

Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Bahá'í Writings to discover the nature of the ontology they embody. However, in a single paper, this project can only be an “initial reconnaissance,” a scouting of the territory to discover some of its most prominent features. A full and more complete examination awaits a book-length study.

The main value of this project is that an ontology, like a constitution, provides a philosophical frame of reference within which various ideas take on meaning. Any exposition of the Writings or any Bahá'í-based philosophizing must harmonize with this ontological ‘constitution’, or at least, be neutral and not offend against its general principles. Thus, like any other constitution, a Bahá'í ontology provides a particular philosophical identity that distinguishes the Writings from other sacred books or the foundational books of various philosophies and ideologies. Clear knowledge of this identity lays the foundations for detailed and in-depth dialogue with other religious and secular belief systems.

1. What is Ontology?

Ontology is the study of being and what it means to say that something ‘is’ or ‘exists’. As a branch of metaphysics¹, the study of the most general principles of reality, ontology specifically concerns itself with the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence. It focuses on questions related to being, such as what precisely does it mean ‘to be’?; “why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”²; what exists?; what kind of things are there?; do all things have ontological parity? and what is the relationship between being and becoming?³ While far from complete, this list of questions provides at least a sense of the ontological enterprise.

2. Do the Bahá'í Writings Have an Ontology?

As the following example illustrates, the Bahá'í Writings definitely embody an ontology. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident – that is to say, the body – be destroyed, the substance, the spirit,

remains.” (SAQ 239) This statement commits the Writings to the existence – in some form – of spiritual substances such as the soul⁴, and to material substances such as the body. Moreover, it defines the body, and perhaps matter in general, as an “accident”⁵, as a particular kind of attribute or quality of a spiritual substance. Because the soul is the substance and the body the attribute or accident, they obviously have different ways or modes of existing: the ‘accidental’ body is in a relationship of existential dependence upon the soul, which it needs to exist. This suggests that the soul does not depend on the body for its existence – though it may depend on the body for its appearance in the world of matter – which allows the soul or substance to survive the dissolution of the body. Already at this point we have dealt with such questions as ‘what kind of things exist?’, ‘do all things have ontological parity?’ and ‘what does it mean to be as a substance?’

Although philosophical study of the Bahá'í Writings is in its early phases, it seems certain they embody a systematic ontology. As this paper shall demonstrate, it is already possible to discern the parameters of the system. The outward presentation of the Writings – tablets, talks, letters – should not be interpreted as a lack of coherent, systematic thought, since these various presentational forms are united by a network of identifiable themes and principles.

3. The Language of Bahá'í Ontology

Careful analysis shows that to an almost overwhelming extent, the Writings use a philosophical language and concomitant concepts that overlap with the philosophical tradition begun with the work of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.⁶ A list of these includes essence; substance; essential attribute; attribute; accident; potential; the prime mover argument; emanation; planes of existence; material, efficient, formal and final causes; the mineral, plant, animal, human kingdoms; contingent and necessary being; this world being an image of a higher world; the concept of the rational soul; an unknowable God and change as the actualization of potentials. These terms and concepts are used in a manner fully consistent with what we find in the original works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Moreover, the terms and concepts are used in a consistent manner throughout the Writings.

How are we to interpret the consistent use of this philosophical language? In our view, the Bahá'í Writings plainly endorse many of the ontological principles and ideas found in this tradition as the basis for further philosophizing. Of course, this is not to imprison future philosophical developments in ancient ideas, for as the work

of Whitehead, de Chardin, the neo-Thomists and Ken Wilber shows, this tradition is capable of highly diverse developments.

There are two main reasons for taking this position. The first is the sheer pervasiveness of the use of Platonic, Aristotelian and Plotinian terminology and concepts in the Bahá'í Writings. It is extremely unlikely that such a far-reaching overlap of terminology and concepts is merely a matter of accident. The literary and philosophical sophistication of the Writings show that the authors were obviously in full and complete control of their diction and chose it because they always had a specific purpose in mind. We must also remember that the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi cover a century: in other words, this consistency of diction spans four generations of writers expounding their teachings in very different circumstances, to very different audiences at very different times. This is unlikely to be mere happenstance.

The second reason for concluding that the language of this tradition was chosen intentionally lies in the inherent weakness of the counter-arguments, of which there are basically two. The first is that the philosophical concepts and terms were chosen as a means of communicating with a specific audience in its own terms. While this argument might possibly have some merit so far as Middle Eastern audiences of the time were concerned, it does not apply to western or other non-western audiences. In the West, since the time of Galileo and Descartes in the 17th Century, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition was scientifically and philosophically discredited most particularly in the areas of prime interest, physics, metaphysics, epistemology and ontology. Since that time, despite the efforts of neo-Thomists⁷ and neo-Aristotelians⁸, the philosophy of this tradition has never been a part of mainstream philosophy. Therefore, we must conclude that *if* Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and, through his use of quotation, Shoghi Effendi intended to use the language of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus to reach western audiences of the 19th and 20th centuries, they miscalculated grievously. For a Bahá'í scholar, the notion that a Manifestation of God and His chosen interpreters err so completely is not tenable for theological reasons but even a non-Bahá'í scholar would have enormous difficulties in supporting such a conclusion on non-theological grounds. Consequently, it seems almost certain that the choice of philosophical tradition is intended as guidance for future Bahá'í-based philosophizing.

A similar argument applies to reaching non-western audiences outside of the Muslim world. Here too, the argument that this language was chosen to facilitate communication fails because these peoples were wholly unfamiliar with the Platonic-Aristotelian-

Plotinic tradition. Initially, at least, such language is bound to be a barrier, a barrier that could be overcome only by a careful study of this tradition as presented in the Writings. Furthermore, it makes no sense to put these non-western peoples to so much trouble if there were no special value in doing so.

3.1. Making the Tradition and Language New

The second argument against the view that the Writings' use of the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition is intentional is that in Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, God has "instilled into every word a fresh potency." (GWB 92-3) For these reasons, the Writings cannot belong to an 'outmoded' tradition. This argument has two decisive weaknesses. First, it cannot be rationally denied that this argument notwithstanding, textual analysis shows that the Bahá'í Writings do in fact, use the terminology and concepts of this tradition in the way that is consistent with their original usages. A secular scholar would describe this as a conceptual continuity, whereas a Bahá'í scholar would say this is *confirmation* of some of the tradition's philosophical insights. Second, Bahá'u'lláh's confirmation of this tradition does not necessarily imprison our understanding in the work of the ancients. Whitehead, de Chardin, Wilber, and the neo-Thomists irrefutably demonstrated that this tradition is enormously flexible, capable of considerable growth and has, indeed, received a "fresh potency." (GWB 92-3)

4. The Bedrock Principle of Bahá'í Ontology: Ontological Dualism of Creator and Created

This paper contends that the bedrock of Bahá'í ontology is the principle of ontological dualism between the Creator and the created. It rejects any form of ontological monism — a substantial identity and/or one-ness of being⁹ — between God and creation. God and creation are so fundamentally different in their substance and modes of being that between them there exists an unbridgeable gulf denying any possibility of a direct connection, let alone substantial unification. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "there can be no tie of *direct* intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute." (GWB 66, emphasis added¹⁰) 'Abdu'l-Bahá also states categorically that the "Preexistent is different from the phenomenal, and the phenomenal is opposed to the Preexistent." (SAQ 293)

Because of the vast ontological gulf between the two¹¹ — a difference of kind, not of degree — it is impossible for God to become man as held by some mystics and by Christian incarnationism. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this view, which He

identifies with the Sufis as “evident error.” (SAQ 195) There is no way that “the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms.” (SAQ 195) He also rejects the view that man may become God, asking rhetorically, “[H]ow can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality?” (SAQ 221) Bahá'u'lláh makes the same point when He says, “*no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being ... every saint hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend [contain, encircle] His Essence.*” (SVFV 23, emphasis added) He reinforces this point by asking rhetorically, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence?” (SVFV 23) The ontological difference between Creator and created cannot be overcome by mere human effort.

Ontological monism undermines Bahá'í theology because it makes Manifestations superfluous as mediators between God and humankind. If human beings can actually or substantially become one with God, then there is no need for Manifestations to guide us to the divine. For this reason, ontological monism undermines the rationale of all revelational religion.

Moreover, ontological monism also ignores logic. First, if man truly becomes ontologically one with the Creator, then the claimant in effect becomes his own creator, which is to say, he exists before he exists – since God logically precedes all other beings. This is not logically possible. Second, the relationship of dependence on God can never be revoked or negated in any way. God is the perpetually indispensable ‘necessary and sufficient condition’ for the existence of anything other than Himself. Consequently, there is no possible point of view, position or stand-point within creation where the distinction between Creator and created is overcome and dependence on God is negated.

To claim otherwise – as ontological monism does – is, in effect, to claim ontological parity with God and to ignore Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that “He hath assigned *no associate* unto Himself *in His Kingdom ...* (GWB 192, emphasis added) It also violates Bahá'u'lláh's injunction not to “transgress the limits of one's own rank and station.” (GWB 188) The principle of adhering to one's appropriate station is so strict in the Bahá'í view that even after death, the soul “never leaves its own condition.” (SAQ 233)

Another major problem with ontological monism is that it violates the principle of the unknowability of God, since actually (i.e. substantially) becoming one with something entails inner or subjective knowledge of it and its condition. However, in the “Commentary on the Islamic Tradition, ‘I was a Hidden Treasure...’”, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá categorically states His own position that “the path to knowing the innermost Essence of the Absolute is *closed to all*

beings ... How can the reality of non-existence ever understand the ipseity of being?”¹² Since the knowledge of God is utterly impossible for “*all beings*” then no one – regardless of spiritual condition – can attain the necessary and sufficient conditions for obtaining such knowledge, which in effect denies the possibility of unity with God. Moreover, such knowledge is also impossible because “encompassment”¹³ is one criteria of knowledge: “until one thing *encompasses* another, it cannot understand its inner nature.”¹⁴ The problem for ontological monism is that according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the limited can never *comprehend, surround* nor *take in* the unlimited.” (PUP 422, emphasis added) This categorical statement is itself enough to completely negate any conclusion about the equal validity of ontological monism and dualism in Bahá'í ontology.

