

Origins of the Bahá'í Concept of Unity and Causality

A Brief Survey of Greek, Neoplatonic, and Islamic Underpinnings

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Introduction and Overview

Though the Bahá'í writings are explicit and, in important regards, unique in their exposition of the concept of unity, the Bahá'í conception is not without significant historical and intellectual precedent. This essay attempts to highlight several of the more prominent of these underpinnings by considering, however summarily, the history of the concept of unity (and its inseparable counterpart: the concept of causality) as it developed in ancient Greek thought, Neoplatonism, and, subsequently, in Islamic philosophy and mysticism.

In particular, the following points are discussed: (1) the Greek account of the eternity of being and of God as the Sun of Reality; (2) the Neoplatonic account of creation by way of emanation; (3) the accounts of various Muslim thinkers (particularly Fárábí, al-Ghazálí, Suhrawardí, and Ibn `Arabí) joining the concepts of creation and revelation and introducing an account of the unity of being by way of the names and attributes of God; (4) the anomaly of Ibn Rushd in the post-Ghazálí Islamic world, his resurrection of Aristotelianism, and his significant impact upon Europe; (5) the Bahá'í concept of unity, its inheritance and systematization of the insights of its intellectual predecessors (particularly that of Ibn `Arabí), its distinction in establishing the Manifestation of God, rather than God, *per se*, as the ground of the unity of being, and its implications in light of the Bahá'í assertion that the Supreme Manifestation has appeared.

It should be noted that, in relying upon several primary Greek sources, the Qur'an, and secondary sources on Islamic philosophy,¹ this paper seeks to provide an introductory and cursory overview of the respective treatments of this problematic, as a prelude to further study. As such, it makes no attempt to undertake a thorough, let alone detailed, review of Islamic philosophy, nor does it attempt to detail the social history of the flow of ideas through the three contexts.

Background: the Basic Problem of Being

Before considering the question of unity, and the multiple historical accounts thereof, brief consideration should be given to the even more fundamental problem of “being.” One of the earliest and most historically influential formulations of this problematic can be found in the writings of the Ancient Greeks, consisting, essentially, of the following debate: although Parmenides and Plato argued that only universals *are*, Aristotle disagreed, arguing that only particulars (ultimate subjects) *are*. Though this debate remained largely unresolved in the Islamic world, certain thinkers – such as Ibn Sina and Suhrawardī – provided a resolution through the merging of the two elements: the doctrine of the particularity of essences (i.e. doctrine of the individual soul).

Parmenides and Plato: Being is Universal

Of the Greek thinkers, one of the earliest extant accounts of being is that of Parmenides (d. 515 BC). The essential problematic he dealt with was the following: amidst this world of things that are constantly changing (e.g. birth, growth, death), on what ground can one assert that anything *is*? In other words, how can identity (the endurance of being) be predicated on something that is never the same from moment to moment? Parmenides made a decisive distinction: That which “*becomes and perishes,*” which “*alters its place*” and “*changes its shining,*” is the “*illusion (Greek: doxa) of mortals, in which there is no true belief.*”² In contrast, the way of truth (Greek: *alethea*) is the way of the totality-of-being (Greek: *estin*) which is:

not-generated, imperishable, whole, sole-of-its-kind . . . is now at once all one . . . And never will the force of belief say that from being something became besides it . . . For if it became, it is not, nor is it if some time it will be. Thus generation is extinguished and destruction is not-to-be-heard. Nor is it divisible . . . it rests in itself.³

His students, the Eleatics, radicalized this teaching in such a way as to lay the ground for a reaction by Plato. While agreeing with Parmenides that there is only *doxa* with respect to that-which-changes, they further asserted that such things (are)⁴ non-beings. *Only* eternal (the sun, the gods, etc) *are*.

At first, Plato’s (d. 347 BC) account of being, in Book VI of *Politeia*, seems to confirm the Eleatic orthodoxy of the non-being of the particular. Inquiring into the essence of rightness (Greek: *dikae*), he agrees that particular things – “the many” – are constantly changing and (are) therefore not beings proper. However, he departs

from the Eleatics in his declaration of what is being. Though “the many” are not beings, “*according to one idéa of each as one being, we proclaim ‘what is’ each.*”⁵ Thus, being proper pertains to the single, universal, and unchanging *idéa* (i.e. “looks,” “forms,” or, as called in later philosophy, “archetypes”) that unify the many particulars. For instance, though the particular trees in a given grove are not beings, they are illusory copies of the one true tree – which is an *idéa*.

Aristotle: Being is Particular

Aristotle (d. 322 BC) objects. He explains that “[b]eingness, as said in the most decisive and first and foremost sense, is what neither is said about anything underlying, nor is in anything underlying.”⁶ Restated positively, being is said of ultimate subjects and not of predicates.

