Conceptualising Moral Values: A Metaphysical, Ethical and Empirical Dialogue with Schaefer's Moral Philosophy

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This paper will present an attempt at formulating what may be considered a new framework for a Baha'i moral philosophy that integrates three key areas of contemporary ethical discourse: meta-ethics, which inevitably begins from metaphysics; ethics, which frames the hermeneutics of morality itself; and praxis, as disclosed, recorded and discerned by the empirical sciences.

I have positioned this effort as a conversation with Udo Schaefer's philosophical thought, rather than as the independent conception it ultimately amounts to. I believe this is a necessary and a useful approach. In the same way that a study of Christian Aristotelianism would have to engage in extremely close ways, and position itself in relation to Aquinas, I think any serious scholarly work on Baha'i ethics at this stage of discourse needs to position itself in relation to Schaefer's foundational work, if we are to build a philosophical discourse around ethics, and not merely a set of independent, isolated islands of thought on a critical and remarkably neglected aspect of Baha'i studies.

This paper is not intended as a review, an affirmation, or a critique of Schaefer's work, although it engages in all three. It is rather a deep personal and scholarly engagement with his very seminal work from an independent standpoint, which acknowledges as much as it critiques, praises considerably more aspects than it questions, and pretends, in proposing alternative conceptions, not to ignore, much less dismiss the solid system he has made such fruitful efforts to discern, but to build on his foundation and provide the echo that can begin that conversation which it was his stated goal to set in motion.

As such, it is important to both acknowledge and emphasise that Schaefer's work has served as the key stimulus for this articulation, and yet it has not been covered comprehensively in any conceivable way. It would be impossible, given the breadth and volume of Schaefer's project, to do justice to it in this paper. In addressing its main subject, this ambitious book addresses and contributes to a range of fields that precede ethics and affect many more areas of Baha'i studies. By way of example, Schaefer's second chapter "Doctrines: a Systematic Survey" is an ambitious project in itself, an epitome and summation in 90 pages of his many decades of work in Baha'i systematic theology. It alone merits serious discussion, which this paper will bypass almost in its entirety. All we can hope is to provide some insights into its grand narrative, and indicative highlights which the reader is invited to follow by reference to this worthwhile text.

In summarising close to a thousand pages of scholarship of his two volume ethical *magnus opus*, and extracting key themes from which to gain momentum in a dialogic search for new syntheses, it is possible that I may have misrepresented or distorted, through having misunderstood, threads of Schaefer's thought in what is after all highly elusive, abstract exploration, particularly in the area of meta-ethics. This may

mean that the consensus may be greater than I perceived, or that insights I have overlooked may refine, supplement or correct the framework here presented.

If this paper brings Schaefer's work to a wider audience, and further stimulates others to read his work and join in the conversation one key goal of this paper will have been fulfilled.

Introduction: Schaefer's moral theology

Udo Schaefer is without doubt one of the doyens of Western Baha'i scholarship, a pioneer in this field whose work has contributed immensely both substantively and contextually, in terms of creating the discursive space for Baha'i studies which we today inhabit.

Beyond this ground-breaking trajectory, Schaefer has the unique distinction of having written, with Gollmer and Towfigh, the only book of Baha'i studies to be celebrated in a Ridvan message to the Baha'is of the world by the Universal House of Justice as a milestone in the global contribution of the Baha'i community to interfaith dialogue. (2000) In that message, the book *Making the Crooked Straight*, is credited with being the one "remedy" that single handedly ended the exclusion of the Baha'i community from interfaith dialogue in Germany and reversed the underlying hostility of Christian denominations, as a result of a hostile and misleading work of pseudo-scholarship produced by Ficicia.

That is an extraordinary impact for a piece of Baha'i scholarship to achieve, and highlights the role scholarship can play in assisting and enabling the environment for Baha'i community building and engagement in the discourses of society. It illustrates a dynamic recently highlighted by the Universal House of Justice:

"Through their scholarly endeavours believers are able to enrich the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, to explore new insights into the Bahá'í teachings and their relevance to the needs of society, and to attract the investigation of the Faith by thoughtful people from all backgrounds. Far from being a diversion from the worldwide effort to advance the process of entry by troops, Bahá'í scholarship can be a powerful reinforcement to that endeavour and a valuable source of new enquirers." (UHJ 24.04.2008 link epistolary)

Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture amply accomplishes the first two functions of intellectual enrichment; and new insight into the Baha'i teachings and their relevance to the needs of society; and if *Making the Crooked Straight* is any indication, its potential to attract investigation of the Baha'i Faith by thoughtful people will also be considerable.

In this last goal its great strengths may also be its two greatest challenges as far as diffusion and reception in the Baha'i community and beyond: *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture* is a monumental work, and well ahead of its time.

By monumental I refer to 864 pages of closely annotated systematic theology and moral philosophy, its very comprehensiveness making it at once a necessary, and a

daunting read for anyone with a scholarly interest in Baha'i ethics. It is more than likely that a large proportion of readers will study it piece-meal as a reference work they consult by looking at the contents or index for relevant sections addressing a particular area of interest.

While the book does lend itself to such approaches, and amply rewards such efforts, this is not, in the view of this writer, where its greatest contribution lies, but in the attempt at systematic correlation and integration amounting to a first shot at delineating the contours, not just of ethics in a narrow sense, but of Baha'i moral philosophy as a whole.

The second strength (and challenge) is Schaefer's seemingly inexhaustible capacity to break new ground with virtually every publication. *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture* is ahead of its time because academic studies on Baha'i ethics are all but non-existent - perhaps counter-intuitively given the centrality of values both in Baha'i theology and in actual public discourse.

Schaefer finds three precedents only [v1.xii] - all other serious treatments consisting of his own lone and lifelong output in this area [ibid]. This means that the community of discourse has not yet emerged that will truly and intensely engage with this ground-breaking, field-defining work, profit from it, critique and nuance it, and build on its likely enduring foundations. Nonetheless this is a book which as the years and even decades go by, will only grow in importance and relevance, and is likely to remain a foundational reference point to Baha'i moral philosophers for a long time to come.

Conceptual framework

Schaefer's work may be said to address two areas. First, what I would call meta-ethical moral philosophy, consisting of "the a priori structures of the moral subject (i.e. man)", comprising "human nature...purpose...the highest good of human conduct and...its sanctions"; together with "the origin, derivation and vindication of moral values." [p.ix, vol 1] This is the focus of the first volume.

Secondly, the study of ethics proper, the articulation, cataloguing and correlation of "concrete norms, values and duties" derived from the above. This is the subject of the second volume.

Given that both of these areas are wholly addressed in the light of Baha'i scripture, the whole amounts to the formulation of a systematic Baha'i moral theology.

Affirming that Schaefer's books are an attempt at a systematic Bahai moral theology is not the same as saying it is an attempt to create a Bahai theological system. Schaefer explicitly disclaims such a project [ibid. x]; cites Aristotle as inspiration ("all statements concerning matters of action should be made sketchily and not with precision" [ibid. xi]); and categorically affirms that "all attempts at classifying...the confusing multitude of normative statements in Bahai scripture are ultimately doomed to failure." [ibid.]

Suggestively for all Baha'i theology, Schaefer approvingly cites Bollnow's dictum that "Genuine truth can never be reduced to a system" and cautions that "the vital process of systematising a Revelation entails the danger of reductionism". [ibid] Schaefer nevertheless believes (possibly contradictorily) that there does in fact exist "an ethical system underlying the Revelation of Baha'u'llah" [ibid, p.xii], and that a "wide spectrum of approaches will gradually unveil the features and structures of Baha'i ethics." His own approach he presents as a "descriptive and analytical" effort to focus on "the essential features of this theonomic ethics." [ibid]

He is careful to emphasise the preliminary nature of this attempt, not least because no truly comprehensive overview can even be attempted in the absence of raw material at this time when "the canon of authentic texts has not yet been completed and many texts await translation."[xiii]

Pointing out the indispensability of referring to the source languages to arrive at definitions and precise terms, his lack of mastery of the original languages likewise for Schaefer rules out any definitive statement, although he assures us he has acquired a vocabulary of indispensable Arabic and Persian terms, and been closely supported by experts in those languages [ibid]. The frequent and accurate reference to key technical terms in Arabic and Persian in both volumes attests to this.

In sum, Schaefer considers his substantive work in this area "one contribution to the beginning of a theological discourse" [ibid], anticipates and welcomes disagreement with his views and conclusions as part of the long-term, consultative process of theological discovery [xiv], and asks that his efforts "be treated with forbearance by academic specialists", describing himself as a lawyer by training whose philosophical and theological knowledge is self-taught. [ibid].

This statement of the reach, boundaries, aspirations, cautions and vulnerabilities of his formidably ambitious project represents an intellectual starting-point worthy of emulation in its balance of intellectual aspiration, transparency and humility that compellingly exemplify the ethos of Baha'i scholarship as enjoined in the Baha'i writings [compilation]. It is on the basis of such qualities, attitudes and concepts that Baha'i scholarship can evolve into what Schaefer elegantly describes as "a never-ending process of humble discussion and exchange" which is for him the precondition to the emergence of truth. [ibid]

Within this unifying conceptual framework, each of the two dimensions of Schaefer's project, the meta-ethical and the ethical, revolves around a key conceptual axis: meta-ethical theological voluntarism in volume 1, and ethical hierarchy and the mean in volume 2. We will look at each in turn, before adding a third, empirical dimension.

Part I: The place of theological voluntarism in Baha'i moral philosophy

Of the full range of philosophical ideas and principles surveyed in Schaefer's first, meta-ethical volume, perhaps none is more fundamental to Schaefer's project than the concept of theological voluntarism [some clarity is lost by the conflation of "theological voluntarism" (the meta-ethical question of the validation of ethical

norms), with "ethical voluntarism" (referring more often in philosophy to the question of the worth of the moral will behind a given action)]. It is the glue that holds together theology, ontology, anthropology and ethical norms, and provides the transcendental grounds of Baha'i ethics.

In Schaefer's exegesis, "the moral order - which includes morals as well as law - is not anchored in preceding Platonic ideas of good and evil, in eternal truths immanent in nature and identifiable by reason, nor in a rational concept of human nature, defining for all eternity the idea of the good, nor in a rationally recognisable 'nature of things' (*natura rerum*). Rather, morality proceeds from the decisions of God's arbitrary will... He alone is *anarchos*, absolutely free, that is, not subject to any law or principle. He is above the law because he is himself the law. His sovereign, unfathomable free will is the foundation of all moral obligations, of a moral life. There is no criterion of moral rectitude independent of his will." [149]

The way this doctrinal principle connects to concrete ethical norms is that such norms stem from God's divine legislation as enjoined in sacred scripture, and while limited to the duration of a given dispensation and hence contingent rather than essential, within the authority of each dispensation those theonomic norms "are absolute, independent of all empiricism, authoritative categorical [in a Kantian sense], apodictic, i.e. free of the need for rational justification" In essence, for Baha'is "'good' means 'whatever God wills'". [ibid] This is what Shaefer means by ethical voluntarism.

Schaefer is careful to state that this "does not imply that all Baha'i ethics can be reduced to whatever has been explicitly commanded and approved by God" [p.150] For Schaefer the values are "entities" with "objective meanings", such virtues being "identical with the attributes and names of God". While Schaefer recognises the existence of values and virtues which do not and will never change, and are universally found in all human cultures since time immemorial, [157-158] which constitute the *lex eterna*, the eternal law, those values remain historically grounded, "it is not a natural law, derived from an order of being, inherent in human nature but rather one that has its origin in the divine will revealed to humankind by the prophets of the past."

For Schaefer, the corollary of the radical theological voluntarism posited above, is that "The existence of a preceding idea of the moral good, the existence of a natural moral order, of a natural law, binding upon God, would... limit God's absolute sovereignty." [152] Schaefer goes so far as to equate a position advocating such existences as *shirk* or polytheism. [ibid].