We must, however, remember that the denial of ontological union or oneness with God does not preclude an ethical oneness in which man submits to or harmonizes his personal will with the will of God. This ethical monism is not only allowed but even encouraged by the Writings as an essential human goal. Nevertheless, we must not misinterpret this ethical harmonization as an ontological union.

4.1. Apparently Monist Passages

It may be argued that the Bahá'í Writings contain passages suggesting ontological monism, as, for example, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee.” (HW Arabic 7) However, this passage is not really monist. Because we can find God's omnipresent presence reflected in the mirrors of our hearts¹⁵ does not mean that we have become ontologically one with God's Being. Moreover, this passage maintains the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived (God) – a fact which effectively precludes a monist interpretation since monism vitiates the distinction between perceiver and perceived.

*The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*¹⁶ contains another seemingly monist passage: some wayfarers behold various colors, but “some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself.” (SVFV 20-1) A careful reading of this passage shows that its concern is epistemological – visionary – and not ontological, it is about perceiving, not about the *being* of that which is perceived. To be ontologically monist, this passage would have to assert that “the place of appearance” (SVFV 20) and the sun itself are actually one and that the perceiver, the person who gazes, is substantially one with the perceived. However, it is obvious that the preservation of the perceiver/perceived distinction precludes a monist interpretation of this passage.

The following passage is also quoted to support ontological monism:¹⁷ “Yea, all he [the seeker] hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.” (SVFV 36-7) Nothing in these or immediately subsequent statements suggests that the seeker becomes ontologically one with God since neither the passing away of the world or self nor the loss of awareness of self and world as separate entities necessarily implies actual, substantial one-ness.

Finally, it is claimed that the Bahá'í belief that only God has absolute existence is “in essence a monist position.”¹⁸ Such is far from being the case. First, God's absolute existence implies the (relative) nothingness of contingent creation, not the ontological identity of creation with God. Indeed, to insist on such identity is, in effect, to insist that God – like creation – is nothing and that creation – like God – is absolute. Both positions are untenable for Bahá'ís. Second, the assertion of ontological one-ness between Creator and created implies that God is somehow present, albeit in different forms, in His creation. This position would be “appearance through manifestation” (SAQ 203) which 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically rejects as “quite impossible.” (SAQ 203)

4.2. The Failure to Reconcile Monism and Dualism

Given this rejection of ontological monism in favor of ontological dualism, how are we to understand Dr. Moojan Momen's claim that the two positions are reconciled in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden treasure'*”? According to Dr. Momen, 'Abdu'l-Bahá adopts a relativist approach to achieve “a reconciliation of the dichotomy”¹⁹ between an ontological dualism asserting that “there is a fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute”²⁰ and an ontological monism stating that “there is no fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute.”²¹ But is this really the case? After His exposition of both apparently monist and dualist views, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*But to this servant all these expositions and questions, stations and states are complete in their own station without defect or flaw. For although the object being viewed is the same, nevertheless the viewpoints and stations of these mystic knowers is different. Each viewpoint, with respect to the person who is in that station is perfect and complete.*²²

Analysis shows that 'Abdu'l-Bahá strictly confines His remarks to the *subjective* criteria for truth: given their own presuppositions and criteria, the advocates of each viewpoint reason correctly and attain a conclusion that is consistent with their spiritual conditions as

“knowers.” In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument is *subjectively* epistemological – concerned with the “knowers” and not with what is objectively known, with the perceiver and not with the perceived. He is not talking about what actually is the case but rather about what the viewer thinks is the case because of his presuppositions, nature and spiritual condition. Once this distinction is noted, it becomes clear that His judgment about the two viewpoints has no ontological implications at all.²³ Consequently, seeing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words as a relativist reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is to mistake a rather studiously neutral statement about two kinds of viewers as an endorsement of both their opinions.²⁴ Such is patently not the case.

If Dr. Momen’s reading is correct, it would follow that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assumes that the spiritual condition, nature and understanding of the believer are by themselves sufficient to determine the objective *correctness* or *truthfulness* of a belief. However, the Writings do not espouse such a subjectivist theory of truth.²⁵ Indeed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clearly dismisses this notion when He points out that subjective conditions and observations notwithstanding, it is simply an objective error of fact to assert a geocentric solar system.²⁶ Moreover, if spiritual condition and nature were sufficient to establish objective truthfulness, the Writings could not logically dismiss certain beliefs as “vain imaginings,” (TB 41) “error,” (TB 10) and “the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness.” (SAQ 137²⁷) Spiritual condition is simply not sufficient to establish objective truth.

5. Problems with Relativism

Can, as Dr. Momen asserts, relativism be “a basis for Bahá’í metaphysics” or ontology? According to him, there can be no ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ interpretation of certain experiences and statements as monist or dualist because all knowledge “is relative [to the speaker’s standpoint] This may be termed a cognitive or epistemic relativism.”²⁸

This far-reaching assertion is beset by at least six problems. First, is the claim that humans are “unable to make any absolute statements about Reality.”²⁹ If this is meant categorically, how can Bahá’ís claim “God exists”? For Bahá’ís, this declaration cannot be anything less than absolute since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the infallible interpreter of Bahá’u’lláh’s word, provided “proofs and evidences of the existence of God.” (SAQ 5³⁰) He affirms this unconditionally, which is to say, it absolutely as true from all possible viewpoints and no addition can make it more true than it already is. Furthermore, from God’s absolute existence, we can – contrary to Dr. Momen’s claim – make indisputable ontological deductions. For example,

God's existence makes Him the non-contingent head of a hierarchy of being whose other members are contingent and dependent on God. This dependence is true from all possible viewpoints within creation. Denying or relativising this irreparably undermines the foundations of the Bahá'í theology.

Second, in his claim that there can be no "absolute statements about Reality,"³¹ Dr. Momen falls into a logical trap that devils all assertions of absolute relativism. If the claim is true, then it contradicts itself, since it is an "absolute statement about reality." If it is self-contradictory, there is no reason to give it the epistemic privilege of being the "basis of Bahá'í metaphysics."

A third problem is that the denial of "absolute statements about reality"³² logically suggests that all viewpoints are equally true insofar as they are relatively true, which in turn undermines the central doctrine of "progressive revelation." (KA 220) Guided by successive Manifestations, humans attain ever more adequate, ever more true – though never perfect – knowledge of reality. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we were "created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization" (GWB 215, emphasis added) implicitly suggests an "*evolutionary relativism*" in which knowledge – while never perfect – is nonetheless genuinely improving and progressive. If knowledge is progressive, all viewpoints cannot be equally true.

A fourth difficulty is that Dr. Momen's "cognitive or epistemic relativism"³³ rejects epistemic privilege, a position that maintains that inasmuch as all views are conditioned by personality, spiritual, historical and cultural factors, they are equal. There is no absolute standard. However, in the Bahá'í Faith the Manifestations, "the perfectly polished mirror[s]," (PT 26) and Their chosen interpreters are, indeed, epistemically privileged: Bahá'u'lláh's "Book itself is the "Unerring Balance" established amongst men." (KA 13) Bahá'í teaching on this issue cannot be logically reconciled with epistemic relativism.

A fifth difficulty: if we argue that the statements of the Manifestations are privileged, but human interpretations of these statements are not, we face the problem of vacuousness. When all readings are equally true, then – because some readings contradict others – none are. Consequently, it becomes impossible to teach the Writings or even to discuss them since – all interpretations being equally accurate – no one knows what the Writings actually say. What is the point of becoming a Bahá'í or offering the Faith's teachings as a solution to a wide variety of world problems if no one knows what the Writings 'really' mean? Obviously, the very *raison d'être* of the Bahá'í Faith is removed by an unqualified cognitive relativism.

How can we distinguish various degrees of truthfulness without infringing on every Bahá'í's right to interpret the Writings for him or herself? This paper contends that the Bahá'í community has adopted negative gate-keeping as a means of reconciling doctrinal cohesion with individual freedom. Any understanding of the Writings is acceptable if it is not 'forbidden,' that is, inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Sacred Text and/or the guidance from Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice. By adopting negative gate-keeping, Bahá'ís have, in fact, adopted a *qualified relativism* inasmuch as negative gate-keeping stipulates that within the framework provided by the Central Figures and the Institutions, all understandings that are not forbidden are equally valid or true.

The sixth problem with Dr. Momen's views on relativism is his interpretation of Shoghi Effendi's statement that Bahá'í Faith's "teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final." (WOB 58³⁴) He appears to understand this as a blanket relativism applicable to all subjects, but such is not the case. The context of Shoghi Effendi's is progressive revelation which distinguishes between eternal "essential ordinances" (PUP 106) and "material ordinances [which] are abrogated according to the exigencies of time." (PUP 106) It is the "material ordinances" *not* the "essential ordinances" or "golden core"³⁵ which are relative. Because these "essential ordinances" (PUP 106) of religion are not relative, it follows that only a qualified doctrinal relativism can apply to the Bahá'í Writings.

6. The First Great Ontological Question: Introduction

Because the Bahá'í Writings embody an explicit and implicit ontology, they are able to answer one of the most fundamental ontological questions: "Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?"³⁶ In answering this basic question, the Writings also answer a host of supplementary questions and thereby lay out an entire ontological schema for future exploration and development. The question arises because, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, "absolute nothingness cannot find existence." (SAQ 281) Everything comes from something else not itself.

