a dream in the world of sleep, and its signification becomes apparent two years afterward in corresponding events. In the same way, how many times it happens that a question which one cannot solve in the world of wakefulness is solved in the world of dreams" (*Some Answered Questions* 227).

'Abdu'l-Bahá also argues that our intuitive abilities allow us to communicate with departed souls. "A conversation can be held, but not as our [physical] conversation. . . . The heart of man is open to inspiration; this is spiritual communication. As in a dream one talks with a friend while the mouth is silent, so is it in the conversation of the spirit" (*Paris Talks* 179).

The highest form of human intuition is revelation, which is available only to specific human beings who are the "Manifestations of God," the founders of major religions. These Divine Manifestations share with other humans the sensory and rational capacity for knowledge, but in addition they possess intuitive or heavenly comprehension that "embraces all things, knows all mysteries, discovers all signs, and rules over all things" (*Some Answered Questions* 218–19). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the source of intuitive understanding as follows:

This is the knowledge of being which man realizes and perceives, for the spirit surrounds the body and is aware of its sensations and powers. This knowledge is not the outcome of effort and study. It is an existing thing; it is an absolute gift.

Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired—that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation. (*Some Answered Questions* 157–58)

Divine Manifestations are capable of spiritual visions and discoveries such as the one witnessed by the disciples of Jesus Christ and described in

the Bible as the transfiguration.² The Manifestations are the only source of the knowledge of God, His will, and His attributes, and Their Word is authoritative and binding for the community of believers.

REASON VERSUS SENSORY PERCEPTION

Among the three main sources of knowledge—sensory perception, abstract reasoning, and intuition—the latter is always individuated, that is, peculiar to the person who experiences it. We do not share our intuitions in common with other people, and, therefore, we cannot claim them to be generally valid. Sense perception and rationality, on the other hand, both refer to the objective world of nature and by virtue of that have a universal character. However, while the senses provide us with perception of objects, rational analysis produces abstractions and generalities. Hence, reasoning appears to be the most universal among various forms of human cognition both in its sources and outcomes.

The philosophical movement known as positivism that arose in Europe around the mid-nineteenth century challenged traditional attitudes toward human rationality. The French philosopher, sociologist, and founder of positivism Auguste Comte (1787–1857) stressed the importance of knowledge that is gained through the five senses on the basis that observation and experimentation, which constitute the foundation of science, are impossible without empirical data. In His writings and talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá criticizes such an approach as inconsistent with empirical evidence itself.³ He says in this respect, for example: “Modern philoso-

2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses in this context the event of the transfiguration in *Some Answered Questions* (132). He also describes the transfiguration as “a spiritual vision and a scene of the Kingdom” (*Selections* 162).

3. Speaking about positivists, whom He simply calls materialists, 'Abdu'l-Bahá displays an unusual and, rare for Him, sense of sarcasm: “One of the strongest things witnessed is that the materialists of today are proud of their natural instincts and bondage. They state that nothing is entitled to belief and acceptance except that which is sensible or tangible. By their own statements they are captives of nature, unconscious of the spiritual world, uninformed of the divine

phers say: 'We have never seen the spirit in man, and in spite of our researches into the secrets of the human body, we do not perceive a spiritual power. How can we imagine a power which is not sensible?' (*Some Answered Questions* 189). He replies to this question: "If we wish to deny everything that is not sensible then we must deny the realities which unquestionably exist. For example, ethereal matter is not sensible, though it has an undoubted existence. The power of attraction is not sensible, though it certainly exists. From what do we affirm these existences? From their signs" (*Some Answered Questions* 190).⁴

It is well known that animals possess sensory perception that is often sharper and more powerful than that of humans. However, they lack the faculty of reason, and this makes animals subject to nature and inferior to man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "God's greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding. . . . All creation, preceding Man, is bound by the stern law of nature. . . . Man alone has freedom, and, by his understanding or

Kingdom and unaware of heavenly bestowals. If this be a virtue, the animal has attained it to a superlative degree for the animal is absolutely ignorant of the realm of spirit and out of touch with the inner world of conscious realization. The animal would agree with the materialist in denying the existence of that which transcends the senses" (*Foundations of World Unity* 69; *Promulgation* 177).