This is not to say that there are no moral universals in Schaefer's moral theology. He recognises "that fundamental values, virtues and vices have been known in all human cultures since time immemorial, that they are basically identical and are taken for granted in the scripture"; [157] affirms that such fundamental values do not change or alter between religions, have been confirmed and renewed and will never be abrogated [158] – but is categorical that these values are not "derived from an order of being... but rather one that has its origin in the divine will revealed to humankind by the prophets of the past." [158]

In brief, although Schaefer recognises the historic presence of universal moral norms, he challenges any essentialist character to them, rejecting "the axiom of a transcendent, unchanging set of values". [155]

That he is conscious of the stakes in this assertion is evident from the fact that Schaefer affirms that under that axiom "the philosophy of natural law has generated the essential elements of law and morality, which today form the basis of our legal and state order. This includes such ideas as human dignity, human liberty, freedom of the individual and freedom of conscience and opinion, together with the structures of justice... the equality of citizens under the law, religious tolerance, the principles of the rule of law, popular participation in government and the rejection of all forms of despotism and authoritarianism." [155]

To reject this foundation and set the Bahai teachings directly against the current foundations of such fundamental ethical advances – even if to maintain them under a different foundation – reveals both the scale of Schaefer's ethical project, and the dimensions of what is at play.

Morality, in Schaefer's vision, then is transcendentally originated in God's will, yet historically contingent upon acts of revelation and hence essentially mutable, even if in practice constant. It is external to "human nature": not to be found within, but without, in the prophets' historicised guidance, laws and exhortations.

In one sentence, values are ever provisional, contingent acts of divine legislation arbitrarily assured affirmation and renewal in every subsequent revelation.

In the spirit of Schaefer's generous welcome of constructive disagreement as a contribution to the pursuit of truth I would like to comment on what is to me at once the most challenging, most far-reaching, and most problematic part of Schaefer's edifice. In this I am heartened and emboldened by Schaefer's recognition that approaches to Baha'u'llah's ethical system "will be as different as people are from one another in their way of thinking" [xii], and his conviction that it is from the encounter of such differing perspectives that its underlying structures will be identified. My critique is not intended to contradict, but to nuance, complement and hopefully enrich the compelling framework Schaefer has created.

Given the foundational importance of these issues to Baha'i ethical thought, public engagement and interreligious stance, I will devote extended attention to this theme.

Irrespective of the hermeneutical robustness of the radical voluntarist argument, which I will explore below, I would like to touch on extrinsic, apologetic difficulties which such a position entails.

1) The idea that ethical norms are undiscoverable by theologically unconvinced and/or uninformed human reason, because they are not demonstrative, only prescriptive, means that ethical norms are not anchored in human discernment except insofar as it leads to or more precisely is prescribed by (specific) religious belief.

"Human beings cannot recognize the moral order by reason alone; they are dependent on divine revelation, on a God-given standard, a hierarchy of supreme values, on fixed points constituting an immovable yardstick and not subject to reason." [151]

As an abstract concept this might work: in practice, this creates serious complications. Whether or not a religiously framed act of mass violence against civilians is morally good becomes, exclusively, a function of which religious claims one accepts. The carnage carries no demonstrative weight either way, the only available yardstick being the doctrinal claims and counterclaims of competing believers.

If I believe in what I consider to be the true revelation, and as part of that belief regard terrorist acts an expression of God's unrestricted and ultimately beneficent will; and another, persuaded of the truth of a different revelation, considers terrorist acts an abomination against the will of God, if the consequences of given actions cannot in themselves serve as a guide to moral judgement, and massacre can be reduced to a doctrinal dispute, it could be argued that human suffering is trivialised, and sectarianism given added impetus. Without a role for moral reason, and hence for natural law, there is no external "reality check" to religious justifications of morally destructive behaviour, doctrine the only space for moral reasoning.

2) Taking this further, the idea that reason is unable to recognise moral norms without, not just a revealed religious framework generally, but specifically a "normative Baha'i anthropology" [153] places us in what could be considered an ethical exclusivism potentially more narrow than theological exclusivism, and could be understood by any partners in inter-religious dialogue as a particularly pernicious form of triumphalism.

"Only when reason is illumined by faith," and guided by these absolute criteria and by the normative Baha'i anthropology, can human beings recognize, by means of rational thought, what is allowable arid what is not, in cases not explicitly dealt with in scripture. This means that the recognition of moral norms by human reason is not an aspect of Baha'i doctrine. This appears to me to be an important argument against the notion of a natural law in Baha'i ethics and legal theory" [153]

This of course can be nuanced by the concept of progressive revelation, whereby the capacity of believers to rationally discern moral norms would remain possible to the extent that their abrogated dispensation provides guidance identical to Baha'u'llah's, and hence their moral judgements are not entirely hamstrung. But this is unlikely to satisfy anyone outside the Baha'i community, and many within it.

3) The idea that there is no natural moral order, and whatever moral order there is is undiscernible outside a revelatory, and particularly a Baha'i anthropology, puts us on a collision course with a growing tide of modern scientific thought and research, which has begun to document the empirical effects of different values and associated patterns of behaviour. This is a trend that is beginning

to shape the way we address the most pressing challenges of sustainability and arguably survival, as detailed later, and whose rejection is a significant statement.

Clearly, such concerns are ultimately expedient. If that is what Baha'u'llah teaches, Baha'is are to embrace it, regardless of the difficulties they might experience in articulating such claims to a potentially outraged audience. But is this degree of tension actually necessary? Has this construction of the foundation of Baha'i ethics taken full account of the texts and teachings to be found in the Baha'i writings? In Schaefer's framework, in my view, lurks an inconsistency which is not acknowledged and which holds the key to potential reconciliation between theological voluntarism and a tradition of natural law to which Schaefer credits the very idea of human dignity.

The internal tension in Schaefer's monument resides in his depiction of values as historicised, arbitrary, if consistent, acts of divine legislation extrinsic to human nature or the order of things – while at the same time Schaefer also describes "the catalogue of virtues enjoined upon the believers" as "identical with the attributes and names of God." So much so, that those who practise virtue constitute emblems of His names and attributes. [150]

From values as Law to values as Being, from norms to attributes: the challenge of immanence

Schaefer emphatically cautions that the "doctrine" of divine voluntarism "should not be misconstrued. God is not a tyrant. His actions are neither senseless nor capricious, despotic or arbitrary...God's will as the origin of all values is governed by His intrinsic goodness, love, mercy, justice and wisdom." [161] And he points to Baha'u'llah's reference that God has engraved on human beings His image, [ibid] and that all moral norms prescribed by God are designed to aid them to attain the station conferred upon their own inmost being." [162]

And this is where the fundamental problem lies: values and virtues, as portrayed in the above citations to which Schaefer makes reference, are not legislative acts, but eternal attributes "intrinsic" to God, and "identical" to the attributes manifested in human beings when they express "their own inmost being." If the values of goodness, love, etc, were in fact, as per a radical theological voluntarism, merely contingent acts of revelation, then they could not be considered "intrinsic" to God, inasmuch as God precedes those acts of revelation. In fact, if such values pre-exist as intrinsic (and hence unchanging) divine (and hence transcendent) qualities, then they constitute in fact the very "the axiom of a transcendent, unchanging set of values" inseparable from the axiom of the existence of God from whom those values intrinsically and unchangingly flow.

Once we detect this crack in the wall of Schaefer's voluntarist theology, if we peer through the gap we discover a vast landscape that has been left unexplored. We immediately perceive luminous passages that state that human beings have been created "in the nature made by God" [gleanings LXXVI] and that in the human being "are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no

other created being hath excelled or surpassed." [gl xc] Revelation helps humans manifest "all the potential forces" with which their "inmost true self" has been endowed. [gl xxvii] What this inmost nature holds is perhaps most unequivocally and jubilantly proclaimed in the Hidden Words:

"Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting." [Arabic Hidden Words, no 13]

To know oneself, Baha'u'llah concludes, is to know God [Gleanings CLIII]

Since the divine names and attributes, with their concomitant and inseparable moral values not only pre-exist and subsist in an eternal way, but causally precede, as attributes of God, all subsequent, contingent manifestations of those attributes in creation, then any appearance of goodness or justice, or other spiritual attributes is but a reflection of those transcendent, unchanging attributes that are intrinsic to God's nature. Thus, His name/attribute "the Just" implies and contains the moral value of Justice, without which it would be meaningless. And it contains it not relatively but absolutely, so that God's justice is its very archetype, all other expressions of justice being more or less faithful, and always and inescapably approximate reflections or theophanies of that pre-existing divine attribute.

What is more, if those attributes are potential, as Schaefer acknowledges, within the "inmost being" of humanity and when exteriorised and practiced are "identical" with those values intrinsic to God, then, in fact, those transcendent and unchangeable divine values are also latent, and hence discoverable, within humanity's inmost nature. For if ethical virtues, norms and values are the expression of transcendent, eternal, divine attributes, and if those attributes of God are also qualities that lie latent in our own inmost selves, in that nature made by God, engraved with His image - then prophetic revelation is not the first instance of those virtues, norms and values, which pre-exist in both God's attributes and the inmost self of each human being, but are rather a stimulus and means for their release, their definition, their discovery and expression.

Hence the Universal House of Justice writes that "spiritual principles, or what some call human values", harmonise "with that which is immanent in human nature". [PWP p.9], precisely the notion of an ethical "awareness of transcendence in immanence" which Schaefer rejects. [155]

Which all amounts to the existence of natural law: a transcendent and unchanging moral order prior to revelation (in God's intrinsic being), that is at the same time immanent, and hence (ever partially) discoverable, within human nature itself.

Natural law and Divine Will: Beyond dichotomy

Is this a simple contradiction between a transcendent, voluntarist, theonomous, construction of values derived from an earlier set of quotes, and an immanent, theophanic, natural construction of values found in these set of quotes? Can more be said to reconcile the indications of radical voluntarism on the one hand ("He doeth what He willeth") preserving the freedom of God to alter His will; and of an indwelling

natural moral order stemming from "the nature created by God", and consisting of the virtues and values which, expressing the names and attributes of God, "harmonizes with that which is immanent in human nature"? [pwp 9]

Applying the "logic of reconciliation" I articulated in an earlier paper (JBS 18:1-4, 2008), we can take these apparently polarised perspectives and seek out a key to reconcile them.

In a well known passage Shoghi Effendi writes:

" One may liken Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them." (5 July 1949 to an individual believer)

So we have, at first sight, both an unequivocal scriptural endorsement of voluntarism ('He doeth as He willeth), and an unequivocal transcendent and unchanging foundation of spiritual attributes embodying moral values inherent in the inmost nature of human beings, making natural law a reality. Are there texts and perspectives to connect and reconcile them?

What follows will be an attempt to "confidently seek the unity of meaning" in these two perspectives, finding "the links uniting the two" in the form of "the thoughts and doctrines that unite them."

The foundational passage for this reconciliation may well be found in Baha'u'llah's Tablet of Wisdom:

"Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world... Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion." [TB p.142]

With this one statement, the fundamental barrier between nature and divine Will is collapsed. Nature (and natural law as its expression) is, according to this statement of Baha'u'llah, the reality and manifestation of God's unrestricted will in the world of being/existence, in and through the contingent world, i.e., in and through all else but Him.

Natural law in this perspective is not primarily the outcome, but the exercise of God's will. To say virtues have their origin in nature, and are conditioned by nature, and to say virtues have their origin in the Will of God, and are conditioned by it, is, according to this passage, effectively, to say the same thing.

This is a conceptual shift of seismic consequences for the centuries old debate between theological voluntarism and natural law – and for Schaefer's thesis.