6.1. 'To Be' Means 'to be Caused' (with one Exception)

Unlike God, the created universe lacks "essential preexistence ... which is not preceded by a cause," (SAQ 280) and, therefore lacks ontological self-sufficiency and independence. For this reason, the created universe, like every one of its contents, requires a creator or

pre-existing cause since according to Bahá'u'lláh, “*All that is created ... is preceded by a cause.*” (GWB 162, emphasis added³⁷) From this we can conclude that in Bahá'í ontology ‘to be’ means to be caused and to be contingent³⁸, that is, to require a pre-existent and external cause. Consequently, ‘to be’ also means to be part of a causal chain or network, to be essentially connected to other entities or acts in a community of predecessors that extends through time.³⁹ This, in turn, suggests that the Bahá'í Writings are committed to a causal ontology.⁴⁰

‘Abdu'l-Bahá declares that every affect must have a cause⁴¹ and rejects as “manifestly absurd” (BWF 343) the notion of an infinite causal chain that does not eventually lead back to a First Mover. He uses this to prove the existence of God. (BWF 343) The fact that all beings except God need a prior cause highlights again the ontological dualism what we have called the ‘bedrock principle’ of Bahá'í ontology – the absolute distinction between God Who has “essential preexistence” (SAQ 280) and creation which does not.

7. Why is There Something Rather than Nothing? The First Answer

The Bahá'í Writings provide two answers to this question. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says, “*a creator without a creature is impossible ... all the divine names and attributes demand the existence of beings.*” (BWF 297, emphasis added) This and similar statements⁴² affirm the idea that there is something rather than nothing because God's perfection includes the title or name of ‘Creator’ which, in turn, logically “demand[s]” (BWF 297) a creation without which God would suffer a deficiency inconceivable in “the Exalted, the Supreme”. (TAB 197) This is the argument from divine perfection. It is possible to generalise this answer to say that creation follows logically from God's transitive attributes such as “All-Merciful,” (TB 12) “the Help in Peril” (PM 14) and “the Ever-Forgiving.” (PM 17) This in turn can be generalised even further, as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá does when He writes “all the divine names and attributes [transitive and intransitive] *demand* the existence of beings.” (SAQ 180)

7.1. God's Free Will and Necessary Creation

Do not such demands limit the freedom of God Who “is powerful to do as He willeth?” (GWB 314) On one hand, God's freedom is a paradox or mystery beyond human reason. There is nothing inherently irrational about this stance – known as moderate rationalism⁴³ – since recognising the limits of logic is not in itself illogical. On the other, we could say that God has not only established the laws of reason but also committed Himself to follow them. Thus, He is constrained only by Himself which, in effect,

leaves God doing as He wills. Given this commitment, He accepts creation as a logical consequence of willing His own perfection.

8. Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing? The Second Answer

Creation also exists because God wishes to be known. Bahá'u'lláh makes approving use of the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure. I *wished to be made known*, and thus I called creation into being in order *that I might be known*." (KA 175, emphasis added) This and similar passages⁴⁴ highlight that this freely chosen wish on God's part underlies creation.

However, if God is the "the Self-Sufficing," (GWB 12) why does He wish to be known? One possible reply, the 'devotional answer', is that God's will in all its mystery ought to be sufficient reason for us since He is "inscrutable unto all men." (SWB 113) Another possible response argues that without beings to know Him, God exists purely as a subject and thus lacks being as an object. Since God cannot have any deficiency⁴⁵, He must – according to the logical rules He has willed and to which He has freely committed Himself – also exist as an object of knowledge in creations that are fundamentally different than He.

9. The Ontological Principle of Perfection and Plenitude

It might be argued that only the Manifestation and, perhaps, humankind are needed for God to be known and to "reveal [Himself]" (KA 175) but such a notion violates the principle that God's creation is "perfect and comprehensive." (GWB 62⁴⁶) This seemingly simple phrase conveys a very powerful idea, namely, that in Bahá'í ontology, the principles of perfection and plenitude are at work: creation is not only perfect (PUP 79⁴⁷) but the "numberless forms" of creation guarantee that God is known as completely and perfectly as possible throughout all degrees of being.

10. The Qualified Idealist Tendency in Bahá'í Ontology

The Writings state that all beings are "expressive of the *knowledge* of God." (PUP 178, emphasis added) Indeed, without revealing God's attributes and names, there would be no beings: "but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist." (PUP 177) Given that conscious or unconscious knowledge of God is *the sine qua non* of existence, Bahá'í ontology has a strong idealist tendency. Like Bishop Berkeley's principle of "esse est percipi"⁴⁸,

Bahá'í ontology correlates being and perception or knowledge, but with a unique qualification: in the Writings, 'to be' is not just to be known by God but also to actively know or perceive God in a manner appropriate to one's station. In general terms, knowledge and being are correlates. They can be distinguished intellectually but not separated in actuality.

Abdul'-Bahá's statement that "the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out," (SWAB 178) not only reinforces the idealist tendency in Bahá'í ontology but also gives it a decided Platonic turn.⁴⁹ Just as in the "Myth of the Cave"⁵⁰ Plato compares what most people take as reality to shadows, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likens the real world to a "shadow" (SWAB 178) or "images reflected in water." (SWAB 178) The Platonic structure of this idea is plainly evident in that the material world is a shadow of the ontologically superior, truly real world of the ideal Kingdom.

Although the material world is an image or shadow of the Kingdom, the Writings do not write of this "nether" world" as ontologically unreal or illusory in an absolute sense. Bahá'í ontology, unlike Platonic ontology, only devalues the world therapeutically – but not ontologically – to remind us that our ultimate destiny is not on the material plane though passage through this plane is necessary for our development as individuals and as a species. For this reason, we say that Bahá'í ontology exemplifies a *qualified* idealism.

10.1. The (Platonic) Arc of Descent and the (Aristotelian) Arc of Ascent

In Bahá'í ontology, things cannot just receive knowledge of God's attributes but must also express or reflect the divine attributes. Thus, every entity not only illustrates the "return to God" (PUP 73⁵¹), but actually *is*, in its very being, the act of returning to God. If it did not 'testify' to God's bounty, it would not actually exist. Therefore, at every moment an entity's act of being is both the "arc of descent" (SAQ 284) – the reception of God's attributes – and the "arc of ascent" (SAQ 284) – the reflection of God's attributes – in a manner appropriate to the kind of being it is. Descent and ascent are really aspects of a single ontological process constituting at every instant an entity's complete act of being and were this process to stop, the entity would cease to exist. This shows that in Bahá'í ontology, 'to be' is 'to be in the act of becoming.'

Furthermore, the arc of descent corresponds to the Platonic fall in which things are projected onto the lower, material plane as shadows, images or "outer pictures." (PUP 10) The corresponding arc of ascent is Aristotelian insofar as entities proceed towards, or 'return' to God, the universal "object of desire,"⁵² by actualising their intrinsic potentials through real experience and thus becoming

'all they can be.' They give up an ideal, untested perfection – the inexperienced purity of childhood⁵³ – for practical experience by which the human spirit will “acquire perfection.” (SAQ 200) The descent is not entirely a loss since an entity's act of being is augmented by the process of return.⁵⁴

11. The Two-Fold Structure of Being

The fact that things must both receive and actively express or reflect their knowledge of God in order to be, indicates a correlative two-fold structure of being: receptive ('passive') and active.⁵⁵ 'To be' is to be receptive *and* expressive of the divine attributes; being is structured receptivity and expression.⁵⁶ Though in the case of non-human entities, reception and mere reflection, that is, unconscious “testimony,” (GWB 177) is sufficient for the act of being, such is not the case for human kind. As the Noonday Prayer demonstrates, conscious and free humans were created to “know Thee and to *worship* Thee.” (KA 100, emphasis added) Thus, humankind also has a two-fold ontological structure, but it is distinguished by a qualitative difference: we must not only be aware of the signs of God but reflect them *consciously* and *freely* in worship.

12. A Hierarchical Ontology: Degrees of Existence

Bahá'í ontology includes the concept of “degrees of existence” (SAQ 225) as shown in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that “the differences in the degrees of existence of creatures is one of the necessities of existence, which unfolds itself in infinite forms.” (SAQ 301⁵⁷) He also recognizes “degrees of being,” (SWAB 190) stating that “although the degrees of being are various, yet all are good,” (SAQ 225) meaning that each being and each kind of being has its appropriate place (station) and properly performs its tasks as it “participateth in a coherent whole.” (SWAB 190⁵⁸)

Implicit in the concept of “degrees of being” is the concept of a hierarchy, albeit one in which each entity is good and perfect in its own degree and relative to itself. Relative to others, however, “*some beings are higher in the scale than others.*” (SAQ 130) Specifically, humankind is at the top and the mineral at the bottom, an idea emphasised by saying that “the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence.” (SAQ 278) In other words, humankind has a greater degree of being than matter, though in relationship to the “Supreme Being” (KI 97) any degree of being possessed by any created entity “is an illusion.” (SAQ 278) The hierarchical principle is so much a part of Bahá'í ontology that even the Abhá Kingdom reflects degrees or a hierarchy of being. As

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, in the next life those who "fall[] into the lowest degrees of existence" will be "considered as dead by the people of truth." (SAQ 225)

How, we may ask, can one thing can be 'more real' or have 'more being' than another? One possible answer is that the degree of being is determined by the capacity to receive and express the divine attributes and names. "Each [entity] according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God," (GWB 178) and humankind possesses this receptive and reflective capacity "[t]o a supreme degree" (GWB 177) because "in [humankind] are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed." (GWB 177) Thus, humankind possesses a pre-eminent degree of being among created things.

We must also recall that our degree of being or existence has two aspects. First, there is our *natural degree* or station as beings consciously able "to know and worship" the Divine, and as beings "at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light." (SAQ 235) Second, there is our *existential degree* of being, the degree we attain by the free choices we make and our consequent "nearness to God" (PUP 147) which seems to determine how much of the divine bounties or attributes we can receive and reflect. Above all, we must consciously choose to love God, for if we do not, we cannot receive and reflect God's bounties. (HW Arabic 4) Spiritually, we can be as real as we choose to be.