This effectively turns Plato’s conception of being on its head. Only particular things, “the many,” the “each,” are ultimate subjects.⁷ Conversely, “that which prevails on the whole” (precisely the universal *idéa*) are always predicated on particulars.⁸ Thus, being lies in the particular thing, of which the *idéa* is a predicate or attribute.

Aristotle, however, does not discount the being of the *idéa* entirely. He explains that the distinctive and essential attribute of each particular being is its *idéa*. It is only through perceiving “the prior” (the being’s *idéa*) that the “posterior” (the particular being) can be truly understood. Without perception of the prior, “what is perceptible and first to each is often only slightly perceptible, and has hold of little or nothing of what is.” He employs an example: because the point is the *idéa* of (is prior to) the line or surface, true knowledge of a surface amounts to the understanding that it is a collection of points.⁹

Islamic Thinkers: Bridge of Universal and Particular

At the heart of this difference between Plato and Aristotle is a disagreement as to the most fundamental criteria of being: constancy vs. uniqueness. The Greeks presented these two criteria as mutually exclusive because they assumed that the *idéa* are universals (e.g. in a grove of trees, all trees are copies of *the one universal idéa of tree*).

Though this debate was largely unresolved in the Islamic world,¹⁰ certain thinkers, including Ibn Sina (d. 1037) and Sohrevardi (d. 1191), advanced the doctrine of the *particularity* of the *idéa*. Ibn Sina, in critiquing the Platonic doctrine of the *idéa*, explains that the universals exist in particular embodiments.¹¹ Sohrevardi, similarly, suggests that the *idéa* are not single prototypes of a multitude of

particulars; they may, rather, be embodied in particular representations.¹²

In other words, to each particular being corresponds a particular *idéa* distinct from the *idéa* of others of the same species (e.g. in a grove of trees, each tree has its own *idéa*; similarly, all men do not share the same soul but each man has an individual soul). This resolves Plato and Aristotle's dispute by adopting both of their criteria. Plato was correct to assert that what truly *is* about a being is its *idéa*, which *idéa* yet fulfills Aristotle's requirement of ultimate subjectivity because it is not common to the entire species but, rather, is unique to this particular member of the species.

The Unity of Being

On what ground, if any, can the multiplicity of beings in the world be considered not merely as a sum but as a *totality* (i.e. one being, a unity)? This question necessarily invokes the question of causality, which, in turn, invokes the question of God.

Greek Doctrine of the Eternity of the World (*Fusis*)

Though later philosophy asserted that the multiplicity of beings were together as one in the mind of a creative God, the ancient Greeks did not conceptualize God as a creator. Rather, their notion was that God, like the sun, causes the movement of all beings, but does not thereby create anything. Parmenides explains that Estin (the totality of being) is "not-generated [from without] [for] how and whence would it have grown? Out of not-being ...it is neither sayable nor thinkable."¹³ Similarly, nowhere in Plato is a creative God asserted,¹⁴ merely the Supreme *idéa* (Greek: *tou-agathou-idean*) Who "holds-above far beyond" all other *idéa* and is their Unmoved Mover.¹⁵ Nor does Aristotle assert the being of a creator-God; the closest he comes to it is asserting that "all things are either ground or from a ground."¹⁶ The implication is that those beings that are themselves grounds are not from a further ground, therefore being groundless (uncreated).¹⁷

Rather, the Greeks accounted for the oneness of being through the doctrine of the totality-of-being (Greek: *fusis*) whereby the totality of being, though moved by God, generates itself eternally. Though the sun provides the energy needed for nature to endure, it does not on that account create nature – rather, nature perpetuates itself. Parmenides explains that *fusis* is "**whole**, sole-of-its-kind ...is now at once all **one** . . . Nor is it divisible . . . it rests in itself" (emphasis added).¹⁸ Aristotle confirms, "nothing is without order in *fusis* because *fusis* itself is to **all things** a cause of order" (emphasis added).¹⁹ Thus, *fusis* is the account of the plurality of beings as one being (a totality).

However, Aristotle raised initial arguments against this account of the unity of being. First, by extension of his argument with Plato regarding the *idéa* are merely attributes,²⁰ he objects to the being of an alleged “Supreme *idéa*.” Further, he argues that it is impossible to classify the totality of being under the master genus of “Being” (*fusis*). Despite his convoluted explanation,²¹ the heart of his argument is compelling: “Being” itself is indefinable because every definition must always already pre-suppose being (every definition takes the form of “X is Y”). Therefore, Being cannot be an ultimate genus (i.e. classification, definition).