Lest this identification of nature and divine will be taken for a hasty gloss, 'Abdu'l-Baha - elucidating on the meaning of this very passage - reiterates: "all of the realities and conditions which the philosophers attribute to nature are the same as have been attributed to the Primal Will in the Holy Scriptures" (*Má'idiy-i Ásmání* 2: 70, Keven Brown provisional translation)."

It becomes indisputably apparent then that, in the perspective of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha's writings, the difference between divine will and nature, is not one of substance or indeed function here, but of terminology. The terms are different, and often traditionally opposed, but the underlying concepts, in light of these two passages are unmistakably interchangeable.

If at the heart of theological voluntarism lies the notion of God's unrestricted Will; while at the heart of natural law lies the metaphysical concept of "nature"; and if the quote above makes the will of God and nature interchangeable, it is important to establish what is the conceptual referent of both, in other words, what is the ontological status and quality of the divine Will/nature in the Baha'i writings?

The most compelling and succinct academic summary of this subject is likely Keven Brown's excellent essay "Creation" (bahai-library.com/brown_creation_encyclopedia), although very relevant treatments may be found elsewhere (Momen, Lambden, Lawson, Milani, Saiedi). For the sake of convenience, we will quote extensively from Brown's summary.

"The first thing to emanate from God, in the station of wishing to be known, is the Primal Will, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies with the First Intellect of the ancient philosophers (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 203). In conventional religious terminology, it is known as the Word of God and His Command (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 140-41). In the terminology of Plato, the Primal Will corresponds to the "Idea of the Good," which, consequently, emanates from the Being who is good. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that this Will "is without beginning or end" (i.e., having temporal preexistence), whereas only God has both essential and temporal preexistence. "Essential preexistence is an existence which is not preceded by a cause" (*Some Answered Questions*, pp. 203, 280). The Will, therefore, although originated by a cause, is co-eternal with God and precedes space and time. Space and time unfold from it as its necessary effects. It is the act by which God, as the agent, calls the rest of creation into being (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 140; *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 98)"

If, as 'Abdu'l-Baha suggests, the semantic content of "nature" and "primal will" is identical, then, along with "First Intellect", "Word of God", "Command of God", we can say that "Nature" is one more term for Primal Will.

Replacing accordingly as a mental exercise the term Primal Will with "nature" in the paragraph above, we begin to see how wonderful and far-reaching are the consequences of Baha'u'llah's identification of nature and God's will in the Tablet of Wisdom as elaborated on by 'Abdu'l-Baha in His commentary of it.

From this perspective the first thing to emanate from God, in the station of wishing to be known, is nature, which, although originated by a cause, is co-eternal with God and precedes space and time. Space and time unfold from nature as its necessary effects. Nature is the act and means by which God calls the rest of creation into being.

The Platonistic[1] substratum of Baha'i meta-ethics

Schaefer's presumably unpremeditated sidelining of the strong immanentist current in Baha'i anthropology described above is likely an example of the "relevance paradox", where in order to focus only on the information most relevant to one's investigation, data is excluded or pushed to the margins that proves, in retrospect, to have been essential to our explorations. Schaefer's anthropology, consistent with his voluntarism, very ably and compellingly marshals the sources which declare the insufficiency of human beings, their animal nature, and their need for divine assistance for the manifestation and dominion of their spiritual nature. But it hardly dwells on what that spiritual nature might consist of. To have done so would have surely led him to a consideration of values as Being, and not only as legislation or moral norm - with substantive consequences.

A similar, and related, relevance paradox appears at work in Schaefer's exclusion or marginalisation of key philosophical layers in the Baha'i writings which would militate against a hermetic theological voluntarism. Specifically, the contradiction between natural law and divine Will which forms the foundation of Schaefer's meta-ethics requires a repudiation of all platonist metaphysical heritage which could slip natural law through the back door. This is significant enough for Schaefer to feel the need to make explicit that "the moral order - which includes morals as well as law - is not anchored in preceding Platonic ideas of good and evil, in eternal truths immanent in nature and identifiable by reason." [p.149] It is this explicit anti-Platonic stance in relation to Schaefer's conceptualisation of voluntarism and natural law, that pre-empts the need to engage an entire gamut of relevant passages, some of which we have covered in our discussion of immanentist Baha'i anthropology.

This is not to say Schaefer entirely ignores or rejects the existence of neoplatonic tendencies in the Baha'i teachings, particularly as regards the cosmogony of emanation [p.15-16] and the process of spiritual evolution [p41m n304]. But as the earlier quote shows, he explicitly excludes the role of neoplatonic metaphysics from the consideration of morality. And yet, Baha'i theology and ontology tends, arguably, to the Neoplatonic in substance (and frequently to the Aristotelian in form) to such a degree that to exclude the platonic dimension from any metaphysical Baha'i discourse, including that of divine will and action in relation to morality, is very difficult to scripturally support.

The very notion of a hierarchical emanationist cosmogony, which Schaefer recognises - where the cosmic first creation of the Divine Will (*mashiyyat*) creates in turn all contingent things and acts as an intermediary between the created and the absolute - presupposes a platonic realm that transcends historicity. More unambiguously still, Baha'u'llah declares the existence of a "world of images" (*'alam*

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[1] I use the term 'platonistic' to refer to the very clear platonic traits, which nevertheless do not amount to a straightforward transposal of classical Platonism or neoplatonism, but are embedded into a metaphysical framework that is ultimately distinctive and innovative in its framing and use of platonic concepts and frames. This is important because it means that while one can look at the Baha'i Writings and confidently detect neo-platonist formulations, one cannot with any confidence look at classical neoplatonist thought and assume that it will translate into Baha'i metaphysics, which frequently critique, nuance or redefine it by embedding it in an unexpected frame or asserting an unexpected equivalence.

al-mithal), a realm of the "kingdom" (malakut) of which this earthly world is but the approximate image, and which occupies a higher echelon in the scale of reality, and compared to which this physical realm is but illusion.

"The meaning of the Kingdom (malakút)...referreth to the world of similitudes ['álam-i-mithál], which existeth between the Dominion (jabarút) and this mortal realm [násút]. Whatever is in the heavens or on the earth hath its counterpart in that world."

"That which thou beholdest in this temporal world are the fleeting shadows of the world of the Kingdom and the external images of the celestial realm." (provisional translation by Keven Brown from Muntakhabat 3:23)."

Clearly, the realm of values operates in the same overall dynamic, with values the expression of pre-existent divine attributes, and Schaefer's assertion that morality bears no relation to "platonic images" is ultimately conceptually inaccurate, although terminologically correct inasmuch as the ontological realm of divine attributes, as qualities of God, precedes even those putative platonic images.

 This excursus into the neo-platonic substratum of Baha'i metaphysics is necessary because it holds the key to the reconciliation we propose. In Schaefer's model, divine Will occupies an undelimited sphere or unrestricted possibility. Natural law is its inversion, a fixed and unchangeable order. Within such a polarity, reconciliation is indeed hard to conceive. However, as we have seen above, Baha'i metaphysics posit intermediate realms between the two, the Will of God and physical creation, in a gradated cosmogony of which this world is the last, and least substantively real realm, an ever-changing shadow of immanent, eternal realms, whence values, as divine attributes, pre-exist and emanate.

But although this demonstrates the immanent nature of values in a pre-existing, atemporal, platonistic realm, it does not in fact resolve the tension between unrestricted Will and fixed natural order. The solution may be found in yet another neo-platonist dimension which breaks the strict dualism that divides unfettered will from constant and delimited natural law.

I refer to a well established (neo-platonic) framework derived from Shi'ih metaphysics and used in the Baha'i Writings to describe the creative dynamic of the divine will. Rather than seeing an immediate succession between God's will and its instantiation in the world, this model involves seven stages between God's will as potential, and God's will as execution. It is suggested that this scriptural framework holds the key for the reconciliation of God's causal voluntarism, and a posited constant, orderly natural law immanent in all created things.

Bahá'u'lláh states (Má'ídiy-i-Asmání 8:191-92) that nothing whatsoever may come into existence in heaven or on earth other except through seven stages: will (mashiyyat), purpose (irádih), predestination (qadar), fate (qadá), permission (imdá), fixed-time (ajal), and book (kitáb). The first three of these stages take place outside time, the latter four take place in time.

The Bab (Amr va Khalq, vol. 1, pp. 99-100) clarifies on the meaning of this creative process, by stating that the stage of Will is the stage before the quality of being a

thing has been attached to anything. We might understand this as the stage of pure unconditioned potential, where God's will is, as Schaefer states, *anarchos* unbound by anything, arbitrary, limitless possibility. To use an analogy, it would be the stage where a writer, with the willpower to write anything at all, has decided to write, but has yet to decide what it is he wishes to create. In this stage of Will, "He, verily, abideth in a state accessible only to Himself. Nothing is connected to Him, and in Him not a trace of the existence belonging to created things can be found." (Ibid.)

The stage of Purpose gives this formless potential a form, becoming a specific potentiality, possibility conditioned by intention, a creation that is yet to be, like that writer deciding to act, and write a book, who has yet to put his pen in contact with paper. In the Bab's terms, it is the stage of "the limitation of the creative outpouring... Whatever is going to exist in the contingent world cometh into existence through the existence of Purpose." (cited in Keven Brown, section 7).

With this purpose there comes an inherent and simultaneous, but causally dependent stage of Predestination, insofar as the intent to write a book will, even before the pen touches the paper, precondition the motions the hand will make, the ink it will use, the time it will need to write a book existing already *in potentia* within the purpose that animates his creative act. This is the stage "whose object is the design (*handasa*) of substances, matters, existences, natures, essences, accidents" (ibid.)

The next four stages involve the transition from willed potential, into realised will, from the realm of possibility and intention to the realm of composition and actuality. This fixing of potential in the realms of time and space is the translation from predestination, to fate, for once potential is actualised, it can no longer be changed, as once the writer has put his pen to paper, he might erase or cover or destroy what he has written, but he cannot change the fact of having written it in the first place. Thus Baha'u'llah writes: "Whatever is irrevocably decreed by fate cannot be changed, but whatever remaineth potential can be changed through means and actions." (*Má'idiy-i Ásmání*, vol. 8, pp. 191-192).

Baha'u'llah summarises these four stages in a perspicuously clear way: "The first inclination that is created ...before the appearance of means, is the stage of the Will; the first conception of means is the stage of Purpose; predestination is the stage of scheme and dimension, that is to say, the appearance of means in proper quantity. Fate is the composition of that which hath been decreed." (*ibid*).

Bahaullah continues:

"After the appearance of fate, execution becometh evident, and it is the same as the stage of permission. For every created thing its fixed-time, in other words, the duration of its existence, is set. After the fixed-time, the book, which is the stage of the completion of a thing, shall be laid bare and made manifest." (Ibid.)

And so, as the stage of fate is the instant when the pen touches the scroll and initiates the process by which potential takes on a determinate form, so in the stage of Permission that first contact turns to execution, as the pen from first contact with the page, moves to write its intended text. That execution can only go on for so long

if the book is to be completed, and it has a fixed term upon which completion depends. Until that term is reached, the stage of *ajal* or Fixed Time, the book will remain incomplete

The resulting text, creation as finally determined, realised and complete in both form and substance, is the stage of the Book.

Causal Voluntarism vs. Dispensational Voluntarism.

Schaefer's argument that God's will is unconditioned, unlimited and independent of norms and consequences is scripturally water-tight. By definition, in contrast, natural law is a fixed and stable order, which allows for predictable relations and consequences. The answer to this dilemma, it is suggested, is akin to that of the origin of creation, already adverted above, that God's Primal Will is eternally simultaneous God, and hence has always been, without beginning or end, while at the same time that same Will is causally subsequent to God, so that it is temporally eternal, but causally created. In further evidence of the identification of God's will and nature, Baha'u'llah states something analogous with respect to nature in the Tablet of Wisdom:

"God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning." (TB, p.140)

In the same way as God's Will, nature is simultaneous and co-eternal with God, but causally subsequent to God.