13. A Qualified Relativist Ontology

'Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statement about some beings as "higher in the scale than others" (SAQ 130) shows that Bahá'í ontology is a relativist ontology with the degree of existence possessed by any entity being *relative to its position in the hierarchy of being*. At the top of the "scale" of being is God, Who alone is existentially independent or "Self-Subsistent," (TB 34) and in comparison with Whom "the existence of beings ... is but illusion and *nothingness*." (SAQ 278) A similar relationship holds between humankind and matter: "the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence." (SAQ 278) It is nevertheless important to remember that *relative to itself*, or, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, "in its own condition," (SAQ 281) the mineral possesses complete and adequate existence. Similarly, in the Abhá Kingdom, those who are "deprived of [God's] divine favours" are "dead" in relationship to the "people of truth." (SAQ 225) Generalizing on this issue, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "existence and nonexistence are both relative." (SAQ 281)

The relativity of existence and nonexistence is ontologically important because it denies any form of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of absolute nothing, a key doctrinal point for almost all Christians and Muslims.⁵⁹ Indeed, on this issue, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “absolute ... has not the capacity of existence.” (SAQ 281⁶⁰) Consequently, we cannot take literally Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that we were “called into being ... out of utter nothingness.” (GWB 61⁶¹) Given ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s qualification, the latter phrase obviously intends the phrase “utter nothingness” relative or in comparison to God and does not introduce the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dismisses the concept of absolute nothingness as “inconceivable.” (PUP 88)

Because in Bahá’í ontological relativism, an entity’s degree of being is both absolute and relative – absolute vis-à-vis itself and relative vis-à-vis its place in the hierarchy of being – we have a ‘qualified’ not a radical or “totalistic relativism in which all things without exception depend on their relationships to everything else for their existence and degree of being.”⁶² Bahá’í ontology is also qualified because it has an absolute reference point – God – Whose absolute being is beyond degrees, and by Whom all other degrees of existence are determined.⁶³ God gives the hierarchy or “chain”⁶⁴ of beings an absolute foundation, just as in physics the absolute speed of light gives relativity an absolute foundation.

14. Substantialist Ontology

‘Abdu’l-Bahá categorically rejects as “erroneous” the belief that “each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence [and that] the existence of beings is like a mirage or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality.” (SAQ 278) What the mirage or mirror image purports to be is entirely unreal because the image “has no material existence, *no substance*.” (PUP 21, emphasis added⁶⁵) This suggests that in Bahá’í ontology to be real means to have a substance of some kind.

‘Substance’ of course does not necessarily refer to material substance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for example refers to the “living substance” (SAQ 90) from which humankind is created, and says that the rational soul and spirit are the substance whereas the body is the accident.⁶⁶ Even God seems to have a substance of some kind, for according to Bahá’u’lláh, the spiritual nature of the Manifestation is “born of the substance of God Himself.” (GWB 66⁶⁷) Thus we may conclude that in Bahá’í ontology, to be real, to exist, means to have or be a substance of some kind. What illusions and mirages represent lacks substance and is, therefore, not real.

The substantialist ontology is also confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that while things are known to us by their attributes, their "identity or reality ... remains hidden." (PUP 421⁶⁸) Elsewhere, using a flower as an example, He notes that the "*underlying reality or intrinsic identity*, is still beyond the ken" (PUP 421, emphasis added) of human observers. In other words, in addition to the attributes by which a thing becomes known to us, it also has an "underlying" substrate or substance that remains unknown. In its identification of "underlying reality" with "intrinsic identity" this last quotation also indicates that substance ("underlying reality") and essence ("intrinsic identity") are the same, a position that aligns Bahá'í ontology with Aristotle.⁶⁹

The fact that things are more than their perceived attributes also makes it clear that Bahá'í ontology rejects phenomenalism, "the doctrine that physical objects are reducible to sensory experiences"⁷⁰ or that empirical statements correspond only to "mental appearances."⁷¹ Real things are not only their superficial sensible or mental appearances but also possess an underlying reality, a substrate or substance as an emanation of the divine Will.⁷²

In regards to substantialism, there are three additional points to keep in mind. First, the fact that even this "nether place" (SAQ 178) has some degree of substantial reality qualifies or mitigates the Platonic aspect of Bahá'í ontology: the unreality of the "nether place" is relative in the hierarchy of being and not absolute. Second, we must keep in mind that a substantialist ontology is not necessarily static. What the Writings call 'substance' may – except in the case of God – also be thought of as various modes of a process of self-actualization.⁷³ Third, evil is simply a by-product of the greater good of the quest for self-actualization; it is a failing, a shadow or "absence of good" (FWU 78) without real existence, that is, substance of its own.

15. A Qualified Realist Ontology

Reflecting on the examples of substance given in the Writings, makes it clear that a substance is that which exists independently of a perceiver. Consider the mirage mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. What it represents, or purports to be (a caravan) is completely unreal – not only because it lacks substance but because it is observer-dependent for its existence; another observer might see the caravan as something else and there is no way to prove either person right. However, the fact that mirages exist as atmospheric phenomena is indisputable and independent of any observer. Therefore, Bahá'í ontology is realist; what is real does not depend on observers for its existence.⁷⁴ This realism is supported by the fact that all things are

created by God and therefore depend for their existence on Him and not on any human observer.

The claim that Bahá'í ontology is fundamentally realist does not mean that human beings simply perceive reality without interpreting it. The fact that we do interpret reality encourages us to re-introduce a traditional distinction between first nature, or reality as made by God, and second nature, the personal, social and cultural superstructure which humans have developed from their various interpretations of and work with first nature. For example, a sculptor such as Michelangelo takes a piece of marble – first nature – and interprets it as the unrealised form of “David” which – the second nature – he then reveals through his labour. Second nature is indeed man-made reality, and is, therefore, immediately dependent on humankind for its existence and proximately dependent on first nature. Thus, when we say that in Bahá'í ontology reality exists independently of human perception, we refer to first nature as created by God, and not to second nature. For these reasons the realism of the Writings is “qualified.”

Although the terms ‘first and second nature’ do not occur in the Writings, the concept is implicitly there. It is directly analogous to the distinction the Writings make between natural or innate and “acquired capacity” (SAQ 214) as well as between innate and “acquired character ... which is gained by education.” (SAQ 212) Innate capacity and character correspond to first nature; they are divine creations and, therefore, “purely good” (SAQ 212) because “in creation there is no evil; all is good.” (SAQ 215) Acquired capacity, character and education correspond to second nature. Our use of this distinction does nothing except apply at the larger, collective level a distinction clearly made by the Writings at the individual level.

The importance of the distinction between first and second nature should not be underestimated. It means, among other things, that the Writings distinguish between ontology *per se*, that is, the study of being *vis-à-vis* the first divinely created nature, and *cultural ontology*, that is, the study of being *vis-à-vis* human interpretations of and constructs based on this first nature. This distinction completely undermines the radical constructionist or relativist view that there can be no knowledge of nature as it is because whatever we call ‘nature’ is already a human cultural construct. From the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings, such *may* be the case – as proven by the existence of errors – but it is *not necessarily* so. Thus, we conclude that Bahá'í ontology does not support the view that our understanding of first nature is entirely a human construct. This, in turn, supports the outright essentialism of Bahá'í ontology.

Additional proof of the realist nature of Bahá'í ontology is found in the existence of the various kingdoms of God, the mineral, vegetable, animal and human. These are real regardless of human perception, that is, they reflect inherent essential differences, the divinely decreed “degrees of existence” (PUP 208⁷⁵) that are independent of human observers and not mere constructs or conventions. (SAQ 301) However, the realism is qualified inasmuch as the reality of things is relative in regards to God and higher beings.

However, this does not mean Bahá'í ontology espouses a completely ‘naïve’ realism in which the world is necessarily always as it appears to superficial inspection. On the contrary, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is perfectly aware that the senses and the rational mind can be deceived as, for example, with images in a mirror or in a mirage.⁷⁶ He does, however, agree that it is possible to penetrate these illusions, to cut through the appearances and illusions we have constructed to get to the underlying reality. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “we say that the spirit of man can *penetrate* and *discover the realities of all things*, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects.” (PUP 264, emphasis added) The notion of *discovering* realities suggests they exist independently of the knower.

16. An Essentialist Ontology: To Be Means To Have an Essence

Since the various kingdoms possess inherent or essential differences and if each entity has a hidden “reality,” (PUP 421) then it is difficult to avoid the judgement that the Bahá'í Writings uphold an essentialist view, or conversely, reject the basic nominalist principle that entities possess no real essences other than humanly constructed ‘nominal essences’ of second nature. The essentialist nature of the Writings can be deduced from Abdul’-Bahá’s statement that we know the “hidden” (SAQ 220) essence of a thing only through its qualities or attributes.⁷⁷ It follows that if the essence is hidden from us, it cannot be a human construction or convention and must, therefore, be independent of human perception and action. This would apply primarily to things in the divinely created first nature. Moreover, if we define essence as a thing’s unique capacity to reflect the divine attributes⁷⁸ and that “*all things* in their inmost reality” (GWB 177, emphasis added) do so, it follows that all things, be they first or second nature, have an essence.⁷⁹ Nothing is exempt from having an essence, as shown by the following list drawn from the Writings: God; the human soul; humankind; belief in Divine Unity; justice; “all created things” beauty; species of living things; truth; religion; “this new age”; “existence” and the spirit. These references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realise that such phrases as “inmost

reality,” “the realities of” the “inner reality,” and “inner realities” also refer to the essence of things.

This highly diverse list, along with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s references to the real but hidden “intrinsic identity,” (PUP 421) as well as to “the essential reality *underlying any given phenomenon*” (ibid, emphasis added), makes it clear that in Bahá’í ontology, all things have an essence whose attributes appear or manifest in the world. Because there is no such thing as being without an essence, being and essence are absolutely correlated. To be is to have an essence since the act of being can never be separated from the act of being something in particular.

Essentialism is reinforced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insistence that “the essence of things does not change,” (SAQ 100) an idea also reflected in His belief that the essence of humankind undergoes no change despite changes of outward appearance⁸⁰ and that species do not change.⁸¹ The immutability of essences is, of course, one of the pillars of any form of essentialism since the ‘purpose’ of essences is to provide order, that is, continuity of identity through various transformations.