Having objected to the two central elements of the Greek account of the unity of being (the Supreme Mover and *fusis*), Aristotle asks: “Then in what sense are different things called good?” He offers another account, suggesting, albeit tentatively, the “analogy of being.” He explains: “[the good of beings] do not seem to be a case of homonymy by chance . . . Perhaps it is by way of analogy: that is, as sight is good in the body, so intelligence is good in the soul, and similarly another thing in something else.”²²

In the end, however, Aristotle retracts this argument. Having found no basis for any such analogy, he explains, “this question must be dismissed for the present.” With no other way to legitimize a pursuit of the “Science of Being,” he simply assumes that there is a Supreme Being, one that he at times describes as self-thinking Thought (Greek: *Nous Noesis*), and at others as the Unmoved Mover that moves all beings through the attractive power of love (Greek: *eros*).²³

The Neoplatonist Doctrine of Creation

The concept of creation, distinct from that of *fusis*, asserts that God (“the First”) is the creator of all beings. This concept of a Creator-God was present in the Judaic tradition (Book of Genesis) and continued in the early Christian tradition (Book of John). A subsequent bastion of this thinking was Gnosticism, which was decisive in disseminating the doctrine, particularly from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD.²⁴

The influence of these three currents of thought (Judaic, Greek, Gnostic) upon Platonism²⁵ resulted in Neoplatonism, a syncretism of ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian thinking.²⁶ As Plotinus (d. 269) and Proclus (d. 485) both explain, God, through His self-contemplation, emanated (created) the First Reason, which in turn emanated a sequence of further Reasons through a series of similar acts of contemplation. Each of these Reasons has created a particular celestial realm, the last of which created the entire world of nature. Thus, it is important to note that God, as the First in the series of causation, does not directly create the world of nature, nor

can it be deduced that He necessarily “intervenes” (or even knows of) the happenings of particular beings in the contingent realm (i.e. in time and history). The eternal is bifurcated from the historical.

Significantly, this account results in an ambiguity that speaks, at least partially, to Aristotle’s objections. Beings are *not* unified under the master genus of Being because, as Proclus explains, the First (God) is not a being. Rather, the First (is) featureless and nameless, exalted above categories of sensible and intelligible beings, and can only be inferred from perusal of the first caused being (Reason).²⁷

However, viewed from the perspective of the First Reason, the totality of being *is* unified under the master category of Being because the First Reason is itself a being (created). Proclus explains that “[a]ll things are found in the First Reason, since the First Agent has made this product to contain many Forms and each of these Forms to contain all the particular objects corresponding to that form.”²⁸ Hence, all beings exist as a totality in God’s Intelligence, and their creation lies precisely in their *existence* (the Greek-appropriated Latin word “*ex-sistere*” means “to cause to stand outside of”). The apparent diversity of creation is due merely to the divinely-ordained differences of dispositions of creatures, resulting in varying degrees of reception of the *single, uniform* outpouring.²⁹

Islamic Thinkers

Fárábí

Fárábí (d. 950), a Sufi and “philosopher,” was one of the first Islamic thinkers to expound an explicit theory of the unity of being. Without doubt, one of the most important contributions he made to the concept was his distinction between necessary and contingent³⁰ being. Meditating upon the Qur’anic articulation of the utter transcendence, unity, and independence of God, Fárábí explained that, while God is a being who is “necessary-in-Himself,” all other beings are “necessary-through-Another” (this can be loosely understood as “contingent”). This distinction amounts to a preservation of the unity of God by way of his exclusive right to an entire ontological domain.

Further, adapting the Neo-Platonist scheme, Fárábí explains that God, through an act of Self-contemplation, emanates the First Intellect.³¹ Through contemplation of its Author, the First Intellect emanates the Second Intellect, and through self-contemplation, it emanates the outermost heaven. The process continues until ten Intellects and the specific heavenly spheres are emanated, the last of which creates the terrestrial world, in which Man stands at the apex.³²

However, in attempting to propose an authentically Islamic doctrine, Fárábí makes a significant departure from the pre-Islamic account of emanation. Specifically, he attributes to this Tenth Intellect not only the capacities of creation, but also revelation. Thus, he equates this Intellect with the Angel of Revelation, Gabriel.

al-Ghazálí's Critique

Hamid al-Ghazálí (d. 1111) vehemently objected to certain features of Neoplatonic thinking, particularly as articulated by Fárábí (and by his successor, Ibn Sina).³³ One of his chief criticisms of the emanation scheme was that it denies God's quality of omniscience as postulated in the Qur'an. The concept of God as "Self-Thinking Thought" suggests that God's knowledge is limited to Himself or, at most, to the First Intelligence, which is the only being that directly emanates from Him. The scheme does not suggest that God knows all of the beings that emanate further down in the chain – including, for instance, particular terrestrial beings. However, the Qur'an explains that *nothing* escapes God's knowledge, not even "the smallest particle in heaven or on earth."³⁴

Further, he argues that the Neo-Platonist assertion of separate chains of independent causation is at odds with God's absolute power and prerogative to act freely. In other words, God is the only being with will – He causes everything, directly. Though it may appear that other beings have agency to effectuate effects, such effects were in truth pre-ordained by God and only correlated with the particular agents.