In this perspective, God's will is causally unconstrained by natural law, in line with Schaefer's voluntarism. He could conceivably create, and maybe has created, an infinite number of realms each with their own "natural law".[2] They would all be however, in light of the above passages, part of Nature and created through the instrumentality of Nature, regardless of their variant natural laws.

The natural law which underpins and orders creation, is determined by that Will, rather than determining, and hence constraining that Will – violating the voluntarist principle upheld in the Writings. And yet once Nature/the divine Will have manifested from the unlimited realm of potentiality, into the created order of the universe, including the moral universe predicated by the immanence of divine attributes within human beings before any historicised act of religious revelation, then natural law arrives at the stage of "the Book", the "fixed" manifestation of the Will, and so consistent and discernible by reason.

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[2] This is not a dissimilar position to what is sometimes known in cosmology as the "multiverse" alternative to the anthropic principle (viz. "The Anthropic Principle and the Science and Religion Debate" by John Polkinghorne, Faraday Paper No 4, Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Cambridge University, . st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/resources/Faraday Papers/Faraday Paper 4 Polkinghorne_EN.pdf (accessed May 2012)

The universe being so vast, including the inner universe of the heart, unaided human reason is utterly unable to encompass and comprehend its full extent, and the fact that there is such a thing as natural law does not entail human reason exhausting its workings, even if it can deduce them partially and progressively, as it has through science for millennia. What remains undiscovered and inaccessible is always vaster than what can be comprehended by reason at any one time. The same applies to the moral order immanent in the nature created by God, so that while reason may unaided apprehend something of the potentialities and processes of the soul, it is very far from being able to comprehend and exhaustively understand them. It is this fundamental insufficiency of human reason that adds, to the Book of Nature, the need for the Book of Revelation, which in a historicised manner articulates and reveals each dispensation new vistas of moral capacity and renews and expands and refines the inner meaning and outward applications of human values, which are ultimately the relative, temporal expression of God's absolute, atemporal attributes.

The distinction between the spiritual education available through moral reason and experience unaided by revelation and deriving from the order of the universe itself, and the spiritual education derived from moral reason and experience illuminated and infused through revelation is validated and affirmed thus by Bahau'llah:

"Consider ... the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings dependeth upon it. This education is of two kinds. The one is universal. Its influence pervadeth all things and sustaineth them. It is for this reason that God hath assumed the title, "Lord of all worlds". The other is confined to them that have come under the shadow of this Name, and sought the shelter of this most mighty Revelation. They, however, that have failed to seek this shelter, have deprived themselves of this privilege, and are powerless to benefit from the spiritual sustenance that hath been sent down through the heavenly grace of this Most Great Name. How great the gulf fixed between the one and the other!" (Gleanings, XCVIII)

The reconciliation between theological voluntarism and natural law, which allows us to accept most of Schaefer's analysis of the former, while modifying his rejection of the latter, may lie in a distinction of what I might describe as "causal voluntarism" and "dispensational voluntarism".

Dispensational voluntarism refers to Schaefer's position, which in order to preserve God's unrestrained Will, in denying any immanent basis to morality considers all values as arbitrary, unfixed and historicised acts of revelation, where morality is not merely defined, but created from scratch by each Manifestation of God with each religious dispensation, and not existing outside such dispensational revelations. There is no moral order inherent in creation, no moral good awaiting and discernible by reason within the hearts of human beings, but only temporal and temporary acts of divine will which create morality for a provisional historic period which human beings must embrace if they are to acquire genuine moral reasoning, which inescapably requires a revelatory framework to exist. Apparent acts of independent moral reasoning are to be considered as ultimately diluted derivations of revealed norms filtering through social and intellectual impacts from and exchange with revealed texts and religious communities.

What I term "causal voluntarism", in contrast, affirms the identity of God's Will and Nature as two terms for a single, primal reality which is quintessentially the creative principle and process by which all creation is engendered through an emanatory spiritual process. In its essence, in its causal primacy, God's Will is *anarchos*, unconstrained by any definition, any order, any form. It engenders pure potentiality as its first emanation or expression, purpose, creative energy. And so, at a causal level, the Will is, as per a classical voluntarist position, entirely apart from any category, entirely capable of any expression whatsoever, and the origin and standard of whatever may emanate from its own arbitrary expression. In its action, however, it becomes, by virtue of its own unrestrained purpose, defined in a creative act, which entails and creates an order, a fixedness of the acting as act, and whatever exists within that act or fiat, exists within the order and structure and constraints of that act of God's unconstrained Will. The entire created macro and microcosms are the continuous expression of that act, and as such, contain the structure and fixedness of that expression and that willing. As parts of that creation, the physical universe and the human heart are fixed within the structure of the universe as created, a universal structure and order identical with natural law. Nothing in this universe departs from natural law, because natural law is the creative expression of nature as God's will in the contingent world.

Similarly, in the station of pure potentiality, God's attributes could be expressed in creation in infinite possible ways, none of which God was bound to choose. Once God's unrestrained Will chose to act, however, in creating the human heart "in the nature made by God", engraving upon it His image, so that within it He could be found Mighty, Powerful and Self-Subsiting, then, the moral life of the human being existed within that structure, that order implicit and inherent in that expressed act of Will. Henceforward, within the world of contingency, a consistency of moral structure ruled, predicated by the complex of immanent divine attributes within the human soul. Whatever expressed or manifested those inherent divine attributes, manifested morality, and whatever was inconsistent with those eternal divine attributes within the human soul, violated, vitiated and obstructed morality. Those two stages, of unrestrained potentiality and enacted will, subdivided in the Bahai writings into seven, are only subsequent at a causal level, like the sun and its rays, and like the sun and its rays are simultaneous and inseparable in the realms of actuality.

From this perspective, both independent moral reasoning and religious revelation operate within the consistent framework of that inherent, immanent moral universe emanating from the divine attributes. Religious revelation does not create values – it reveals and applies them. Natural law is not in conflict with revelation – revelation discloses its inherent mysteries to a limited reason whose best approximation is ever partial. Moral reason can derive authentic moral guidance from its contemplation and deductions of the immanent order and qualities as expressed in creation and in relationships. However its deductions in this, as in every other area, are ever provisional. Revelation takes moral reasoning progressively beyond its own unaided capacity, while remaining adapted to its degree of spiritual evolution in any particular age. Moral reason is thus capable of independent ethical discovery in a relative way, with revelation its only absolute standard, and yet revelation itself being but a relative disclosure of the inherent moral order, constrained as it is by the degree of evolution of humanity at any given time.

To summarise the thesis of this extended commentary, Schaefer's voluntarist theology of values seems to me solid at the causal level, but misplaced at the level of the created universe, natural and moral. His negation of natural law and of a metaphysical moral order carries profound and far-reaching implications which place the Baha'i community on a collision course according to Schaefer himself, with the axiom on which have been built the current ideas of the equality of citizens under the law, religious tolerance, the principles of the rule of law, popular participation in government and the rejection of all forms of despotism and authoritarianism – among others - as well as valuable and groundbreaking trends in global and national policy, economics, and social sciences at a point when values are for the first time entering global decision making in a formal way.

A causal voluntarism, which affirms the unrestrained and arbitrary freedom of God's will at the level of potentiality, and affirms its ordered and fixed expression at the level of creative act, beside being scripturally a more internally coherent and comprehensive formulation, avoids such dramatic discursive tensions, and reconciles for the first time in a solid way the immense benefits accruing historically and currently from the recognition and affirmation of natural law, with the spiritual depth and practical implications of affirming the unconstrained sovereignty of God. This in addition has implications for the harmonisation of science and religion, which this paper cannot articulate, but offers building blocks for elaboration.

Part II: Organising structures of the Baha'i moral order.

The second volume of Schaefer's *magnus opus* is considerably the longer, and addresses in great detail the actual ethics of the Baha'i Faith at the level of specific virtues and moral norms. It surveys in detail some 80 individual virtues, including possibly the most rigorous and sophisticated Bahai treatment of justice to date [see also Huddlestons work], combining his unique insights as a former judge with decades of experience in the administration of justice, a virtue to which he devotes nearly 150 pages and which space regretfully dictates that we ignore in this paper. It is keenly hoped that many scholars will engage in detail with this critically important contribution.

In contrast to the qualified, if robust critique which Schaefer's incisive and ambitious thought inspired in me - in recognition of the weight and importance of Schaefer's arguments - volume two, moving from meta-ethics to ethics is one the present writer can much more fully identify with.

In fact, Schaefer's discussion of concrete ethics fits particularly well with the causal voluntarism I propose above, and in particular the distinction I made between values as immanent attributes, and values as transcendent norms.

This same distinction, problematised at the metaphysical level in Schaefer's system, is foundational to his structure at the actual ethical level and hence brings into definite conceptual unity at the level of praxis our divergent meta-ethical conceptions at the level of ontology.

"ethical injunctions are liberally scattered throughout the Baha'i sacred scripture, with commandments, praise of the virtues, exhortations and warnings richly woven into the tapestry of the whole. And examination of the holy texts reveals that moral guidance is made of two fundamentally different structures: virtues and commandments." [1]

This framework in fact resonates with the nuances I sought to contribute to the meta-ethical framework of volume 1. The immanent dimension I stressed above as a complement to the revealed dimension of moral norms, relates primarily, though not exclusively, to moral guidance with respect to virtues; while revelatory ethics relates primarily, though not exclusively, to moral commands. Naturally, both are inseparably interdependent, insofar as commands antitethical to virtues, will impede their expression and development, while the absence of underlying virtues will annul, distort or nullify the authentic execution and application of moral commands. And in both cases, as discussed above, the disclosure and articulation of moral virtues and commands in scripture, and that derived from moral reason in relation to natural law, will be qualitatively different in a radical way. Revelatory articulations of values and commands are intrinsically apodictic, normative and absolute within a dispensatory cycle; rationally deduced virtues and commands are intrinsically relative, negotiated and contestable.

The Baha'i Concept of Virtue and the Twin Structures of Baha'i ethics: T**eleology and Deontology**

Schaefer defines virtues as "supreme values, 'a conditioning prius of all phenomena of the moral life', according to which we should shape our life". [2] In resonance with our discussion above, these values are described as "identical to the attributes of God", and as such having "an objective character... Their validity is unconditional and the guarantor of this validity is the Creator of the realm of values, God, who, in manifesting himself, summons all mankind to these values." [*ibid*]

"Virtues", continues Schaefer, "do not prescribe concrete action; rather they are directed towards basic attitudes and dispositions, towards a mode of existence, towards right *being*, from which the right *action* results". Thus virtues are not neutral: "virtues have a *telos*, or purpose, that of right being". [*ibid*] This directionality of virtue means that Baha'i ethics are teleological, that is, tending toward a goal.

In contrast, concrete moral commandments and prohibitions in Baha'i scripture "constitute obligations that are to be observed because they emanate from the will of God". They are normative and operate, Schaefer convincingly proposes, "according the criteria 'permitted' 'commanded' or 'prohibited'". [*ibid*] In the Baha'i writings, these obligations include "legal prescriptions, moral commandments, and ordinances relating to worship". [30]

Even as Baha'i "ethics as virtues" are teleological insofar as ethical integrity is measured by the degree to which one's fundamental attitudes and dispositions impel one toward 'right being'; so Baha'i "ethics as norms" are deontological, that is, conditioned on a specific set of binding rules – ethical integrity in this specific domain being measured by the degree to which the divine commands and prohibitions are practiced and obeyed by the individual.