4. In this article we confine our analysis to epistemological and not ontological issues. So the difference between sensible and intellectual reality is discussed here as an epistemological concern with no distinction made with respect to the objects of intellectual knowledge that may be either material (ethereal matter, by which 'Abdu'l-Bahá may mean the forces of heat, light, electricity, and magnetism) or spiritual (love). From the ontological perspective those nonsensible realities should be differentiated but they often are not when 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks with reference to the theory of knowledge: "[T]he power of intellect is not sensible; none of the inner qualities of man is a sensible thing; on the contrary they are intellectual realities. So love is a mental reality and not sensible. . . . In the same way, nature, also in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality" (*Some Answered Questions* 83–84).

intellect, has been able to gain control of and adapt some of those natural laws to his own needs" (*Paris Talks* 41–42).

The materialist position, on the contrary, assigns to human intellect a place within the natural order as its product and an inalienable part of it. While capable of rational inquiry, human reason, as materialists contend, can never penetrate the essence of nature or understand all of creation, which is the sign of its inferiority to the world of nature. Furthermore, as materialists argue, human intellect is a physical endowment, very much like that of sight, hearing, and other senses, and hence it ceases to exist along with the rest of the sense organs at the moment of an individual's death. Therefore, being subject to decomposition, human intellect also proves to be part of the natural order.

In responding to these arguments, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes between physical and "ideal" endowments, material and ideal perception and virtues. He writes, for example, "The sense of sight in man is a physical virtue; but insight, the power of inner perception, is ideal in its nature" (*Promulgation* 325). He seems to agree with the materialists that "the power of ideation, or faculty of intellection, is material" insofar as it is based in the brain, but he also writes, in contrast to the position of the materialists: "The acquisition of the realities of phenomena is an ideal virtue; likewise, the emotions of man and his ability to prove the existence of God" (*Promulgation* 325).⁵

In various places 'Abdu'l-Bahá juxtaposes this contemporary European empiricist philosophy with the tradition of classical rationalism. He writes: "The criterion of judgment in the estimation of western philosophers is sense perception. . . . The philosophers of the East consider the perfect criterion to be reason or intellect. . . . and they state that the senses are the assistants and instruments of reason, and that although the investigation of realities may be conducted through the senses, the stan-

5. The translator used the term "ideal" here as interchangeable with "spiritual": "[T]he body of man expresses certain material virtues, but spirit of man manifests virtues that are ideal" (325). He considers memory to be an ideal entity: "The sense of hearing is a physical endowment, whereas memory in man is ideal" (325).

dard of knowing and judgment is reason itself” (*Promulgation* 355–56). He continues:

The materialistic philosophers of the West declare that man belongs to the animal kingdom, whereas the philosophers of the East—such as Plato, Aristotle and the Persian—divide the world of existence or phenomena of life into two general categories or kingdoms: one the animal kingdom, or world of nature, the other the human kingdom, or world of reason. (356–57)

As a definite proof that humanity transcends the world of nature and does not fully constitute a part of it, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presents the following argument: “[I]t is evident that in the world of nature conscious knowledge is absent. Nature is without knowing whereas man is conscious. . . . If it be claimed that the intellectual reality of man belongs to the world of nature—that it is a part of the whole—we ask is it possible for the part to contain virtues which the whole does not possess?” (*Promulgation* 360). In other words: “Is it possible that the extraordinary faculty of reason in man is animal in character and quality?” (360) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own answer to the question is that it is definitely not possible.

REASON VERSUS REVELATION

In parallel with various types of cognition there can be empiricist, rationalist, intuitivist, and traditionalist or scriptural philosophy. John Locke, for instance, was a pioneer of empiricist philosophy in modern Europe. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, and Descartes and Leibniz in more recent western history advocated rationalist philosophy. The German thinker Schelling developed intuitivist philosophy that before him had flourished in various schools of religious mysticism.

Traditionalist and scriptural philosophy have roots in human culture as deep as the ancient rationalism of Plato and Aristotle. Already in sixth century BC China, Confucius taught a social and moral philosophy that was based on the “tradition of the past” and such Chinese classics as the

Book of Odes, the *Book of Ritual*, and others. Around the same time, Indians invented scriptural philosophy in order to defend the truth of Hinduism by means of rational arguments. Scholars estimate that the Hindu thinker Jaimini wrote the *Mimamsa Sutra*—the earliest treatise within the tradition of Hindu religious philosophy that belongs to the school of Purva Mimamsa—in the fourth century BC.