Simultaneously, Ghazálí objects to the ancient Greek and Neo-Platonist assertions of the eternity of the world, which he views as an arbitrary limitation on God's power. He argues that, according to the Qur'an, God created the creation out of absolute nothingness (creation *ex nihilo*) – i.e., creation *happened in time* because at one point there was nothing and only at a later point was there something.³⁵ Causation is temporal.

al-Ghazálí's Proposal

While opposing the Neoplatonic account of the unity of being, Ghazálí offered an alternative account, which proved to be particularly influential in subsequent Islamic mystical and philosophical thinking. For starters, he confirms the general equation that Fárábí attempted – namely that God is a *Revealer*. However, whereas Fárábí attributed this power of revelation to an intelligence that was ten steps "removed" from God, Ghazálí's account is more radical: God, Himself, acts as a revealer. This effectively replaced all of the emanated intelligences with a God Who intervenes with, and sustains the unity of, His creation through

historical revelations. Along these lines, he explains that “the Qur’an and other revealed scriptures are the expression of” the (Neo-Platonic) intelligible world.³⁶

Having dismissed the demonstrative complexity of Neo-Platonist emanation with this single stroke, he offers, instead, an account of the unity of being that simply asserts the relative *nothingness* of creation. He employs the symbolic language of light and love. For instance, in his commentary on the Qur’anic verse depicting God as the light of heaven and earth,³⁷ he explains that light applies to God primarily and to all else only derivatively. He declares. “there is *no* being in the world other than God ...everything other than He ...is pure nonbeing ...and is perishing eternally and everlastingly.”³⁸

Suhrawardí

Suhrawardí was deeply influenced by Ghazálí’s account. As a youth, he entered the Sufi path and is known to have studied Ghazálí’s *Mishqat al-Anwar*, which inspired him with important elements of his light imagery. Thus, typical of Suhrawardí’s account is a depiction of the essence of all beings as lights originating from the love of the Light of Lights.³⁹

However, despite his adherence to these elements of Ghazálí’s account, Suhrawardí departed from it in other respects, such as his “revival” of the Neoplatonist doctrine of emanation. Suhrawardí elaborated upon this doctrine, delineating various levels of reality that emanate from God. In particular, he proposes the following order of emanation: God, the world of pure Intelligences (*jabarut*), the world of pure lights (*malakut*), the world of the fixed archetypes, and the material world (*mulk*).

Ibn ‘Arabí

Ibn Arabí’s conception of the unity of being is often recognized as the most mature and subtle of accounts amongst the great Islamic thinkers and mystics. While there is no question that he made important new contributions to this concept, it should also be recognized that he benefited from, and utilized, conceptual features elaborated upon by his predecessors. As this section will explain, Ibn ‘Arabí’s account employs the following concepts that preceded him: the distinction between necessary and contingent being (Fárábí), emanation (Neo-platonism, Fárábí, Suhrawardí), the realm of the fixed archetypes (Suhrawardí). Further, Ibn ‘Arabí employs poetic imagery that can be traced to Hallaj (e.g. the mirror metaphor) and Junayd al-Baghdadi (e.g. the shadow metaphor, discussed by Junayd in connection with an individual’s attainment of the last of the four stages of *tawhid*).

To begin with, Ibn ‘Arabí, in his *Fusus al-Hikam*, makes the ontological premise that the essence of every being in creation is

that it is a *name*. He posits this based upon the observation that, linguistically, the Arabic words for “world” (*‘alim*), “knowledge” (*‘ilm*), and “sign” (*‘alama*) all derive from the same root (*‘a-l-m*). Furthermore, the Qur’án’s Surah of the Fath pluralizes “world” in the grammatical form of a sentient being (*‘alemin*). These observations lead him to conclude that all beings are, essentially, both means to the knowledge of God (i.e. names) and are actively engaged in pursuing the knowledge of God (i.e. sentient).

Upon this foundation, Ibn ‘Arabí proposes a scheme of creation by way of emanation (despite the efforts of al-Ghazálí, Ibn ‘Arabí succeeds in fixing the emanation scheme in subsequent mystical accounts of being). He explains that, in primordial, pre-eternity, God existed alone – represented by the first part of the Hadith, “I was a Hidden Treasure.” Here, God is most properly called *al-Haqq*, which, as a concept, does not allow for Lordship, because He did not yet create any subject-worshippers.