"Both categories, *deontological* and *teleological*, constitute the moral duties according to which man is to act. Hence, moral good and moral evil are defined either by virtues and vices, or by following commandments and prohibitions. The two forms, which can be found in the scriptures of most religions, are not contradictory, but merely different, i.e. complementary ethical structures, directed toward the same end: the achievement of human perfection, the winning of God's good pleasure and the attainment of celestial bliss." [2-3]

Schaefer's pivotal articulation of this twinned teleological and deontological structure of Baha'i ethics is a signal contribution to Baha'i moral philosophy that is, in the view of this writer, highly likely to stand the test of time. It creates a powerful framework for the analysis of ethical questions as they arise in the light of Baha'i scripture.

While the exact relationship, hierarchy and interaction between the teleological and the deontological content of the Baha'i revelation is likely to be explored and debated indefinitely, yet it would not be surprising if this fundamental framework became the basis of any edifice of Baha'i legal theory.

Virtue and duty: an analytical tool
Having established his teleological and deontological framework, Schaefer proceeds to classify the different virtues. He does so self-consciously, hesitantly, lest it be regarded as "a frivolous academic exercise" [5] which is not surprising, given his declaration, at the start of the first volume, that "all attempts at classifying...the confusing multitude of normative statements in Bahai scripture are ultimately doomed to failure." [vol 1, ix]

Nevertheless, without classification, Schaefer warns, "some apparently glaring contradictions among Baha'u'llah's utterances defy explanation." [ibid] He gives as (perhaps not perfect) examples the virtues of 'steadfastness' and of 'justice', the former named by Baha'u'llah the 'king of all acts' and the 'first and foremost duty' of humanity; the latter described as 'the most fundamental among human virtues'. [5]

These quotes evince and demonstrate for Schaefer the operation of a hierarchy of virtues ("first and foremost", "most fundamental"), and on the other imply a contradiction given their apparently equal primacy over one another. While one might argue that the different wording precludes contradiction, one can find more exact examples that demonstrate Schaefer's point. For instance, the quote he cites of justice being 'the most fundamental among human virtues' (*Gleanings* 100:6), can be contrasted with 'Abdu'l-Baha's affirmation that 'truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues' (Cited in Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26)

By suggesting a classification of virtues into categories of virtue, Schaefer hopes to reconcile such apparent discrepancies, so that a virtue could be the foremost in one category, while another in a different category.

Schaefer begins by classifying virtues into three classes in terms of three types of duty [5] which are their essential *telos* or goal:

1) Virtues relating to the duty to God, whose purpose is "to relate man directly to God". [5] These Schaefer designates "theocentric virtues", a term coined by him, which again, appears to have much potential to enter the language of

Baha'i moral philosophy. He is clear that such virtues "are not to be found in philosophical ethics."

Among these theocentric virtues he includes the love of God; the fear of God; patience (he discusses the intriguing phenomenon of 'messianic impatience') and forbearance; steadfastness in the Faith of God (which he connects to tests, trials and martyrdom); courage in the Faith of God; faithfulness and fidelity; submissiveness, humility, self-surrender, resignation and servitude; obedience; trust in God; thankfulness; and finally, piety. [cf. "contents"]

2) Virtues relating to the duty of the individual for self-perfection, which Schaefer designates "virtues of the path". [5]

These include self-knowledge; detachment; selflessness; purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement; moderation and temperance – the virtue of 'the golden mean'; chastity; and lastly truthfulness and the related virtues of uprightness, sincerity, honesty, trustworthiness, faithfulness, and fidelity. [op.cit]

3) Virtues relating to the duty of the individual toward other human beings, which he calls 'worldly virtues' importing the term from Catholic theology, [5] which is everywhere in evidence in this book as a major influence upon Schaefer's thought. Indeed Catholic moral theology, Aquinian in particular, is arguably Schaefer's major philosophical and theological influence in this work after the Baha'i writings themselves.

Here he includes faithfulness, fidelity and loyalty; humility; modesty; steadfastness, fortitude, constancy courage and perseverance; patience and forbearance; audacity; magnanimity; diligence and zeal in the context of a work ethic; respect, honour and reverence; gratitude and thankfulness; obedience; tolerance; courtesy and propriety; wisdom and prudence; justice; love; mercy, compassion, forgiveness, loving-kindness and clemency; generosity, bounteousness and charity. [op. cit.]

This is an interesting framework, whose value and usefulness will require time and application to establish. Indeed, as has been repeatedly affirmed, Schaefer's volumes are the very first systematic and comprehensive foray into the foundations of Baha'i ethics, and the applications of his model to ethical analysis of moral dilemmas, decision-making, personal, legal and institutional thought and relationships, awaits and invites exploration. Immediately stimulating however, is the manner in which Schaefer dynamically links virtue and duty, in a conception where duty provides the goal, and virtue the motive power, and content, of moral action.

These three categories of duty, moreover - to God, to self and to other - suggest a powerful analytical tool to make moral judgments, explore ethical dilemmas and guide decision making as a balance or integration of these three domains. From this perspective the moral and spiritual quality of an act (and of a life) consists of the degree to which it fulfils one or more of these duties without jeopardising or breaking with the remaining spheres. This is a persuasive and promising analytical instrument and line of inquiry.

A systemic approach: moral order, hierarchy and the mean
Consistent with his overarching suspicion of reductionism in any rigid system, Schaefer stresses the important caveat that "such a strict classification is not entirely feasible, as a considerable number of individual virtues belong to more than one catergory".[5]

And yet, Schaefer insists, "notwithstanding the fact that... virtue eludes strict categorisation, the virtues should not be regarded as the mere accumulation of moral values. They do not exist in isolation; rather, they stand in intricate and inseparable relationship to one another. They condition, support and delimit each other and it is the constant task of those who live according to these values to ensure that this harmonious order is not endangered by a distortion of emphasis." [29]

The existence of hierarchy implies the presence of order and inter-relation, and Schaefer definitely demonstrates, as in the examples given earlier, that the Baha'i Writings give primacy to certain virtues (such as steadfastness in the covenant, truthfulness and justice) over others. "Some are fundamental and they are accordingly given particular stress in scripture... others are more at the margin of the hierarchical order and are consequently subordinated". [30]

Concretely, Schaefer evidences clearly that the hierarchical order of Baha'i scripture "assigns 'the highest rank' to the theocentric virtues, and describes all others as 'secondary and subordinate unto them'". [30] Within these virtues, love and justice are supreme over all virtues.

This hierarchical order is however organic in nature, dynamic and emergent: "this order is by no means a closed system. Baha'u'llah has himself refrained from revealing a logical hierarchy. His enumerations of virtues are exemplary, never complete, and vary each time... specific accentuations... should not be viewed as absolutes; rather they should be understood in the context of hermeneutics." [30]

There is no space to address it here, but it is worth signposting that this compelling and elegant formulation has extremely strong echoes, and bears further analysis in relation to a very similar gestalt in systems theory, and more particularly complexity theory. The idea of complexity, as the element of life and evolution which exists "on the edge between order and chaos", and associated concepts such as "dynamic equilibrium", "emergence", and at a more elaborate level the notion of "attractors", etc., may be a valuable source of creative analogy and analytical insight.

Regulating the interdependence of these hierarchical relationships, is what Schaefer calls 'the virtue of the Golden Mean'" [151], and which he links to the value of 'moderation'. Although a specific value in itself, and hence outside the scope of this paper as such, it is also, in Schaefer's exposition, a mediating principle for all the values. This he associates to a universal in "the nature of things" (and hence by implication a key element of natural law as regards morality).

"It is in the nature of all things that they may be destroyed either by defect or by excess... Historical experience shows that overemphasis and exaggeration of a

virtue have generally led to its deformation. Exaggeration of the virtue of chastity has led to celibacy...while overemphasis of ...detachment from the earthly realm has led to ascetic rejection of the world... generosity, practised to excess, becomes squandering; exaggerated piety degenerates into sactimoniousness, bigotry and fanaticism... Even the supreme values in the value hierarchy – i.e. love and justice – degenerate when perpetrated to excess." [159-160]

Thus virtues to be virtues, have to harmonise with a fundamental structure, that is they must be appropriately prioritised in relation to one another, and also complemented, and moderated, by one another. Implicit in Schaefer's discussion is that, taking virtue as the animating and underlying spirit behind norms, this structure applies not only to the teleological, but the deontological spheres.

This is an immensely helpful conceptual model for understanding the structure of Baha'i scriptural ethics.

Part III: Revelation and natural law from theory to practice: intuitionism, consequentialism, and the advent of empirical ethics.

Empirical cognition: the next step in the construction of a Baha'i ethics?

Schaefer's project concludes with the above discussion of the rational structures of the Baha'i moral order. His vast overview provides solid anchors and intellectual relationships to embed Baha'i moral discourse in the wide discursive compass of moral philosophy through the centuries back to the Greeks, a prerequisite for the degree of correlation required for the maturation of a Baha'i moral discourse at a philosophical level.

What Schaefer's philosophy doesn't take account of, is the ongoing, and still early evolution of an empirical approach to ethics through the application of social science methodologies, and incipiently also of the neurosciences, to the conception, practice and impacts of values. This cannot be called in any way an omission, given how recent this development has been, and the distance of this approach from his own disciplinary background.

To release the full potential of a Baha'i ethics however, it is necessary in my view to engage this emergent discourse of social sciences research, inasmuch as it promises, in conjunction with existing efforts pioneered by Schaefer, a conceptual framework of enormous significance: the application and integration, perhaps for the first time in history, of the full range of human epistemological capacities into the question and pursuit of moral life.

I am alluding here to the four dimensional basis of Baha'i epistemology, which reduces knowing to four epistemological resources: reason, tradition, intuition, and the senses.[3] In this perspective, moral philosophy over the centuries, and certainly the tradition that Schaefer interrogates, has drawn primarily on the first two resources. Additionally, the early 20th century saw the formulation and rise of ethical intuitionism as a meta-ethical philosophical theory, founded by the likes of G.E

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[3] SAQ; Tablet of the four ways of knowing; PUP

Moore and W.D. Ross in particular. This theory suggests that there is an *a priori* intuitive awareness of what is right and wrong which is pre-rational and foundational to the derivation of ethical ideas and moral judgements. The starting point of this theory is the recognition, now extensively documented by psychology and to some extent by neurology (about which more below) that in practise, non-inferential moral judgements guide many of the commonsense ethical responses of every human being in everyday life.

In this light, one can say that until quite recently, the full extent of moral philosophy in all its varied schools was entirely deduced on the basis of reason, of religious tradition, and *qua* philosophy, to a lesser, and more recent extent also on the basis of intuition. Entirely missing, as a significant and rigorous contributor to moral theory, has been the experience of the senses, except as anecdotes drawn on to illustrate a given ethical thesis. Discussions such as the existence or absence of natural law, and its relationship to revelation, no less than the nature of specific virtues, or the wisdom of specific norms, have remained at the level of philosophical argument, doctrine, and intuitive preference, drawing at most on personal observation and experience, against which anyone else's personal observation and experience could be placed with equal value.

The terms of philosophical explorations and discussions, as in this paper so far, have been exclusively confined to philosophical and theological argument informed by intuitive preference. This was not an act of intellectual carelessness or neglect. In the absence of adequate research tools, the relationship of such philosophical and doctrinal arguments and preferences to the actual existence of ethics in social life, was impossible to explore beyond personal impressions.

With the advent of the social sciences however, the question of what ethics look like in the internal and external experience of human beings – as opposed to the question of what ethics *should* look like – began to attract the attention of empirical scientists in the fields of psychology, anthropology, sociology and economics. Most recently this has begun to be extended to the biological sciences as well, as neurological correlates to social, intellectual and emotional cognitions are discovered. What this has made possible, for the first time in human history, is the integration of all four epistemological resources available, according to the Baha'i writings, to human beings, reason, tradition, intuition and the senses.