Essentialism does not mean that Bahá’í ontology is static. Instead, we must bear in mind that the essence of an entity is only an aspect of its whole being. The other, equally necessary aspect is the ‘becoming’, that is to say, the manifestation of that particular essence in the external, contingent and “visible world” (SWAB 8) whereby it can display in ever-more adequate measure the bounties of God. Without this ‘becoming’ or actualization, the essence remains wholly on the “plane of the invisible” (PUP 30) and, thereby, without effect and unknown. That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Praise be to Him Who hath made the world of being ... and hath made the invisible world to appear on the plane of the visible.” (SWAB 13)

16.1. Being and Essence

On the far-reaching issue of whether being or existence is identical to essence, Bahá’í ontology sides with Ibn Sina and St. Thomas Aquinas in distinguishing the two except in the case of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes this clear when He writes that “all things are subject to transformation and change, save only *the essence of existence itself*.” (SWAB 157, emphasis added) The phrase “the essence of existence itself” is a philosophical description of God, Who, as the only non-contingent being, exists necessarily. His essence is to exist which is why He needs no creator. From this it follows that in God, existence and essence are one. This is emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when He speaks of “the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God)” (SAQ 180) indicating thereby that God’s essence and existence are identical.

In God, we cannot even conceive of a difference between essence and existence but such is not the case with contingent beings in whom we can distinguish between the essence, 'what' a thing is, and whether or not it actually exists, as for, example, with unicorns and moose. Thus, in Bahá'í ontology, whatever exists in creation has two correlated aspects: a divinely bestowed act of existence by which it negates nothingness and an essence which makes it the particular kind of thing or negation it is. It should be noted that the distinction between being or existence and essence allows us to understand with greater precision the difference between Creator and created since in God this distinction does not exist.

16.2. Knowledge and Essence

A key feature of Bahá'í ontology is the principle that human beings cannot know essences or substances directly but can only know *about* them by means of their attributes. Thus, Bahá'í essentialism is an epistemically qualified essentialism. On this issue 'Abdu'l-Bahá informs us, that "phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes," (PUP 421) that "the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities." (SAQ 220) Even more precisely, He says, "the *essence* of a thing is *known through* its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden." (SAQ 220, emphasis added)

What exactly does this prohibition of knowing essences mean? It is our contention that this is one of the 'continental divides' in the interpretation of the Writings: how we understand 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks will lead Bahá'í ontology into wholly two different directions with profoundly different implications for a number of important issues. If we go in a Kantian direction, the Bahá'í world-view is divided not only between Creator and created but also between absolutely unknown essence or noumenon and perceived attribute.

On the basis of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "the *essence* of a thing is *known through* its qualities," (ibid) the present author takes a non-Kantian view. The Master's statement shows not that there can be no knowledge of essences but rather that this knowledge must be gotten in a specific way – through the qualities. The knowledge about essences may not be obtained by direct, immediate intuitive or 'mystical' knowledge of the essence or substance itself. Knowledge about essences is indirect and 'second-hand,' and it is inherently incomplete, for which reason essences are bound to remain mysterious. Nonetheless, we can rest assured that whatever knowledge we do possess from the qualities, that knowledge is not just about the appearance of something but is 'connected to', corresponds to the inner nature of that particular thing.

17. Disconnected, Phenomenal 'Knowledge'

If there were a *complete* 'disconnect' between the qualities and the essence, Bahá'í ontology would postulate a *strongly Kantian* universe in which we remain absolutely isolated from the noumenal or essential realm and enclosed in a world of superficial phenomena or appearances.⁸² There are three problems with this position. First, such a limitation denies any knowledge of 'depth.' Not only does this conflict with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's claim that essences can, in fact, be known, albeit through attributes, but it also is out of harmony with such statements as "The power of the rational soul can *discover the realities of things, comprehend* the peculiarities of beings, and *penetrate* the mysteries of existence" (SAQ 217), and "For this reason we say that the spirit of man *can penetrate and discover the realities of all things, can solve the secrets and mysteries* of all created objects." (PUP 264, emphases added) These statements, with their references to knowing the "realities of things" and solving "secrets and mysteries" clearly indicate that human knowledge goes deeper than phenomena or appearances.

The second problem follows from the first. If there is a complete disconnect between our knowledge and "the realities of things", then in fact, there is no knowledge of things at all. This opens the way for a profound philosophical skepticism that undermines the Revelation itself. A complete disconnect between phenomenal knowledge of Bahá'u'lláh and His reality prevents Bahá'ís from using their phenomenal knowledge of the history of Bahá'u'lláh to attain certainty about Him and His mission. Any efforts to know His phenomenal history would be pointless since such knowledge would not necessarily connect in any way to His reality. In that case, why bother?

Third: if there were no intrinsic connections between the entities and its qualities, how could we know to associate a particular set of qualities with a particular entity? Qualities with no intrinsic connection with entities are simply free-floating qualities not much different from the mirages mentioned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They have no intrinsic or necessary connection with any underlying reality or substance and this — in Bahá'í ontology — deprives them of reality. Moreover, if there is no certain connection between perceived attribute and essence, we will eventually arrive at an all-corroding skepticism about knowing things in any way. This conflicts with the Bahá'í notion of making progress by increasing knowledge of various kinds.

Though it rejects a strong Kantianism, Bahá'í ontology does, in fact, embrace a weak Kantianism insofar as it posits a distinction between attributes and essence, between the knowable and not

completely knowable, between inherently mysterious essences and the emanated attributes perceived by us. However, we must not press this distinction too far, lest we end with a strong Kantianism and its attendant difficulties. Finally, it should be noted that God, of course, differs from created beings inasmuch as “all these *attributes*, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation” (SAQ 149, emphasis added) rather than to God-in-Himself. However, as will be seen in Section 19, this doctrine is more nuanced than at first appears.

18. The Problem of Nominalism

Positing a complete disconnection between attributes and essence leads to some form of nominalism. If essences are completely unknown, they can be discounted and, therefore, objects can be reduced to the qualities we select and bundle together in whatever way suits us. This easily leads to the conclusion that what we call particular things – ‘chairs’, for example – are only a conventional (and basically arbitrary) selection of attributes bundled together under one name or heading, ‘chair.’⁸³ Such a conventional theory of knowledge easily leads to skepticism since any convention can be arbitrarily replaced by any other.⁸⁴

The Writings show at least three additional problems with nominalism. First, they assert that the “the reality of things, the mysteries of beings and the properties of existence [are] *discovered*.” (SAQ 9, emphasis added) Nowhere do they even remotely suggest that reality is merely a construct or convention. Second, the degrees of existence – mineral, plant, animal and human – are the results of divine creation and not arbitrary human conventions. Second, the differences between the degrees are inherent, that is, essential. The same may be said of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s three-fold division of reality in God, the Manifestation and the rest of creation. These distinctions are not constructs or conventions. Third, nominalism is implicitly rejected in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s acceptance of the concept of species and His emphatic denial of the modification of one species into another.⁸⁵ Since the differences among species are inherent and real, the existence of species is not simply a matter of constructing and conventionalizing.

19. God and the Problem of ‘Disconnected Knowledge’

Vis-à-vis God, the issue of disconnected knowledge takes a different turn. It seems that on this issue the Bahá’í Writings try to steer a middle course between absolutely denying any and all knowledge of God on one hand and the direct acquisition of

immediate, comprehensive and adequate knowledge of God's essence on the other. This is at times a difficult pathway.

According to the Writings, it is “absolutely impossible” (SAQ 147) for the human mind to know the divine reality, essence of substance. God's essence is “above all comprehension” (SAQ 148) and for this reason we categorically reject any direct, intuitive, mystical human knowledge of God. But does this mean that our knowledge of God's attributes – known only indirectly via the Manifestation⁸⁶ – is completely disconnected from God? This paper contends that even though this knowledge is scaled down, and, in absolute terms, wholly inadequate to comprehending completely the divine nature, it is, nonetheless, knowledge of God that we can rely on as being true, though limited and obtained indirectly. We learn to expect mercy from God, for example, because He is “the All-Merciful.” (TB 12) Deficient as it may be, this knowledge tells us something about God. At one point, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that such knowledge is given negatively: we assert God's perfection to deny imperfection.⁸⁷ This, however is still knowledge connected to God. Finally, we must keep in mind Bahá'u'lláh's statement that “no tie of *direct* intercourse” (GWB 66) joins God to His creation for which reason a Manifestation is needed. This statement must not be misread to mean that no tie or connection of any kind can exist between humankind and God.

19.1. The Problem of Ethical Nihilism and the Deus Absconditus

The issue of ‘connected knowledge’ is important because denying such a connection leads to two problems. First, if the knowledge given us by the Manifestation is not connected to God in some way, what is the soteriological relevance of the Manifestation? What authority does He have? Second, if such names as the “Most Merciful” (PM 63) have no real connection to God, what is the ethical relevance of God? Without real grounding in God, our ethical values are all mere matters of opinion. Such a position leaves us open to an ethical nihilism since without God's authority, ethical injunctions lose their absolutely imperative character and become ‘suggestions.’

Finally, disconnected knowledge can also engender the problem of the ‘disappearing God’, the *deus absconditus*. An absolutely unknowable God will simply become irrelevant and, for practical purposes, be ‘replaced’ as an ‘object’ of worship by the Manifestation. This, of course, violates the very *raison d'être* and message of the Manifestation, but the danger is nonetheless real because it is hard, if not impossible, for humans to maintain a sense of connection with something we cannot know in any way.

19.2. An Alternative View

It must be noted that the concept of faith provides us with an alternative view of the issue of connection between the God and the attributes given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh. We might say that these descriptors provide no knowledge of God because knowledge implies a degree of rational and intellectual certainty – which in turn suggests surrounding the object of knowledge⁸⁸ – whereas faith has no such implications. Faith is simply a positive existential response that is not dependent on rational or external evidence. In other words, we take it on pure faith that the attributes of the Manifestation apply to God, but we make no actual knowledge claims on this issue.