Next emanated the Fayd al-Aqdas (Most Holy Outpouring), which represents the existence, in His knowledge, of the archetypes of all things. These archetypes (*a’yan*) correspond to the totality of all the names and are eternal precisely because they do not exist in the visible realm of death and decay. This Outpouring can be understood as corresponding to the second sentence of the same Hadith, “I desired to be known.” Elsewhere, he equates this First Emanation with the Reality of Muḥammad (*al-Haqq al-Muḥammadiya*), which both created the creation and communicates God’s will to the world historically. He explains that this Reality refers not to the historic person of Muḥammad, but rather the eternal spirit that animated *all* the prophets from Adam through Muḥammad, of which Muḥammad was the fullest.⁴⁰

The third stage is the Fayd al-Muqaddas (the Holy Outpouring), which is the emanation of all created things in the visible realm, each of which corresponding to a single archetype. This is represented by the last sentence of the Hadith, “Therefore I created the creation in order to be known.” God, in this respect, is most properly designated as “Alláh,” because of his Lordship over these particular subjects.

This scheme of creation has important implications. Firstly, the purpose of creation is not for God to reveal Himself to man, but for God to reveal Himself to Himself. Second, the creation is the perfect receptacle for the emanation of these names and attributes (as Ibn ‘Arabí explains, it has the perfect *isti’dad* – the command “*Kon*” is perfectly in harmony with the response of “*Yakun*”). To say the same, the entire creation can be likened to a mirror, *reflecting* the light of the sun. Third, man has a very special status amongst the creation, because, as Ibn ‘Arabí explains in his first chapter of the

Fusus al Hikam, to Adam was taught the names and attributes of all things, earning him the designation of “*al-Insan al-Kamil*.” Therefore, man, amongst the entire creation, can be the fullest reflection of God and the fullest means of God revealing Himself to Himself. For this reason, the entire cosmos is referred to as the “*Insan al-Kabir*” – i.e. a macrocosm of man.

From these considerations, the implications regarding the Unity of Being become quite plain and clear. Given the scheme above, God is the *only* necessary being (*wajib al-wujud*); all else is contingent being (*mumkin al-wujud*). Thus, with respect to God, all other beings *are not*; but with respect to themselves, they *are*, inasmuch as they are reflections or shadows of God. It is clear, therefore, that Ibn ‘Arabí’s account of the Unity of Being does not imply that man can achieve union (*ittisal*) with God, nor that created beings are non-beings in an absolute sense. While the multiple beings of creation *are*, their mode of being is that of a shadow or reflection of God – the sole being and the ultimate ground of the unity of being.⁴¹

Ibn Rushd

In opposition to the “mystical shift” in the thinking of the Muslim world, exemplified in the thinking of figures such as al-Ghazálí and Ibn ‘Arabí, Ibn Rushd attempted a rejuvenation of philosophy in general, and of an account of the unity of being, in particular, through a comprehensive refutation of both the Neoplatonists (i.e. Fárábí and Ibn Sina) and al-Ghazálí. While acknowledging that the Neoplatonist emanation scheme is reconcilable with Plato, he argues that it distorts the teachings of Aristotle. Such a scheme analogizes God’s agency to contingent agency, suggesting that God can create only one effect. This, however, places a false limitation on Divine power, which, in principle, is capable of creating everything directly.⁴²

His refutation of al-Ghazálí (in the sarcastically entitled *Tahafut-al-Tahafut*), undertakes a systematic rebuttal of the assertions in al-Ghazálí’s *Tahafut*. For instance, regarding Ghazálí’s gripe with the Neoplatonists over the question of God’s knowledge, Ibn Rushd claims that the entire debate is moot; both parties are guilty of ascribing human modes of attributes and knowledge to God. In truth, God’s attributes and knowledge are utterly transcendent and categorically unknowable, inasmuch as “*the First Being knows the nature of particular beings through that Being per se, Who is Himself.*”⁴³

Similarly, he argues against al-Ghazálí’s (and the Ash‘arites’) purported refutation of the will of created beings, explaining that such a proposition is self-defeating because it nullifies the concept

of action altogether. Further, repudiating causality is tantamount to repudiating knowledge, because knowledge is the act of eliciting the causes underlying a given process. This, further, amounts to a rejection of the notion of a wise Creator Who creates knowable patterns in the creation by which He can be known.⁴⁴

Ibn Rushd also rebuts al-Ghazálí's criticism of the thesis of the eternity of the creation, arguing that the Qur'an does not postulate that God's creation of the universe was temporal (i.e. it doesn't say that God existed together with non-being, and subsequently the world came into being after it was not). In effect, Ibn Rushd rejects the standard Christian and Muslim view of creation *ex nihilo*, adopting, instead, Aristotle's account – "*the least doubtful and most congruent with the nature of being*"⁴⁵ – which account asserts the eternity of the world with respect to its potentiality. Though God did *create* all beings, as the Qur'an postulates, this creation amounted to God's giving form to eternally pre-existing matter.