As with our discussion of Schaefer's work, but much more so, it would be utterly impossible to do justice to the range of empirical studies of morality, their emergent findings, constraints, controversies and tantalising discoveries. A start can however be made to map a conceptual framework as preliminary as Schaefer's own, if less solidly and voluminously explored and hence all the more provisional, which may allow future scholars to advance the field and suggest ways to conceive a Baha'i moral philosophy, at the level of both ethics, and meta-ethics, which can integrate the full capacities of human knowing, and result in a perspective that includes and correlates effectively the richness of moral life at the prescriptive, descriptive and experiential level.

The contribution of empirical ethics research

Concretely, empirical studies of morality illuminate four central issues:

1) How morality is actually processed and translated into action in human experience
2) How universal or localised are moral conceptions of values across cultures.
3) How present or absent a given moral value is in a given context
4) What are the external consequences of values

It should be mentioned that in each of these areas, the empirical theories, frameworks and tools remain in their infancy, and in constant evolution. We are some way before any grand syntheses emerge, even of the empirical data and methodological parameters of such research. The indispensable interdisciplinarity is as yet altogether embryonic. However, the advances have been so consistent and significant, that there is no doubt that the empirical study of morality will be an increasingly important field in the human sciences, and enough data has been generated to identify consistent trends in the emergent findings, sufficient to delineate paradigmatic implications for any philosophy or theology of ethics.

To explore this it is necessary that examples be provided, not to delineate answers, but to exemplify the kinds of questions that any moral philosophy will have to include and address, in as much as every moral philosophy assumes certain psychological and social predicates which until now could never have been put to more than an entirely subjective test. The empirical findings challenge many such commonsense assumptions and enrich ethical thought by stretching its parameters.

Among the issues which have been empirically studied I highlight some indicative findings that may illustrate the nuances and challenges to commonsense understandings of ethical processes, and enrich and challenge our approach to the application of the ethical concepts explored in previous sections to the realities of action.

How morality is actually processed and translated into action in human experience

- Individuals with damaged areas of the brain involved in emotional processing make decisions contrary to all widely accepted standards of moral decision-making (Damasio 1994).
- The way the same dilemma is phrased, will generally result in two different ethical choices. (Tversky and Kahneman (1981))
- While globalist perspectives emphasise continuity, where a courageous character is expected to act courageously across situations, situationalist perspectives question the consistency of character and provide evidence that one's moral character varies according to circumstance:
  - Passersby in a hurry were 6 times less likely to help an injured person than those with time on their hands (Darley and Batson (1973: 105), and 5 times more likely (83% vs 15% of people) to help that injured person if noise levels were normal than if a nearby power lawnmower was running (Darley and Batson (1973: 105). And 88% of those who had found a coin on the floor helped a lady pick up her papers compared to 4% of those who had not found one (Isen and Levin (1972: 387)).

How universal or localised are moral conceptions of values across cultures.[4]

- Ten value priorities have been validated across 70 countries, regardless of gender, ethnicity, religion, education, urban or rural settings (Schwartz 2006). These are: *self-direction* (including creativity, freedom, independence, etc.); *stimulation* (including daring, audacity, etc); *hedonism* (including pleasure, enjoying of life, self-indulgence, etc.); *achievement* (including competence, influence, success, etc.); *power* (including authority, influence, etc); *security* (harmony, stability, unity, reciprocity); *conformity* (including obedience, politeness, honouring parents and elders, etc.); *tradition* (humility, devotion, religiousness, etc.); *benevolence* (including helpfulness, honesty, forgiveness, responsibility, etc.); *universalism* (social justice, world peace, inner harmony, spirituality, beauty).
- "In the vast majority of nations studied, *benevolence, universalism, and self-direction* values appear at the top of the hierarchy and *power, tradition, and stimulation* values appear at the bottom. This implies that the aspects of human nature and of social functioning that shape individual value priorities are widely shared across cultures." (*ibid)*
- Data from 5,000 Moral Sense Test (Hauser date) participants showed that people appear to follow a moral code prescribed by three principles
  - o The action principle: harm caused by action is morally worse than equivalent harm caused by omission.
  - o The intention principle: harm intended as the means to a goal is morally worse than equivalent harm foreseen as the side-effect of a goal
  - o The contact principle: using physical contact to cause harm to a victim is morally worse than causing equivalent harm to a victim without using physical contact.

How present or absent a given moral value is in a given context and what are the external consequences of values

The measurement of values is, as mentioned, in its embryonic stage. Most approaches involve quantitative, statistically standardised and probabilistically sampled and analysed survey research, although alternative approaches are emerging, including experimental designs, monetisation analysis, and most recently, elicited values indicators. To take the example of measuring the presence of one value in diverse contexts, and its impacts I will take the case of *justice*, which can then be linked by interested readers to Schaefer's foundational exploration of the same:

- The perception of justice in a given organization predicts or mediates, according to a recent review (Li, A., & Cropanzano, R. J. Management, 35(3), 564-599):

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[4] The definition of what constitutes a moral "value" is a subject over which much ink has been spilled in the social sciences since their inception. The foremost current theorist is Schwartz, whose definition of "values" is extremely close to Schaefer's definition of "virtues", and it is this definition, tested in over 70 countries, that I adopt for the findings described in this issue. For Schwartz, values are beliefs linked to affect referring to desirable goals that motivate action and which transcend specific actions and situations (in contrast to norms, Schaefer's "commands and prohibitions"), which serve as standards or criteria and are hierarchical and mutually interdependent (Schwarts, 2006).

- o   individual helping behaviours at work
  - o group-level helpfulness
  - o group performance
  - o individual mental health
  - o unit-level turnover
  - o customer satisfaction
  - o unit-level burnout
  - o satisfaction with one's team mates
  - o relationship conflict
  - o group communication
  - o group coordination
  - o balance of member contributions
  - o mutual support
  - o individual effort
  - o and group cohesion.
  - o Even cardiovascular regulation has been linked in one study to perceptions of work place justice.
- A similar range of covariance is being consistently documented with regard to many other values, which have been shown to act as predictors or mediating factors for an equally wide range of impacts.

Empirical research and the evidence for natural law

Above and beyond theological and philosophical discussions, the accumulating body of empirical evidence strongly suggests the operation of natural law in the ethical sphere. We are finding, increasingly, that human beings are hardwired, not just for morality *per se*, but for specific moral frameworks.

The neurological research cited above shows how our brains are so tuned for certain patterns of morality, that damaging relevant parts will shift our moral outlook.

The cross-cultural survey research into values, strongly suggests a consistent structure of moral orientations, even if within that structure emphases and consistency will widely vary, including within them not only values, but anti-values when carried to excess or to the detriment of other values.

The moral sense study suggests a set of fundamental ethical principles common to human moral decision-making. These appear to be unconscious, pre-rational moral frameworks, which precede moral deliberation.

In the research into elicitatory approaches to measuring values, we found a similar recurrence of pattern and perception of relevance across a convenience sample designed for maximum diversity. We are also finding how morality is tested by situational parameters in a consistent way, even if the response to those situational biases may not be uniform.

Finally, we are finding that the presence, application or perception of given values will have consistent patterns of impact across very different environments.

While individual findings and methodologies may be subject, and are subject, to debate, the accumulating evidence does increasingly suggest, is that there is an as yet imperfectly understood but emerging picture of a consistent, complex, and dynamic structure to morality inherent in the human being, a foundational structure which frames, but does not determine, the moral life of humanity. One theoretical version of this position suggests we are born with a "moral grammar" equivalent to Chomsky's notion of an innate, universal linguistic grammar that makes us capable of decoding noise into meaningful sentences. If that is so, if we come equipped with a "moral grammar" or structure that shapes and moulds our reactions, predispositions and judgements vis a vis ethical dilemmas, and if our ethical principles and practises can be systematically linked to generally statistically predictable impacts - do we really need revelation? Can we not dispense with revealed ethics, when we can instead discover the evolutionary structures of morality, measure the impacts of different patterns of behaviour, and derive norms accordingly? Can science not replace religion?

The insufficiency of natural law

Even as empirical approaches to morality can add unprecedented insights and capacities to our ethical models and philosophies, there are strong reasons which these very approaches would suggest make the derivation and practise of ethical principles and norms on the basis of empirical findings a dubious, and indeed a dangerous alternative.

The foremost gap is that empirical research describes things as they *are*, not as they *should* be. Moral values and norms, by their very nature, are concerned with what ought to be, above and beyond what is at any one time. A few examples will suffice:

How morality is actually processed and translated into action in human experience

- The fact that we have pre-conscious moral intuitions does not make those moral intuitions intrinsically reliable in making moral choices or prompting moral action. The situationalist and heuristics research cited above demonstrates how those moral intuitions can be triggered, manipulated and numbed by the mere fact of being in a hurry, experiencing a positive event, and even the word order of an ethical question. In all these cases, a deliberative approach that resists moral conditioning and derives from an explicit values framework would clearly be preferable to a pre-conscious and possibly innate moral intuition.
- Further, even where moral intuitions are taken as reliable indicators of what is right and wrong at the most basic level, as per the ethical principles identified by the Moral Sense Test, this may not translate into the motivation to actually put them into practise across all contexts and to the fullness of one's ability. Once the question of what is right is agreed, the question of how to release the necessary motivation remains, and the situationalist evidence suggest that for a large majority of human beings the required motivation is lacking in contexts that place such motivation under strain.

How universal or localised are moral conceptions of values across cultures.

- While cross-cultural research has indeed found suggestions of common values frameworks, this does not mean that within those frameworks value priorities will be equivalent, and much less does it mean that the application of such value priorities into norms and decisions will be identical or equivalent. Indeed, a cursory look at any newspaper instantly demonstrates that value priorities are widely contradictory and frequently opposed, often violently. From the legitimacy of war to the promotion of contraception, from genetically modified crops to the death penalty, from the permissibility of abortion to the institutionalisation of gay marriage, it is evident that whatever "moral grammar" we may be equipped with which allows us to experience our life in ethical terms, it is insufficient to guide us to consensus as to what the predicates of such ethical frameworks should be.

How present or absent a given moral value is in a given context and what are the external consequences of values

- This is related to the point made above. In the example given, the perception of justice was linked to all kinds of positive effects. This suggests that justice is of great importance in the moral structure of human beings. However what is perceived as just demonstrably differs across social entities and individuals, and within individuals and social entities it also greatly differs across situations. For the sincere CEO of a multinational company, justice will be a very important value, and likewise for the Marxist guerrilla fighter, and for both the perception that justice is being done will have highly motivating and positive effects: but what will be regarded as justice being done could be altogether irreconcilable.

If science only tells us the nature of what is, and what it tells us is that our moral senses are both acute, useful, yet ultimately unreliable, that our inherent moral frameworks are incapable of generating consensus at a deliberative level, and that our unaided formulation, prioritisation and practise of values is, by itself, highly context and affect dependent, is it not then in fact redundant in generating universal standards of ethics and reliable ethical norms when revelation alone can supply such standards based on a transcendent, rather than a purely contextual and deductive framework built on instinct and shifting conceptual sands?

The insufficiency of revelation

It is true that, from the perspective of religion, revelation alone can provide the transcendent basis for a universal set of values. Only when values are regarded as transcendentally normative, can they be fixed as unchallengeable standards of what is right and what is wrong. Any contingent basis for morality is intrinsically and always up for grabs, since we all have equal authority to derive and interpret values outside a transcendent basis, which means that values can only become normative either by consensus, or by coercion.

While at the level of practise this is true regardless of a transcendent or a contingent framework, so that any ethical framework, including revelatory ethics, can only become normative through either of these two means or a combination of both, yet at a philosophical level the situation is very different.