Although further research is needed to make a final determination whether the Writings favor the 'faith' and 'knowledge' approaches to God's nature, there are strong suggestions that 'knowledge' is favored as the first among equals. Knowledge and faith are the "two wings of the soul" (BWF 382) and both are necessary for the ascent of the human soul to the lofty station of divine perfections.⁸⁹ However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that "it is *first* 'to know' and then 'to do'" and that "By faith is meant, *first, conscious knowledge*, and second, the practice of good deeds." (BWF 383, emphasis added) These words seem to give knowledge a certain primacy since 'Abdu'l-Bahá even puts it ahead of good deeds. This idea seems in keeping with the affirmation that "for God, knowledge is the most glorious gift of man and the most noble of human perfections." (SAQ 137)

20. What Else Does It Mean 'To Be'?

In exploring various questions, this paper has provided parts of the answer to the question, 'What does it mean 'to be'?' We shall now continue this exploration. Rather than start with an abstract discussion, we shall begin with an inventory of the kinds of things that exist according to the Writings. This allows Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá to determine the inventory which is, in effect, a 'world-map' of reality.

According to the Writings, human beings inhabit a *Lebenswelt*⁹⁰ or 'life-world' that is made up of the following kinds of 'things': "sensible realities" or physical phenomena; "intellectual realities" or ideational phenomena; spiritual realities such as the "Holy Spirit," "human spirit" and the "rational soul"; God, the Creator; Manifestations, the mediators between God and creation; the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and their members; the human kingdom and its members; the Abhá Kingdom and its inhabitants; "spiritual beings" or entities who are the "angels of holiness ... Thine

invisible hosts” also called “the angels of Abhá.” In addition there are essences, and attributes or qualities, as well as potentials – also referred to as “capacities” or “potency” “powers” and substances, “material forces,” “spiritual forces”, four kinds of time (SVFV 25), the reality of “limitless space,” and the reality of cause and effect. (GWB 162) Furthermore, they recognize “the absolute order and perfection of existence,” “natural order,” natural laws⁹¹ and processes of growth, evolution, decline⁹² and constant regeneration.⁹³

In the *Lebenswelt* of Bahá'í ontology, all of these things exist in various modes of being. Examination of this list suggests that we can classify all the items as existing in one of five ways: either as (1) substance (which includes processes), as (2) an essential attribute, as (3) an accidental attribute, or as (4) the form of a substance.⁹⁴ Finally, there is (5) location, be it physical, temporal or ontological as in the hierarchy of being. Essential attributes are those that a substance needs to be the kind of substance it is; in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example, it is an “essential requirement” (SAQ 233), or the “inherent nature” (ABL 27) of fire to burn. Accidental attributes are those which a substance may have but are not necessary to be the kind of substance it is. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that the body is an accident of the soul which, He says, is the substance.⁹⁵ The form of a substance is the structure, or organization of the parts. Each of these things has a different way or mode of existing. Substances, be they material or spiritual, exist independently; accidental attributes exist contingently and dependently but not necessarily in a substance; essential attributes exist dependently but necessarily with a substance, and form also exists dependently and necessarily with a substance. Location tells us time and place as well as ontological location in the hierarchy of being.

Examining this inventory shows that each of the items fits into one of the five categories that seem to define the minimal requirements of Bahá'í ontology. In the category of substance, we find first of all God, Who is, strictly speaking, the only true substance because only God is completely independent of anything else. That God is a substance is confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh's statement that the Manifestation is “born of the *substance* of God Himself,” (GWB 66, emphasis added) meaning not that God is material but that He is a totally independent being. Lest this statement be misinterpreted in an ‘incarnationist’ manner, we hasten to add that the Manifestation is emanated or “born of” God, and resembles God formally (though not substantially) in the way a mirror image resembles the original formally. The relationship also resembles the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically

prior and is the final cause, *raison d'être*, of the other. All created entities are, therefore, substances only in a relative sense. As we have already seen, the rational soul is also a substance as are minerals, plants, animals, “spiritual beings,” “material forces,” “spiritual forces,” “sensible realities,” some “intellectual realities,” the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, various physical and non-physical processes and the members of the Abhá Kingdom.

In the category of essential attributes, we find the visible essential attributes and “powers” that any substances has along with “capacities” or potentials. All non-essential attributes are, by definition, accidental. Within the category of form – that is, the category of how things are organized – we find the “natural order” and “natural laws,” whereas within the category of location we find time, “limitless space,” and the “degrees of being.”

From the foregoing discussion we may conclude that in Bahá'í ontology, to be is to fit into one of these categories: everything that is a negation of absolute non-existence, everything that is in some way a ‘reality’ finds a place somewhere in this schema. Refinements or even changes may eventually be required, but it is difficult to imagine how any list of categories based on the Writings could fail to include these in some way or another. In other words, with these categories, Bahá'í ontology provides us with a basic map of reality that allows us to understand (within certain limits) the kinds of things we encounter. This list of five categories also shows that there exists some kind of underlying order in the Writings’ vision of reality.

22. A Non-Kantian, Realist Ontology Vis-à-vis the Categories

Our inventory of the Bahá'í *Lebenswelt* reinforces, from yet another side, the conclusion that our knowledge of first and even second nature is not entirely a human construct. It shows that Bahá'í ontology is not a Kantian ontology inasmuch as the Writings recognize the independent reality of time, space, “natural order” (SAQ 201) as well as cause and effect.⁹⁶ According to Kant, time, space, causality and other categorical attributes are imposed upon the unformed external data – noumena – by the human mind and shaped into the phenomena we experience. The cosmic order as we know it is an invention, a construction or convention of the human mind and, to this extent, truth is something that we have made rather than found. The Writings reject this view. Time, space, causality, the categorial attributes – in short, the cosmic order – are inherent in the phenomena themselves and are not human constructs. They were created by God, not man, and therefore exist independently of human perception.

23. The Rejection of Classical Empiricism and Positivism

Another conclusion we can draw from our inventory or *Lebenswelt* is that Bahá'í ontology rejects positivism and “classical empiricism,”⁹⁷ that is, “any view which bases our knowledge, or the materials from which it is constructed, on experience through the traditional five senses.”⁹⁸ This is not to say that the Writings altogether reject sense knowledge – for they do not – but rather that they present reality as made of intellectual⁹⁹ and spiritual¹⁰⁰ as well as “sensible realities.” (SAQ 83) Consequently, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology is fundamentally incompatible with any philosophical system or epistemic methodology that confines valid knowledge to knowledge gathered and verified by the five senses.

24. The Equivocal Application of ‘Being’

Our ontological inventory also shows that the term ‘being’ is applied equivocally in the case of God. In other words, the term ‘being’ does not apply to God in the same way as it does to created things. How could it? God is – among other things – uncreated, Self-subsistent, beyond time, has no spatial location yet is omnipresent and is omniscient. Indeed, the difference is so great we might wonder if the term applies to Him at all. Its self-evident virtues notwithstanding, this argument is rejected by the Writings which on a regular basis refer to God in terms such as “the Divine Being,” (GWB 46¹⁰¹) “the unchangeable Being,” (GWB 47) “the Ancient Being,” (GWB 49¹⁰²) and “the sacred Being.” (GWB 192) (It must immediately be noted that these descriptors for God should not be confused with the references to the Manifestation as the “Great Being.” (GWB 250)) Given these descriptions of God, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Writings intend us to associate God with being in some way. However, in light of the overwhelming differences between God and creation, it is clear that ‘being’ can only be attributed to God in an equivocal or analogous way. Like all other things, God has being insofar as He is not absolute nonexistence and because it is His essence to exist¹⁰³ as the only self-subsisting or necessary being.

This analogous knowledge of God’s being is entirely negative – He is ‘not absolute non-existence’ – and thus lacks any genuine positive content. Knowing what a thing is not tells us nothing about what it actually is. Thus, we are not ascribing any predicate to God beyond what the Writings Themselves do by referring to Him as the “Divine Being.” (GWB 46) This is simply a positive way of saying that God is not absolute non-existence. Of course we must recall that

although this predication indicates a truth about God – His being or existence – this does not mean that humankind understands this truth to its fullest measure. Our knowledge is correct but incomplete.

25. The Tension of Being and Nothingness

The fact that “the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence” leaves all created things in a highly paradoxical or contradictory situation: they both are and are not at the same time. Their very existence is constituted by a tension between being and non-being, a tension that cannot be escaped or resolved in favor of one side or the other. Were it resolved in favor of being, the created thing, would, in effect, become an absolute being like God; were it resolved in favor of non-being, it would become absolute non-existence, and that, as we know from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is impossible. Thus, all created, finite things are situated, so to speak, in the middle, between being and nothingness, a situation manifesting itself most obviously in the inescapable anxiety that accompanies all life and especially the lives of human beings. For humans it is necessary to learn how to live consciously and creatively with the tension, with the thesis and antithesis, of being and non-being which structurally constitutes our existence. We are not here to escape the tension by various means but to use it for our individual and collective growth.

26. Non-Being and Being-not-Yet

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that “nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable” (PUP 88) and that “no sign can come from a nonexisting thing” (SAQ 225) lead to the conclusion that in Bahá’í ontology there is another kind of non-being – ‘being-not-yet.’ The classical name for such incipient being-not-yet is ‘potentials’, which we have noted earlier are a part of the *Lebenswelt* in Bahá’í ontology. Of course, from the point of view of actually existing things, such potentials do not exist and are, therefore, a kind of non-being, but they are a relative non-being with a capacity for actualization. As such, like all other finite entities, potentials have a paradoxical existence: depending on viewpoint they both are and are not, though they are as real “in [their] own condition” (SAQ 281) as any other degree of being.