Though Ibn Rushd's thesis of rationalism and Aristotelianism had little influence in the post-Ghazálí Islamic world, it had a considerable following in Europe. In the thirteenth century, his works were translated into Hebrew and Latin, becoming, thereby, a substantial part of Europe's Aristotelian heritage. His Western devotees included: Maimonides, Siger de Brabant, Moses ben Tibbon, Hermann the German, the "Averroesites" in the University of Paris, Levi ben Gerson, Albert the Great, and, most notably, Saint Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶

The effects of this Aristotelianism significantly modified the concept of causality. In short, thirteenth century Christian theologians recast the teaching of creation according to Aristotle's description of God as *Nous Noesis* (self-thinking Thought), resulting in the doctrine that creation proceeds specifically from God's *thinking* (Latin: *ratio*, reason). The consequence: *all beings are thoughts of God*. To say the same: all beings have a ratio (reason); all beings are essentially intelligible.⁴⁷ The intelligibility of beings, in turn, legitimizes science and technique as the means of uncovering those beings. Several centuries later, Leibnitz (d. 1716) articulates the fullest expression of this doctrine as the Principle of Sufficient Reason: "*nihil est sine ratione*" – nothing *is* without a ground, or, stated positively: all that *is* is grounded in reason (*everything* has a ground).⁴⁸ Here, the departure from Aristotle⁴⁹ is quite evident: even those beings that are grounds must, themselves, be grounded. The impossibility of an infinite regress of causes requires the being of an ultimate, *self-grounding* ground (God).

Initial Reflections on the Bahá'í Synthesis

Inheritance and Systematization of Previous Concepts

It is clear, upon an even cursory review of the Bahá'í writings, that numerous elements of the aforementioned intellectual heritage have been incorporated into the Bahá'í concept of the unity of being. As a starting point, it should be noted that the Bahá'í account preserves the Ancient Greek insight regarding the eternity of the universe, enshrined in the Greek concept of *Fusis*:

If we could imagine a time when no beings existed, this imagination would be the denial of the Divinity of God. . . If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, existence would not have come into being. Therefore, as the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God) is everlasting and eternal – that is to say, it has neither beginning nor end – it is certain that this world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end. (SAQ part IV)

Simultaneously, Bahá'í writings preserve the seemingly opposite, theological concept of creation *ex nihilo*, espoused by the likes of al Ghazálí:

All praise to the unity of God . . . Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation . . . How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being? (GWB 65)

This apparent contradiction – simultaneous acceptance of the eternity of the universe, on the one hand, and God's creation of the universe from nothingness, on the other, is addressed by Bahá'u'lláh explicitly in the Tablet of Wisdom: “Wert thou to assert that [the universe] hath ever existed and shall continue to exist, it would be true; or wert thou to affirm the same concept as is mentioned in the sacred Scriptures, no doubt would there be about it.” (TB 140)

Secondly, the Bahá'í conception adopts the concept of creation by way of emanation, which concept was first encountered in the Neoplatonist scheme and, despite the efforts of al-Ghazálí, persisted amongst numerous of the great Muslim thinkers. More particularly, the Bahá'í conception generally confirms the point made by Fárábí, that the source of creation is also the source of revelation. However, whereas both the Neoplatonist and Muslim emanationists espoused a scheme of creation by way of a lengthy and somewhat mechanical ordering of emanated Intelligences, the Bahá'í writings, perhaps

lending some credence to the spirit of al-Ghazálí's critique, seem to avoid excessive nitpicking regarding the details of this scheme. Numerous expositions of this scheme have, nevertheless, been presented in the Bahá'í writings, perhaps the most prominent of which focus on the concept of the Primal Will as the first emanation from God and the direct agent involved in creation.

Thirdly, the Bahá'í writings adopt several of the essential features of Ibn 'Arabí's particular account of the unity of being, including the notion that all beings are essentially names and attributes and that Man represents the consummation of these names and attributes.

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty.
(GWB 64)

'Arabí's claim that all beings are simultaneously means of, and engaged in, the knowledge of God, seems to be echoed in the Bahá'í Writings:

*[A]ll things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, **indicateth, and is expressive of**, the knowledge of God. So potent and universal is this revelation, that it hath encompassed all things visible and invisible.* (GWB 177, emphasis added)

Distinct Features of the Bahá'í Account

While confirming numerous features of Ibn 'Arabí's account, one of the important points distinguishing the Bahá'í account seems to be its explicit assertion that these names and attributes are not, strictly speaking, of God, but, rather, are of the Manifestations of God.