Discounting the coercive route which has no power over conscience, when the ethical consensus is based on a shared recognition of a common transcendent framework such as is provided by religion, the concomitant value framework *qua framework* can be accepted by all who partake in that recognition without need for further contestation, and the focus can move on to definitions and applications of all that which is not explicit or self0evident in such a framework.

In contrast, where the consensus is based on a contingent framework, it is always a precarious one, for that same framework remains inherently and absolutely up for grabs, not only in its specifics, but in its foundational parameters, so that ethical standards are inherently provisional, and universal, continuous standards conceptually impossible in principle, with very serious practical implications. It can be argued that the extreme fractiousness of ethical debates in contemporary life may have to do with the exclusion, explicit or implicit, of even the possibility of universal standards of values, so that all value statements cannot be taken except as contingent on the shifting mores of a given social group.

And thus, while arguments from revelation are philosophically at least unpersuasive and at most irrelevant for those who lack the spiritual recognition of a divine revelation, with its attendant transcendent ground of ethics, the question is, within a Baha'i theology which starts from the premise of the ethical necessity and normative authority of divine revelation, are empirical perspectives on ethics, based on observation of a morally imperfect humanity, and incapable of generating, and in principle even contributing, to a transcendent set of universal norms, as irrelevant or marginal as revelatory ethics are to non-religious moral philosophies?

While it is true that Revelation can articulate values in a universal way, and add norms which, for the believer, are inherently and unquestionably in harmony with those articulations, and furthermore, endow potentially those principles and values with a motivating power unparalleled in the human world, yet the articulation of a universal set of values runs into the same obstacle adverted to above, that the espousal of a common set of values, and even, as per Schaefer's hierarchy of values, of common value priorities, while taking us indisputably further in consensus than moral frameworks predicated on moral reason and consequentialism alone, yet the reality remains that the concretisation of those values, be it in understanding, or in application, is filtered through natural moral reason, and hence within a common revelation multiple understandings arise, including multiple understandings of what is good and right outside the explicit or the self-evident in the sacred writ.

That there is much explicit and self-evident in revelation is undeniable, and the guidance which that provides, within the perspective of faith, is a contribution to the guiding of human affairs and the perfection of the individual unparalleled by any alternative, so that the fullness of human potential in this world is, again in the light of faith, unattainable outside these firm counsels and admonitions. And yet there is much, perhaps the vast majority of the ethical sphere which, although within the compass of revelation, is outside the compass of the explicit and the self-evident. Thus the prohibition of wilful killing is explicit, and when the text may say that killing a man is abhorrent, it is self-evident that so would the killing of a woman.

Within this perspective, however, the question of killing in self-defense, or in the defense of another, and the parameters where this would be permissible, even if

abhorrent, are surely matters where individual and institutional moral reasoning, inspired but not determined by revelation, would apply. Under such circumstances, all the epistemic weaknesses of deductive reason would apply, and naturally, as is indisputably the case, alternative conclusions can and are reached within a shared faith perspective including a shared value framework. The way the balance between unity and uniformity, between diversity and fractiousness is struck, whether at the level of individual orientation or national policy, is a further example where an agreed framework of values would not necessarily lead to an agreed concretisation of them.

Where it comes to norms, the issue is even more marked, both as regards the enactment of existing divine commands and prohibitions, when and how and to whom and under what circumstances, and also as regards the derivation of additional, supplementary laws and prohibitions from the values and norms enshrined in revelation. Even where a divinely designated authority exists to judge on the application of existing laws and derive additional laws in harmony with the revelation, clearly norms will continue to be derived and applied at national, local and even the family level, and will be as subject to natural reason as any other act of moral and legal reasoning.

Finally, the existence of a transcendent set of values, and even of a transcendent motive power, does not, in practise, obviate the mechanisms of human moral functioning. The challenges of context, where a seemingly trivial detail can dramatically impede or facilitate the practise of a value, operates regardless of religious affiliation and orientation. This has been the case even in extreme situational experiments, such as the groundbreaking if arguably unethical Stanley Milgram experimental simulation of torture, where religion was not a predictive factor on whether a member of the public would choose to administer apparently excruciating electric shocks to another human being as long as he or she was politely but firmly required to do so by a doctor in a white uniform. Nor does the guidance and power of revelation nullify the significance of brain functioning to moral functioning.

While revelation may provide the substance and the inner motivation of universal values, as well as norms which may structure their expressions – yet human psychology, social dynamics and specific situations provide the context against which those values are not only expressed, but gain their meaning, for the concept of justice, for instance would be meaningless without a context in which to practise it or inner means and mechanisms in which to do so. Revelation thus determines the direction and priorities, and hence the substance and structures, of moral life, yet human nature and the dynamics of social relationships determines their meaning, their applications and their referents. In other words, while Revelation generates and articulates values, natural law conditions their expression and pursuit.

The existence of revealed norms and values is insufficient by itself to achieve moral perfection, insofar as those norms and values require or necessarily involve intellectual and affective filtering and derivation from intellectually and affectively fallible human beings – even where motivation can be guaranteed. As the Bible recognised, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." And in ethics, the two are inextricable.

The complementarity of science and religion, revelation and natural law

From the above perspective, it seems that revelation and empirical science furnish information about different categories of ethical cognition, expression and application. Neither is sufficient, by itself, to provide comprehensive ethical guidance at the level of both principle and practise, but perhaps both can add to humanity's ability to navigate the ethical complexities of a world, in a Baha'i perspective, in the throes of a painful and uncertain adolescence toward an as yet undisclosed maturity.

Within a proposed framework of Baha'i ethics, revelation provides a fundamental impulse, an ethical direction, and foundational ethical norms in the form of specific commands and prohibitions, dynamically atuned to the needs of the age, progressively applied as conditions ripen, in a manner authoritatively, and from a faith perspective, infallibly guided and supplemented by legislative acts of the Universal House of Justice. This provides for a transcendent, apodictic basis of Baha'i ethics of unprecedented flexibility and richness.

These ethical impulses, exhortations, illustrations, instructions, commands and prohibitions are, however, as Schaefer emphatically points out, scattered across scripture, or in the case of the Universal House of Justice, emerging in a systemic, but nevertheless ad-hoc way. This means that the systematic application of these principles and norms, for example, to educational processes and systems, the development of law, the orientation of public policy, and ethical problem-solving more generally, will likely require a deliberative, inferential, systematic articulation of Baha'i ethical principles.

This exercise in deliberative ethics, inspired and founded in revelation, is thus a process of articulation through correlational, deliberative reason, and informed and guided by our moral intuitions, not only putative innate ones, but those arising from strongly espoused conscious values. Schaefer's volumes are foundational and preliminary examples of such a process.

This process can be nuanced, tested, and enriched by the empirical studies of ethical experience on a conceptual, and on a practical level. At a conceptual level, understanding empirically how shared values are localised in practise, what are the points of commonality and what the points of difference, can provide a solid basis for a deeper understanding of each virtue, that allows for a consultative spirit on a large scale, so that the articulations of what a given value means are less likely to be constrained by unconscious cultural bias, or alternatively have greatest relevance.

If an articulation of what justice means is in significant dissonance from the empirically ascertained consensus, it does not mean the consensus is right, but it clarifies a conceptual challenge that may well hold a breakthrough, or a caution, to take into account. It may also serve as a diagnostic, analytical tool in identifying to what extent normative principles are reflected in practise, what the key barriers may be, and what policy and educational interventions might make a difference in increasing the degrees of justice, fairness, trust, unity.

Such information on the existing and diverse conceptions of given values, in a mega-city and a tribal village, for instance, also acts as a control and a corrective against the reification of an intellectual definition and a given systematisation of an ethical framework, embedding it in dynamic dialogue with the lived experience of humanity.

Likewise, understanding the differences in articulation and expression of a given value in such an indigenous community, and large city, and in a voluntary club, may help identify what is in practice essential to a universally applicable concept of a value, from what is particular and secondary on a global scale, but which might nevertheless be essential in practical terms at the local level.

Greater understanding of possibly innate moral intuitions, and the articulations that trigger their constructive activation, might also refine the discursive forms and definitions we propound, as definitions which prove to be in tune with our natural predispositions, engaging our affect to result in ethical action, may be closer to the dynamic resonance between values as transcendent norms and values as immanent attributes, while definitions that leave our moral predispositions cold may be considered as departing from the transformational coincidence of external revelation and inner potential and response.

Empirical studies about the diverse effects of different emphases and applications of values, might also guide our hermeneutics with regard to the intended balance of virtues in the sacred text. An example is the Baha'i principle of unity in diversity. The extensive body of research on group cohesion and group diversity provides very valuable insights that closely correlate to a range of scriptural statements in the Baha'i writings, and in doing so, illuminates their meaning and interconnection, helping us define and understand an abstract textual concept in a potentially richer, more nuanced and finely tuned way. We illustrate this below.

At the conceptual level, a dynamic and rigorous synergy between revealed ethics and experiential ethics as disclosed by empirical science is, I suspect, a long way away, requiring considerable evolution of both Baha'i ethical discourses, and existing empirical tools and findings, and requiring in tandem their gradual interrelation.

Hence, the more immediate relevance of the empirical dimension is at the level of praxis. Understanding how different situational contexts test and condition our moral functioning may provide guidance into our elaboration of norms, policies, and systemic design. Norms and environments which facilitate situations which empower our capacity for moral action could be systematically fostered and privileged, while norms and environments which we discover inhibit our moral action could be de-emphasised, controlled for, or pre-empted. This perspective may provide a fascinating insight into the nature and function of revealed law, which might then be construed as designed to create situations and environments which act as optimal enablers for the expression and manifestation of virtue. Such insight can thus guide the translation of values into norms, no less that the timing, conditions and manner of implementation of specific Baha'i norms.

Empirical studies about the diverse effects of different emphases and applications of values, might also guide our application of scripturally revealed and emphasised values, as in the case of unity above, where understanding the thresholds at which diversity becomes divisive, and unity becomes inhibiting, might liberate our capacity to "translate that which hath been written into reality and action."

Understanding under what conditions moral intuition is an effective guide to moral action, and under what conditions questioning such intuitions is likely to redound to a more robust and beneficent ethical response, might help steer the way we impart moral education, and develop our moral consciousness.

Finally, if systematic articulations of values are predicated on implicit or explicit psychological predispositions, tendencies and mechanisms which the facts suggest are in fact not the way humans relate to morality, their application of such systematic articulations is likely to be hamstrung and even deleterious. Empirical studies of ethics can thus act as reality checks on conceptual deductions or projections, and in turn help underpin the application of ethics to real life needs and situations.

A case study in the interaction between scripture and empirical research: Unity in Diversity[5]

To illustrate some of the potential dynamics in a highly preliminary, indicative way, as a stimulus to thought rather than a comprehensive application, I will explore some possible correlations between scriptural statements on unity and diversity in the Baha'i writings, and the empirical literature on group cohesion and on group diversity. As an exercise, it is interesting that outside the empirical perspective, discussions of relative emphases in the Baha'i writings, the correlation of complementary but diverse and scattered Baha'i texts, and perspectives on their potential practical applications, are subject to a great many possible formulas, all of which would come down to philosophical preference and personal hermeneutic. The addition of an empirical dimension provides a dynamic, rooted hermeneutical structure, in constant evolution as new evidence and better scriptural correlations are made.

Unity in diversity: a curvilinear relationship

A concept that emerges from the empirical findings on group cohesiveness is that there is a curvilinear relationship to the benefits of unity, that is, an optimum level of unity above and below which the positive effects of group cohesion begin to diminish. Implicit in this notion, is that achieving this optimum point of unity depends on the presence of a degree of diversity, inasmuch as where cohesion is very homogenous, the adaptability and wider integration of a group may sometimes suffer, and viceversa.