The Writings admit the existence of potentials when They note the virtues of the “potential in the seed,” (PUP 91) of the sun awakening “all that is potential in the earth,” (PUP 74) of the “virtues potential in mankind,” (PUP 70) of the inventions “potential in the world of nature” (PUP 309) and of the embryo progressing until “that which was potential in it – namely, the human image – appears.”

(PUP 359) Of similar import are the passages referring to the “mysteries *latent* in nature” (PUP 51) which are actualized by humankind, the “*latent* talents” (PUP 52) hidden in human beings, the “divine perfections *latent* in the heart of man,” (PUP 53) the “latent realities within the bosom of the earth,” (FWU 70) and the “the greater world, the macrocosm ... *latent* and miniature in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man.” (PUP 69-70, emphasis added) The same idea is implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we are to “[r]egard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” (GWB 260) which is to say that humankind possesses invaluable potentials that must be actualized through education. Perhaps most fascinating passage in this regard is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's rhetorical question, “*Before we were born* into this world did we not pray ... Did we not *pray potentially* for these needed blessings *before we were created?*” (PUP 246, emphasis added) Combined with the previous quotes, this passage strongly suggests that we had some degree of existence as potentials before we actualized on the physical plain. This matter needs further exploration.

27. Platonic and Aristotelian Elements in Bahá'í Ontology

The passages quoted above suggest that Bahá'í ontology recognizes that the material plane has two distinct, though not actually separable levels, the invisible plane of potentials and the visible plane of actualized things.¹⁰⁴ Quotes such as the following suggest the same idea: “through an ideal inner power man brings these realities [in the universe] forth from the invisible plane to the visible.” (FWU 70¹⁰⁵) Such quotations strengthen the view that Bahá'í ontology has a Platonic slant, a view also reinforced by statements such as, “The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven.” (PUP 10¹⁰⁶) Elsewhere we read “For physical things are signs and imprints of spiritual things; every *lower* thing is an *image* and *counterpart* of a higher thing.”¹⁰⁷ These, combined with statements that “the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out” (SWAB 178) and that the Kingdom is a more perfect world¹⁰⁸ – much like Plato's world of Ideas – shows that Bahá'í ontology has strong Platonic features.

The fact that the material world has a ‘level of potentials’ and a ‘level of actualization’, which are distinct though not actually separable, reveals the Aristotelian features of Bahá'í ontology. According to Aristotle, each thing – except God – is in the condition of being actual and being-not-yet or being-in-potential, of being and being-in-development, of being whole and being-not-yet-

whole. If we ask where these potentials are, the answer seems to be that they are enfolded¹⁰⁹ within the particular things. For example, the Writings speak of the “latent realities *within* the bosom of the earth,” (FWU 70) “the potential *in* the seed,”¹¹⁰ the “virtues potential *in* mankind” (PUP 70) and the “virtues latent *within* the realities of the phenomenal world.” (PUP 91, emphases added¹¹¹) This suggests that the invisible plane is not a physical place but rather the unactualized and, therefore, to us, invisible, condition inherent in all things. ‘To be’, therefore, includes being and being-not-yet.

28. Implications for Existential Ontology

Everything of which we are aware has a visible and hidden aspect – a fact which has tremendous implications for existential ontology. Due to limitations of space, we shall refer briefly only to two of them. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is that humankind lives in a world that is essentially and irremediably mysterious. Not only is the world an endless mystery for us – “how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop” (GWB 177) – but we are mysterious to ourselves as well: in each of us is “are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree no other created being hath excelled or surpassed... Man is My *mystery*, and I am his *mystery*.” (GWB 177, emphasis added) The essential mysteriousness within and around us leads in some existential ontologies to the establishment of a sense of estrangement, ‘uncanniness’ or ‘unheimlichkeit,’ and anxiety or Angst¹¹² as constitutive features of human existence, and in others, such as Marcel’s, to a more positive appreciation of the role of mystery in our lives. Like the Bahá’í Writings, Marcel sees the inescapable mysteriousness of life as a structurally constituted sign of the presence of the divine and, therefore, as something that brings value into human existence.

The second implication of the double visible and invisible aspect of things relates to humankind’s role in the universe. According to the Writings, humankind has a clearly defined role in cosmic evolution, namely, to transfer phenomena from the plane of the invisible to the visible. Humankind “discovereth those hidden secrets of nature ... transfereth them from the invisible plane to the visible.”¹¹³ Thus, humankind plays a role in the unfolding of creation’s otherwise hidden potentials and, thereby, makes its contribution to the evolution of the cosmos at large which is to say, human and cosmic evolution are inter-related as aspects of a unified whole. Without this intervention of humankind, the being of the cosmos would remain in an ontologically diminished state and for this reason humankind is a necessity – not, as modern evolutionary theory teaches, an accidental development – for the ontological completeness of cosmos. Without man, the cosmos would also lack

value,¹¹⁴ being incomplete and imperfect.¹¹⁵ Quantitatively insignificant at the cosmic scale, humankind is qualitatively of supreme value.

29. An Ontological Fall?

Because of the Platonic elements in Bahá'í ontology, we cannot avoid asking whether or not the transition from the Kingdom to the visible world and from the potential to the actual constitutes a 'fall'? The question arises because the potential or essential has a certain perfection insofar as it is not determined or limited by the conditions of actual existence. It also arises because of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's characterisation of the world of creation as being as "shadow[s]", "fantas[ies]", "images" and "pictures" in contrast to "the real world" (SWAB 178) of the Kingdom. From a Platonic point of view, this transition constitutes a fall.

However, from the Aristotelian viewpoint also evident in the Writings, the 'fall' into actual being in the world of creation, to the plane of the visible, is an opportunity for real growth and the actualization of latent potentials. Thus, what is a 'fall' in one sense is the beginning of progress in another. One recalls in this connection Bahá'u'lláh's prayer, "O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine." (PM 220) Without the tests of existence, there can be no progress, no actualization and making visible. The situation is analogous to what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about the innocence of children: their "purity is on account of weakness and innocence, not on account of any strength and testing." (PUP 53) From this vantage point, the fall is a 'felix culpa', a 'fortunate fall.'

30. To Be and Becoming

Since all things are a combination of being and non-being in the form of being-not-yet, all things are, therefore, in a constant condition of change as various potentials strive to actualise themselves. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "nothing which exists remains in a state of repose ... Everything is either *growing* or *declining*; all things are either *coming from nonexistence into being*, or going from existence into non-existence." (SAQ, emphasis added) He adds that "motion [is] an *inseparable concomitant* of existence, whether inherently or accidentally, spiritually or materially."¹¹⁶ Indeed, He says motion "cannot be separated from beings because it is their *essential requirement*," (SAQ 233) to which He adds, "this movement is *necessary to existence*, which is either growing or declining." (SAQ 233, emphases added) Since motion and change are essential attributes of all entities, then it follows that in Bahá'í ontology to be is to be in the condition of becoming. It is not a static ontology.

31. The Correlation of Being and Becoming

This leads to a subtle but important question: Is there a difference between saying that 'For an entity 'to be' means 'to be *in the condition of becoming*' and saying 'An entity's being *is the process* of its becoming'? One possible difference is that the first implies that there is a continuing substance that is in the condition of changing, that is, actualising its potentials, whereas the second suggests that the changing process itself *is* the entity. Put into its larger context, this question deals with whether Bahá'í ontology is an ontology of being as represented by Plato and or an ontology of becoming as represented by Heraclitus or perhaps a hybrid as represented by Aristotle and Whitehead. At this stage in our research, the last alternative seems the most capable of doing justice to what we find in the Writings.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "This state of motion is said to be essential – that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings." (SAQ 233) In this statement, 'being' and 'becoming' are absolutely correlated with one another: they are mutually interdependent, complementary and reciprocal relationship. In His words, they are "inseparable concomitants of existence."¹¹⁷ Like two sides of a coin, they are distinguishable by intellectual abstraction but are not separable in actual fact, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms when He says, "an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself." (SAQ 171) For this reason, it is our contention that Bahá'í ontology upholds the correlation – as opposed to the identification – of being and becoming in all things except God and the Manifestations in their station of "pure abstraction and essential unity." (KI 152)

31.1. What is "Becoming"?

At this point, however, we still face the question of how Bahá'í ontology defines becoming or change. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there are "different degrees of motion"¹¹⁸: "motion in transit", "motion of inherent growth", "motion of condition", motion "of spirit", "motion of intellect" and "motion of eternal essence."¹¹⁹ Reflecting on this passage, we see the nature of change as being from one thing to its contrary or contradictory, that is, from one place or condition to its opposite. Next, we see that 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explicitly adopted Aristotle's definition of change as the motion from potentiality to actuality¹²⁰, which is to say that in motion or change, qualities and attributes that were potential but not overtly present or active become actualized, that is, explicitly present and active.

Given the emphasis on change or the actualization of potentials – and further – evolution, progressive revelation and human progress after death, it seems clear that Bahá'í ontology has a strong

affinity for process ontologies. Furthermore, because Bahá'í ontology also has Platonic elements – the “nether place” as the shadow of the Kingdom – it appears that Bahá'í ontology resembles the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead which also combines Platonic and Aristotelian elements with a process ontology. Of course, this is not to suggest that Bahá'í ontology is completely assimilable to Whiteheadian philosophy, but the fact remains that, despite some important differences, they share a number of essential features.¹²¹

From the foregoing discussion, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology is neither a pure ontology of being as best illustrated by Parmenides and Plato, nor a pure ontology of becoming as illustrated by Heraclitus, but rather a hybrid of the two as represented by Aristotle and Whitehead. It does not claim that only static being is real and valuable, nor does it claim that only becoming has reality. Instead, both are real and essential features of the universe. It is a qualified process philosophy.

32. Conclusion

From the foregoing survey it is possible to draw at least five major conclusions about Bahá'í ontology.