*Man, the noblest and most perfect of all created things, excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory. And of all men, the most accomplished, the most distinguished, and the most excellent are the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth. Nay, **all else besides these Manifestations, live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace.***
(GWB 177, emphasis added)

Similarly,

[b]y the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue [the Manifestations] all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty, and grace, are made manifest. (GWB 46, emphasis added)

The justification for declaring that the Manifestation of God, rather than God, is the ground of the unity of being seems to derive from the prior conception of God's utter transcendence:

He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. . . The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace. (GWB 46)

Indeed, precisely because of God's transcendence and consequent inaccessibility to Man, God

hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence. (GWB 46)

Even more succinctly, “[t]he Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men. He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men **can never be known except through His Manifestation**” (GWB XX, emphasis added).

However, the radical import of grounding the unity of being in the Manifestation (rather than in God *per se*) cannot be appreciated without reference to the particular teleological view of history espoused in the Bahá’í writings. The Bahá’í writings, of course, assert that history consists of universal cycles that are unimaginably long in duration, consisting of “*innumerable and incalculable periods and epochs,*” at the end of each of which “*not a trace or record of it will remain.*” (SAQ 160-2) Each universal cycle, in turn, consists of two phases: an age of prophecy and an age of fulfillment, the former of which is characterized by “Prophets” or “Manifestations of God,” and the latter of which is characterized by a single, “*great and supreme Manifestation*” who “*makes the world the center of His radiance*” and whose “*appearance causes the world to attain to maturity.*” (SAQ 160-2) Though other Manifestations arise during an age of fulfillment, their role is derivative: they “*renew certain commandments relating to material questions and affairs, while remaining under His shadow.*” (SAQ 160-2)

Further, the Bahá'í writings are unequivocal in asserting that this most radical of all possible historical events – the appearance of the Supreme Manifestation and therefore the essential consummation of history – has now taken place:

O ye that inhabit the heavens and the earth! There hath appeared what hath never previously appeared. He Who, from everlasting, had concealed His Face from the sight of creation is now come. (GWB XIV)

Further,

It is evident that every age in which a Manifestation of God hath lived is divinely ordained, and may, in a sense, be characterized as God's appointed Day. This Day, however, is unique, and is to be distinguished from those that have preceded it. The designation 'Seal of the Prophets' fully revealeth its high station. The Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come. He hath lifted up the Ensign of Power, and is now shedding upon the world the unclouded splendor of His Revelation. (GWB XXV)

And, as 'Abdul-Bahá has stated so simply: “*We are in the cycle which began with Adam, and its supreme Manifestation is Bahá'u'lláh.*” (SAQ 160-2)

Though far beyond the scope of this paper, there can be no doubt that, given this conception of history, the Bahá'í concept of the unity of being is laden with implications unprecedented in the Greek, Neoplatonic, or Islamic intellectual forbears. The understanding of these implications are therefore now part of the current and future labors of thought for Bahá'í thinkers. Given the Bahá'í grounding of the concept of unity of being in the Manifestation of God rather than in God *per se*, and given the assertion of the appearance of the Supreme Manifestation, then the general concept of the essence of all beings as names, attributes, and referents to the “Manifestations” must now be re-thought specifically and pointedly with reference to the “Supreme Manifestation.” The very notion of unity, previously a possibility that existed within the confounds of the relation between a historic nation and its particular Prophet, must now be re-thought in light of a Supreme Manifestation who has appeared to fulfill mankind at large and all of the kingdoms of creation in general. Similarly, the concept of a Manifestation as emanation, emanator, and creator must be re-thought in light of Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation that “*through a word spoken by [God] in this Revelation, all created things were made to expire, and through yet another word, all such as [God] didst wish were, by [His] grace and bounty, endued with*

new life,” (PM 42) and that “*We have caused every soul to expire ... [w]e have, then, called into being a new creation.*” (GWB XIV)

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to account for certain aspects of the intellectual history underpinning the Bahá’í account of the unity of being while pointing, however initially, to some of the ways in which the Bahá’í account seems to depart, perhaps radically, from all prior conceptions. In doing so, the present author has hoped to shed light on the richness and diversity of elements contributing to the Bahá’í conception, while showing that the Bahá’í account is in no way a mere sum of these prior conceptions.

It has been argued, in brief, that the Bahá’í account confirms both the Ancient Greek notion of the eternity of the universe and the theological account of creation *ex nihilo*; that it upholds but simplifies the Neoplatonic conception of creation via emanation; that it confirms the general Islamic identification of the source of creation with the source of revelation; and that it employs many of the central features of Ibn ‘Arabí’s account of the unity of being by way of the universal reflection of divine names and attributes.