This is a notion that echoes, and most importantly, explains, the following statement of Baha'u'llah:

"Such exhortations to union and concord as are inscribed in the Books of the Prophets...bear reference unto specific matters; not a union that would lead to disunity or a concord which would create discord. This is the station where measures are set unto everything, a station where every deserving soul shall be given his due." (Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 167)

The Baha'i Writings state that "like seeketh like and delighteth in the company of its kind". (HW) This notion forms the underpinning of social categorization theory and social identity theory in psychology, that is, we seek similarity and flow toward it, instinctively avoiding what we perceive as different and other, potentially making diversity cognitively and socially difficult to assimilate. On the other hand, diversity also potentially enriches our resources, our creativity, our thought process.

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[5] The following references to key findings come from a wide variety of sources, but an introduction to the key ideas may be found in the following literature reviews:

There is abundant empirical evidence for both effects of diversity. Where diversity is coupled with group cohesiveness, that is, when a group is at once diverse and united, then all kinds of advantages accrue to it compared to a group that is also united, but not diverse. Group cohesion is a key mediating factor in the impact of diversity on group performance and effectiveness, for instance. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that the more diverse a group is, the more challenging it is to arrive at unity, so that the potential benefits of diversity can be offset by the potential hard work of making that group gel, and a homogenous group can consequently perform better than a diverse one.

One of the factors that has been demonstrated to facilitate, although not by itself determine, the process of liberating the positive effects of diversity, is having a positive outlook on diversity, an attitude that embraces diversity. Likewise, actual positive experiences of diversity in the individuals within a group can also help liberate the potential benefits of diversity in the functioning of the group as a whole.

As with unity, thus, so with diversity there seems to be a curvilinear relationship, that is, an optimum level of diversity. Too much diversity and cohesion becomes unwieldy, whilst too little diversity, and homogeneity impoverishes the group. This resonates with the following Baha'i enunciation:

"In the human kingdom itself there are points of contact, properties common to all mankind; likewise, there are points of distinction which separate race from race, individual from individual. If the points of contact... overcome the peculiar points of distinction, unity is assured. On the other hand, if the points of differentiation overcome the points of agreement, disunion and weakness result." (Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 67)

Strong ties, Group Norms and Group Effects.

The literature distinguishes between strong ties, strong relationships of closely knit people, and weak ties, arms'length relationships with what can best be described as acquaintances. Each of these is associated with specific types of group effects.

One of the areas of unity which is affected by the relative strength of the ties binding a given group, is the evolution of norms of interaction guiding and harmonising its members. The stronger the ties that bind group members to one another, the more united a group is, and the smoother the process of evolving and enforcing group norms.

An example of this would be initiating a junior youth group. If all the members are already close friends, chances are that the process of developing group norms and standards of behaviour is going to be quite smooth, with effective communication and group dynamics, and a stronger initial degree of group commitment. If on the other hand the group is recruited through outreach work in the streets and the members hardly know each other except in passing, when put together in a room the group behaviour and functioning is likely to be to quite variable. Some might be quite shy, others quite raucous and rowdy, and it will take some time, and getting to know each other and bond together, in fact cohering the group, for there to emerge some accepted and shared norms of behaviour.

Currently, practically the totality of Baha'i activity revolves around small groups. Groups of believers and their friends in study circles and devotional gatherings, groups of young people in junior youth groups, groups of children in children's classes, groups of believers in teaching teams in intensive growth programmes, groups of believers in Baha'i institutions and committees. In the process, by consequence and by design, these groups are spaces for the formation of strong, authentic ties between individuals.

"So far as ye are able, ignite a candle of love in every meeting" (SWA p,34)

To the degree that Baha'i groups achieve such strong ties, their efforts will achieve what social scientists designate "group effects" - the power of small groups to impact on the behaviour and values of its individual members. Thus an individual may have a given set of values and ideas, but as they participate in a cohesive group, the group takes on a life of its own, and the values of the group become pervasive and permeate its members, even those whose point of departure is different. This puts into perspective the extraordinary service that the Baha'i community is rendering worldwide, in tens, hundreds of thousands of groups around the world, all animated by the Baha'i ethical impulse.

The impact of group cohesion on the evolution of group norms is such, that one of the observable group effects of closely knit groups, is that the group values can even override the values of individual members. Thus if you have a very united group around a certain core of values, then those values are more likely to be present in the group, and practiced by its members, even when not all individuals fully share them.

For example in work environments where everyone wears a suit and relates to one another in a hierarchical way, if the organization is tightly knit, chances are that even if you are an informal kind of person, when you enter that group or organization you will tend to behave more formally than comes naturally to you. Similarly, a group whose culture is genuinely participatory, with a focus on reciprocity and service, will be more likely to facilitate the appearance of such qualities in participants, even where they are alien to their day to day approach. Over time this can have deeper and more lasting effects outside of the group context.

The value of weak ties

On the other hand, one of the disadvantages of having a closely knit group is that such levels of closeness around a very specific group of people can make the structure less flexible, in times of change or adaptation where you might need new talents, new perspectives or new relationships, when instead of tapping into the capacities of new people, you might feel a sense of loyalty to the people around you, or a sense of safety in sticking to your group, that may hamper your capacity to adapt.

An example of this is when someone moves to a new neighbourhood, and develops very close friendships with two or three people that take up all her social time, she may not have very wide networks, but she can really count on those three friends

come hell or high water. If suddenly there is a power cut, however, and those three friends aren't around, or are ill equipped, the very strength of those ties, leading to the narrowness of her network, could influence the access that she has to other people who might be able to help. If on the contrary she happened to have more acquaintances, more weak ties, she might not be able to unburden her heart to them, or leave them caring for her house, but she might have many people to ask for a candle in the supposed power cut.

Another aspect of the research into the power of weak ties, people who we see regularly, every so often, but with whom we don't not share much closeness, shows that these ties can be instrumental to all kinds of positive variables, including a community's sense of security, peace and collaboration.

From this perspective, the Baha'i notion of a community of interest, the efforts to meet our neighbours and our co-workers, to create weak ties on a vast scale, and likewise the weak ties that our small networks impinge on, so that as we create a children's class we develop weak ties with the parents, endowing a community with connectedness and potentially turning the Baha'i community into a hub of resilience.

If weak ties are indispensable to a functioning community. And Baha'is are systematically multiplying the weak ties in their neighbourhoods, often becoming hubs in an otherwise fragmented and fissiparous community, above and beyond the contribution this may make to Baha'i community building, it is reasonably to conclude that Baha'is are contributing large scale effects in community after community across over 2100 ethnic groups and populations

Part IV: Conclusion

By way of conclusion, and for the sake of final clarity, I would like to summarise the key propositions in this proposed framework for Baha'i ethics.

Metaphysically, a causal voluntarism is advanced, whereby God's will is unrestrained and arbitrary, in the sense of absolutely unbounded, at the level of potentiality, and at the same time ordered and fixed at the level of creative act, natural law being the actualised expression in the contingent world of God's will as shaped and determined by His purpose. The dichotomy between nature and divine will is obviated by the scriptural affirmation that the two are differing words with an identical semantic referent. This formulation has implications beyond the scope of ethics, particularly with respect to the ontological and epistemological relationship between science and religion, which it is hoped may stimulate further research and discussion.

Baha'i ethics has two dimensions, a teleological dimension, consisting of values which direct and animate moral action, and a deontological dimension, consisting of revealed commands and prohibitions that structure specific behaviours. Both moral values and moral norms are hierarchically, dynamically and interdependently structured, and it is on the correct balance of these values and norms that the achievement of moral virtue depends.

Moral values are divine attributes immanent within the human soul, accessible in a partial way to all human beings apart from revelation, insofar as they are the very expression of humanity's inmost being. Without revelation however, these potentialities can never be discovered or released to their fullness, and revelation provides the motive power, articulation and guidance that can alone disclose and manifest these inner qualities in their plenitude.

Moral norms, in the form of commands and prohibitions, are, in contrast, not innate, but are either provided (and renewed) by Revelation, or derived from reason, tradition, intuition or experience. None of these are mutually exclusive, however only revealed norms are apodictic, and within a faith perspective, infallibly appropriate and universally binding upon believers within the compass of a given dispensation. In contrast, norms derived through any of the other epistemological criteria are intrinsically approximate, contestable, and fallible. This includes such norms as are inferred, deduced or derived from revealed norms and texts by any or all of these criteria outside revelation. From a faith perspective, therefore, revealed norms are the fixed cornerstone on which should be built any normative ethical framework. This however is nuanced in the Baha'i Faith by the progressive application (and hence not universal applicability at a given time) of such revealed norms, under the guidance and supplementation of the Universal House of Justice.

The translation of moral theory into practice, whether at an individual or a collective level, is mediated although not determined by the innate neurological and psychological (including social) constituents, constraints and predispositions of human beings, which act as enablers or inhibitors, but not determinants, of moral behaviour. An empirical understanding of these elements and dynamics can make a tremendous difference to the actualisation of virtue, and thus the spiritual development of individuals and societies. Empirical research can illuminate a very wide range of aspects of moral theology and philosophy, including such things as the hierarchy and balance of values, and the optimal (and the obstructive) conditions for the formulation and application of collective norms. It can also impede the reification or essentialisation of any particular ethical systematisations of revelation, by providing points of reference that can expose cultural and conceptual bias and challenge implicit or explicit assumptions, making possible new correlations with the sacred text.

At the same time, empirical sciences, by definition, are descriptive, and while providing raw material for deliberation, are inadequate to prescribe ethical values and norms, which are ultimately grounded on metaphysical notions of what is right and what is good. An empirical approach to ethics that would arrogate to itself the authority to determine the right and the good, would eo ipso cease to be scientific. Furthermore, an ethics founded on description, is an ethics bounded by description. Revelation in contrast discloses an ethics based on potential, a potential no less real for its not having been observed. Indeed revelation claims a transformative and a creative power, capable of a transmutation which introduces a new force and a new capacity, beyond what could be derived simply from a description of what is the norm. Empirical knowledge, equally crucially, is not intrinsically a motivating power in the ethical sphere, and descriptive ethics are not transformational ethics.

Ultimately, what is posited in this paper, is that in the Baha'i writings, moral values are attributes of divinity emanating from the primal Will of God as part of a creative

process and purpose that has culminated in the appearance of the human soul, in whose inmost being those attributes lie innately immanent. Their appearance and manifestation in this world takes place through exercises of will facilitated or obstructed by exposure to diverse material conditions and circumstances, in accordance with natural law as the actualisation of divine purpose.

However far this ethical realisation may be possible through a will guided by reason, tradition, intuition and experience, it is hamstrung without the leavening influence, the spiritual impulse and ethical vistas made possible by the recognition of a transcendent, divine revelation. It is the Word of God which unlocks the full capacities of the individual and of society to experience and actualise human virtue, and it is the bedrock of revealed norms that creates the conditions for this efflorescence. Derived, as opposed to revealed norms, will always be subject to error, and hence constitute a shifting bedrock, where a wrong foundation can lead ineffectiveness all the way to terrible consequences, or where laws can be made to serve the antithesis of virtue.

At the same time, revelation is not a replacement for, nor an invulnerable safeguard against fallible moral reason, since revelation is necessarily filtered through merely human instruments whether in interpretation, or in application. In the Baha'i Faith this is greatly mitigated, although not excluded, by the Baha'i Covenant, including the legacy of 'Abdu'l-Baha and the Guardian's interpretations, and in particular the unique existence of the Universal House of Justice, with its promise of infallible guidance and its authority to steer the progressive application of revealed norms, and supplement them as required, amending its own legislation as appropriate.

Baha'i ethics consists therefore of an ever ongoing effort to articulate and release the plenitude of the divine attributes inherent in the human soul through a dynamic interaction between revelation, intuitive and deliberative reason, and experience; guided and supported by the Universal House of Justice in an open ended, evolutionary, and reflexive process of inner exploration and societal discovery, adaptation and advance.