Philo of Alexandria is usually considered the first “scriptural philosopher” in the western intellectual tradition. Born around 20 BC and raised as an Orthodox Jew, Philo was heavily influenced by ancient rationalism. In his own philosophical system Philo created a synthesis of Jewish wisdom and Greek thought. More specifically, he supported the Revelation of Moses in the Torah by the philosophical speculation of Plato and the Stoics. Later Christian philosophers and theologians would engage in a similar enterprise but with respect to their own Christian scriptural writings.

In the Middle Ages, when philosophy became the servant of theology, such a method of philosophizing produced great works from individuals coming from diverse religious traditions—Shankara and Ramanuja in Hinduism, Avicenna in Islam, Hemachandra in Jainism, Moses Maimonides in Judaism, Chu Hsi in neo-Confucianism, and St. Thomas Aquinas in Christianity. From a philosophical perspective, 'Abdu'l-Bahá belongs to the same tradition of scriptural philosophy as well. Even more so, in the Bahá'í Faith He is regarded as both the infallible interpreter of the writings of His father, Bahá'u'lláh, and as a source of Bahá'í scripture. And as always is the case with this type of philosophizing, it is the interplay between reason and revelation that constitutes the nerve of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought.

Revelation imparts the knowledge of God, and “the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable . . . this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained” (*Some Answered Questions* 299). The knowledge of God is delivered by God's messenger or, in Bahá'í terms, a Divine Manifestation who “is like a mirror wherein the Sun of Reality is reflected” (*Promulgation* 173). 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in another place, “All the prophets and

Messengers have come from One Holy Spirit and bear the Message of God fitted to the age in which they appear" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 24). And in another talk given in London He says: "All the Manifestations of God bring the same Light; they only differ in degree, not in reality. . . . The teaching is ever the same, it is only the outward forms that change" (66–67). Finally, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, revelation often calls for explanations and interpretations.

Divine things are too deep to be expressed by common words. The heavenly teachings are expressed in parable in order to be understood and preserved for ages to come. When the spiritually minded dive deeply into the ocean of their meaning they bring to the surface the pearls of their inner significance. There is no greater pleasure than to study God's Word with a spiritual mind. (80)

Now, if revelation is necessarily the subject of interpretations, then reasoning, as the most potent agent of human cognition, must support it. Devoid of faith, human rationality becomes autonomous and self-sufficient, and it may lose its higher purpose "for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections*, 110). Without rational investigation, on the other hand, faith may turn into mere superstition. Hence the dialectic of philosophy and theology, of science and religion, that plays such an important role in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought.

The need for harmony between science and religion is one of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith that was enunciated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His numerous speeches throughout Europe and America. In *Paris Talks* 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, for instance, that "any religion contrary to science is not the truth" (131). He explains further:

All religious laws conform to reason, and are suited to the people for whom they are framed, and for the age in which they are to be obeyed. . . . I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and sci-

ence everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is truth! If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!" (141–42, 144).

In another talk 'Abdu'l-Bahá consoles His listeners with regard to possible conflicts between faith and reason by stating: "Our Father will not hold us responsible for the rejection of dogmas which we are unable either to believe or comprehend, for He is ever infinitely just to His children" (26).

LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

The limitations of knowledge are an important subject in modern western epistemology, especially after Immanuel Kant, the founder of German idealism, demonstrated, in his book *The Critique of Pure Reason*, the inherent limitations of human reasoning and questioned the possibility of metaphysics—the knowledge of the essences of things—as an exact science. 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not mention Kant or his theories, but He touches upon Kantian themes in His writings.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, human cognition is significantly limited in several ways. First—and here he echoes the German thinker—one cannot penetrate the essences of things apart from their qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote: "Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise it is unknown and hidden. . . . Thus everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence" (*Some Answered Questions* 220). He further explains: "The inner essence of man is unknown and not evident, but by its qualities it is characterized and known. . . . the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is known with regard to its attributes" (220–21).