1. The Bahá'í Writings do, in fact, contain a systematic ontology.
2. Bahá'í ontology confirms many of the insights provided by the philosophic tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, goes through Ibn Sina and Aquinas and is active today in Whitehead, Adler, Wilber and neo-Thomism.
3. Bahá'í ontology is rigorously dualistic vis-à-vis the relation of the Creator and the created. This is the bed-rock of Bahá'í ontology.
4. Bahá'í ontology represents a qualified form of realism, relativism, idealism and process philosophy.
5. Bahá'í ontology is rigorously essentialist, moderate rationalist, hierarchical and substantialist.

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NOTES

¹ The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*; *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*.

² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 1.

³ This question immediately brings to mind Plato's view that true being is only found in the realm of unchanging Ideas of which the changing entities around us are mere copies without 'full reality.'

⁴ SAQ 239.

⁵ SAQ 239.

⁶ See for example, Nima Hazini, "Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá'í Metaphysics"; Mark Foster, "Neo-Platonism: Framework for a Bahá'í Ontology"; John Hatcher, *The Purpose of Physical Reality*; Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings"; Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God*; Juan Cole, "The Concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings"; Keven Brown, editor, *Evolution and Bahá'í Belief*.

⁷ Of whom the most widely known are Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain.

⁸ This movement is best represented by the renowned Mortimer J Adler.

⁹ See Section 14 of this paper, "A Substantialist Ontology" for a precise meaning of 'substance.'

¹⁰ See also SAQ 293.

¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, of course, reveals a three-fold division of existence – the stations of Creator, Manifestation and the rest of creation. (SAQ 295) However, unaided natural reason, can, by itself, only identify two stations, Creator and created. The station of Manifestation requires revelation by the Manifestations of God. Moreover, the first fundamental division is between Creator and created.

¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'", emphasis added.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, emphasis added. See also SAQ 241; SAQ 157.

¹⁵ SWAB 108

¹⁶ Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics," http://bahai-library.com/?file=momen_relativism.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'"; emphasis added.

²³ A similar conclusion was reached by Keven Brown in "'Abdu'l-Bahá 's Response to the Doctrine of the Unity of Existence" in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Vol. 11, Number 34, September-December 2001.

²⁴ This, of course, raises the question as to why 'Abdu'l-Bahá would take such a neutral position and on this score we enter the realm of historical speculation. It is possible, for example, that He did not want to get the new faith or its adherents embroiled in a long-standing Islamic theological dispute, especially while they were in Baghdad.

²⁵ In fact, the Writings hold to a correspondence theory of truth. See Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" for detailed documentation about the correspondence theory of truth in the Writings, <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Den/4944/aristotle.html>

²⁶ PUP 356.

²⁷ This rejection of a subjective theory of truth is illustrated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's denial of the geocentric theory of the solar system. He says, "The eye sees the sun and planets revolving around the earth, whereas *in reality* the sun is stationary, central, and the earth revolves upon its own axis." ("Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics")

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Of course, it is important to distinguish the absolute assertion that God exists from particular descriptions of God; the latter may well be limited by our personal perspectives, but the former is an absolute truth.

³¹ "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics"

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ See also the Preface to *The Promised Day is Come*; BA 185.

³⁵ Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.

³⁶ Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* 1.

³⁷ See also GWB 157 and SAQ 280.

³⁸ GWB 157: "Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause ..."

³⁹ SAQ 178.

⁴⁰ This moves Bahá'í ontology in the direction of causal or hidden variable interpretations of quantum phenomena in agreement with Einstein and Bohm that the Copenhagen interpretation is incomplete.

⁴¹ PUP 307. See also PUP 424; TAF 16.

⁴² PUP 219.

⁴³ One way of schematising philosophies is by their answer to the question, 'How much can reason/logic tell us for certain?' Rationalists answer, 'Everything – and what is not rational is not real knowledge.' Irrationalists answer, 'Nothing. It's all just viewpoints and opinions.' Moderate rationalists answer, 'Some things – but not everything.'

⁴⁴ As in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Commentary on 'I was a Hidden Treasure' " provisionally translated by Moojan Momen.

⁴⁵ BWF 315.

⁴⁶ See also PUP 80; SAQ 199.

⁴⁷ See also SAQ 301.

⁴⁸ Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*. "Esse est percipi" – "To be is to be perceived."

⁴⁹ For more on this, see Section 27.

⁵⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7, 5141-517a.

⁵¹ See also PUP 291.

⁵² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072a, b.

⁵³ PUP 53.

⁵⁴ Some readers may recognise ideas analogous to those found in the poetry of William Blake for whom being has a similar "innocence" and "experience" dialectical structure. We may also see a Hegelian element here.

⁵⁵ This differs significantly from Berkeley for whom being perceived is sufficient for existence.

⁵⁶ If we correlate receptivity and activity with traditional beliefs, we have, of course arrived at a concept analogous to beliefs about yin and yang. For similar ideas, see TAB 140.

⁵⁷ See also SAQ 206, 213; PUP 302; TAB 146.

⁵⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the human body to illustrate His point, thereby showing yet again that an organic image of creation as an internally connected whole underlies the Writings.

⁵⁹ Thanks to Richard Gravelly and Susan Maneck for providing information and exact Qur'anic references on Muslim beliefs regarding creatio ex nihilo.

⁶⁰ See also PUP 88.

⁶¹ See also SWB 196.

⁶² G.R. Lewis, "Relativism," <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/relativi.htm>.

⁶³ God as the absolute reference point is analogous to light, which is the absolute reference point in physical relativity theory.

⁶⁴ SAQ 178.

⁶⁵ This does not refer to the mirage as atmospheric phenomenon, which is quite real, but to what the mirage purports to represent.

⁶⁶ SAQ 239; see also 240.

⁶⁷ See also SAQ 146.

⁶⁸ See also SAQ 220.

⁶⁹ Leon Edel, *Aristotle and His Philosophy* 123.

⁷⁰ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 658; *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 669.

⁷¹ Dictionary of Philosophy of Mind <http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/philos/MindDict/phenomenalism.html>; see also The Catholic Encyclopedia, "Phenomenalism".

⁷² GWB 177.

⁷³ A detailed discussion of this can be found in Kluge's "Process Philosophy and the Writings," <http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>

⁷⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 746.

⁷⁵ See also SAQ 129; 286;

⁷⁶ PUP 21.

⁷⁷ SAQ 220.

⁷⁸ GWB 177.

⁷⁹ Even second natures have essences: Michelangelo's "David" is required to have certain essential attributes to be a statue, to be made of marble, to be that particular statue by Michelangelo. We could call Rodin's "Balzac" "David", but it lacks the attributes to be Michelangelo's "David."

⁸⁰ SAQ 184.

⁸¹ SAQ 193.

⁸² Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, tried to solve this problem by using the universal will of which all things are made as the means to obtaining more than phenomenal knowledge.

⁸³ Nominalism: "The view that things denominated by the same term share nothing except that fact: what all chairs have in common is that they are called 'chairs'... Our common classifications are merely flatus vocis or breath of the voice." *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* 264.

⁸⁴ If the replacement of one convention by another cannot be arbitrary, it must be constrained and such constraints lead us back to the notion of essence/substance.

⁸⁵ SAQ 178-84.

⁸⁶ SAQ 222.

⁸⁷ SAQ 148.

⁸⁸ FWU 46.

⁸⁹ BWF 382.

⁹⁰ The term originated with Edmund Husserl in his *Phenomenology of the Life-World*.

⁹¹ SAQ 3.

⁹² SAQ 233.

⁹³ TAB 141. For a detailed study of process thought in the Writings see Ian Kluge, "Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings." (see <http://www.geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>)

⁹⁴ 'Substance' of course is not material substance but rather Aristotle's substance of anything that does not exist as an attribute (essential or accidental) of anything else or as a form.

⁹⁵ SAQ 239.

⁹⁶ GWB, 162.

⁹⁷ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* 226.

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ SAQ 83.

¹⁰⁰ PUP 138.

¹⁰¹ See also GWB 53; 70; 151; 166-167; 191; FWU 68.

¹⁰² See also GWB 151.

¹⁰³ The essence and existence of God are equated in SAQ 180: "... the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God ...)"

¹⁰⁴ The Writings also refer to the "human plane" (PUP 114), the "animal plane" (*ibid.*, 182), the "vegetable plane" (*ibid.*, 69), the "physical and intellectual plane" (FWU 59). However, inasmuch as these are specific planes of things already actualized, they are part of the visible plane in general.

¹⁰⁵ See also PUP 50, 81, 178, 241; PT 175.

¹⁰⁶ See also ABL 46.

¹⁰⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet of the Universe; emphasis added. Original Tablet in *Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp 13-32. Anonymous translation. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih

¹⁰⁸ PUP 4; 90.

¹⁰⁹ The allusion to quantum physicist David Bohm's concept of 'enfolding', 'unfolding' and the 'implicate' and 'explicate' order is quite intentional. See Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*.

¹¹⁰ PUP 91; emphasis added.

¹¹¹ See also “latent mystery” in PUP 360; “latent force” (ibid., 417) as well as the numerous references to “latent” throughout the Writings.

¹¹² Heidegger and Kierkegaard for example.

¹¹³ BWF 339; see also PUP 30; 81;

¹¹⁴ This is not to be interpreted as a contradiction with the statement that creation is perfect (PUP 80. The apparent contradiction is removed by recalling that creation as a whole, includes both the actualized and unactualized potentials. However, strictly from the point of view of actualized nature is incomplete and, in that sense, imperfect, because other potentials remain to be actualized or made manifest.

¹¹⁵ PUP 310; see also 309, 330, 400. See also SAQ 201.

¹¹⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*. Original Tablet in *Makátib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp 13-32. Anonymous Translation. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih

¹¹⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe*.

¹¹⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *On Divine Philosophy*, quoted from Julio Savi, *The Eternal Quest for God* 57.

¹¹⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *On Divine Philosophy*, quoted ibid. 57.

¹²⁰ *Physics*, III, 1, 201a.

¹²¹ See Ian Kluge, “Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings” in *Lights of Irfan V* (2004) or at <http://geocities.com/iankluge/Whitehead-deChardin.html>