Likewise, the essence of the world of nature is also unknown and for the

same reason. “Phenomenal or created things are known to us only by their attributes” (*Promulgation* 421).⁶

The second limitation of knowledge refers to humanity’s place in creation with a corresponding inability to know higher levels of existence. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, the “difference in degree is ever an obstacle to comprehension of the higher by the lower, the superior by the inferior” (*Promulgation* 173). He also explains: “A lower degree cannot comprehend a higher although all are in the same world of creation—whether mineral, vegetable or animal. . . . In the human plane of existence we can say we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product; but the vegetable has no knowledge or comprehension whatever of us” (114). Hence, humans cannot comprehend Divinity and the spiritual realm, since these are realities higher than that of their own. Neither can humans comprehend life after death, a situation similar to that of animals that have no understanding of the reality of human existence.

The third limitation of knowledge, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, refers to the general liability of human cognition. As He points out, “these four criteria [of human knowledge] according to the declarations of men are: first, sense perception; second, reason; third, traditions; fourth, inspiration”⁷ (*Promulgation* 21). All of them are liable to error. The sense perception, for instance, “is imperfect [because] it is subject to many aberrations and inaccuracies”⁸ (*Promulgation* 253). As for human reasoning, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues:

6. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers here to the so-called objective knowledge that is gained through the organs. In the case of subjective or spiritual knowledge he seems to accept the possibility of cognition of things-in-themselves.

7. In *Some Answered Questions* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá omits intuition or inspiration and juxtaposes senses, reason, and tradition to the revelation of the Holy Spirit in order to emphasize the uncertain character of human cognition as compared to Divine omniscience (297–99).

8. In this quotation ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the sense of sight but his analysis is equally applicable to all other senses.

They [the wise men of Greece, Rome, Persia and Egypt] held that every matter submitted to the reasoning faculty could be proved true or false and must be accepted or rejected accordingly. But in the estimation of the people of insight this criterion is likewise defective and unreliable, for [those] philosophers who held to reason or intellect as the standard of human judgment have differed widely among themselves upon every subject of investigation . . . As they differ and are contradictory in conclusions, it is an evidence that the method and standard of test must have been faulty and insufficient. (254)

Religious traditions can also be incomplete and inconclusive because their interpretations are formed by human reasoning as well and, as a result, produce contradictory explanations.

Finally, intuition or inspiration, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes, "are the promptings or susceptibilities of the human heart. The promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?" (*Promulgation 254*)

The conclusion 'Abdu'l-Bahá arrives at is to combine all four standards of judgment in order to come to a more conclusive proof. He writes:

Consequently, it has become evident that the four criterion or standards of judgment by which the human mind reaches its conclusions are faulty and inaccurate. All of them are liable to mistake and error in conclusions. But a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgment and found to be complete. (*Promulgation 255*)

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude my overview of the epistemological views of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with a brief discussion of the issue of certainty. The purpose of knowledge is to discover the truth, and with truth comes certitude. 'Abdu'l-Bahá believes in the possibility of achieving both—through the multiple sources of ordinary human cognition as well as by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which represents that “Truth never changes but man's vision changes” (*Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 56).

From the standpoint of comparative philosophy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was not the first individual to rely on multiple criteria of knowledge instead of just one. In classical Indian thought, for instance, philosophers relied on intuition and scriptural authority in addition to reason and sense perception.⁹ Also, in ancient Chinese thought the founder of the school of Moism, Mo Tzu, taught that every principle must be verified by the three tests of judgment, which included its basis (will of heaven and tradition), its verifiability (sense perception, common sense), and its applicability (practical application).¹⁰

We know from the history of philosophy, furthermore, that even when multiple sources of knowledge are rigorously and systematically applied there still remains a possibility of error since ordinary human cognition is imperfect, unlike the knowledge that is acquired through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In fact, if each one of the criteria of human knowledge is separately liable to error, then using two or more of them would greatly reduce, but not completely eliminate the chance of error, and although it seems unlikely that they would simultaneously err and thus result in a questionable judgment, this did happen in the history of philosophy.

That may be one of the reasons why numerous scriptural philosophers of the past, who used at least three of the standards of judgment—reason, tradition, and intuition—and who belonged to various religious tradi-

9. See “General Introduction” in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, pp. xvii–xxxi.

10. See Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 211–31.

tions, did not come to agreement with each other and often defended contradictory and even opposite doctrines and theories. And that is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá, when speaking about divine and human knowledge, emphasizes the former over the latter.

'Abdu'l-Bahá said: "Briefly the point is that in the human material world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself" (*Promulgation* 22). 'Abdu'l-Bahá concludes: "All available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible" (22).

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