Perhaps more importantly, this paper has argued that the Bahá’í conception seems to rest upon a ground that is unprecedented in all prior accounts: the conception of the Manifestation of God in every age as both the cause of beings and the object of their reflection, and the radical assertion that we, in our current age and in very recent times, have witnessed the historic happening of the most weighty of all possible events: the appearance on the terrestrial plane of the Supreme Manifestation. As the Ground of Grounds and the Causes of Causes, the Supreme Manifestation has, with a single stroke, destroyed the creation of old, and along with it all prior limitations and possibilities, and has raised up a new creation endowed with unprecedented and hitherto unimagined possibilities for the reflection, by the totality of being, of the divine attributes and names.

NOTES

¹ English quotations of the works of the Islamic thinkers cited in this paper are largely drawn from the translations of Majid Fakhry. See, generally, Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (1983).

² Parmenides, *Fragments*, No. 8.

³ Parmenides, *Fragments*, No. 8.

⁴ This paper parenthesizes conjugations of the verb “to be” whenever the sentence employing this verb predicates non-being upon its subject.

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- ⁵ Plato, *Politea*, Book V, line 507(b).
- ⁶ Aristotle, *Categories*, Book V, ch. ii, (a)(11-18).
- ⁷ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, ch. xiii, 1038 (b)(10).
- ⁸ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VIII, ch. xiii, 1038 (b)(35). See also Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch. vi, 5 (explaining that the *logos* of “Man” and of “this man” are the same and, therefore, the *idéa* of man is not separate from the particular man but, rather, belongs to each particular man).
- ⁹ See, e.g., Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, ch. iv, 1029 (b)(3-13).
- ¹⁰ For instance, Ibn Arabi’s account of the “Fixed Archetypes” (Ayaneh Thabiteh) in his *Fusus al-Hikam* is largely a reiteration of the Platonic account of the universality of the *idéa*.
- ¹¹ Ibn Sina, *al-Shifa*, at 290.
- ¹² Sohrevardi, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, at 92.
- ¹³ Parmenides, *Fragments*, No.8.
- ¹⁴ In this connection, Plato’s *Timeus*, suggesting a creator-god (demiurge), must be overlooked because it is a mythological, not philosophical, depiction.
- ¹⁵ Plato, *Politea*, Book V, line 509(b).
- ¹⁶ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book III, ch.iv, 200(b)(5).
- ¹⁷ To say the same, though Aristotle explains that the grounds for any being consists in “the four causes,” nowhere does he assert that the “four causes” themselves have a cause.
- ¹⁸ Parmenides, *Fragments*, No. 8.
- ¹⁹ Aristotle, *Physics*, Book VIII, ch.i, 252(a)(22).
- ²⁰ See Plato, *Politea*, Books IV and V. Contrast with Aristotle, *Categories*, Book V, ch. ii, (a)(11-18); Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, ch. xiii, 1038 (b)(10); Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VIII, ch. xiii, 1038 (b)(35); Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch. vi, 5 (explaining that the *logos* of “Man” and of “this man” are the same and, therefore, the *idéa* of man is not separate from the particular man but, rather, belongs to each particular man); Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VII, ch. iv, 1029 (b)(3-13).
- ²¹ He explains that for a genus to exist, it must contain different species, which difference requires differentia which themselves *are*. Thus, if we attribute *being* to the differentia, then there is no difference between the species and the genus, and therefore the purported genus of “being” is not a genus. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book III, ch.iii, 998(b)(17-29).
- ²² Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book I, ch.vi, 12.
- ²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book XII, ch.vii, 1072(a)(25).
- ²⁴ See generally Jonas, Hans, *The Gnostic Religion*.
- ²⁵ For an account of Platonism, see Paper Section III(B), below.
- ²⁶ A major factor in this syncretism was “the introduction of the Jewish Scriptures into Greek intellectual circles via the translation known

as the *Septuagint*. The encounter between the creation narrative of Genesis and the cosmology of Plato's *Timaeus* set in motion a long tradition of cosmological theorizing that finally culminated in the grand schema of Plotinus' *Enneads*." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

²⁷ Proclus, *Liber de Causis*, Proposition 5.

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ Proclus, *Liber de Causis*, Propositions 19, 21, and 23.

³⁰ See Madkour, Ibrahim, "al Fārābī," in *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, Sharif, Muḥammad, ed., pp.450-460.

³¹ *Id.* at 115 (citing Fārābī, *Ihsa' al-Ulum*, p.100).

³² *Id.* at 139 (citing Ibn Sina, *al-Najat*, pp.184, 278).

³³ See also Paper Section III(C)(iii) below.

³⁴ The Qur'an at 34:3.

³⁵ Fakhry at 225 (citing Al-Ghazālī, *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, p.53).

³⁶ *Id.* at 248 (citing Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, p.18). Note that such usage of Neo-Platonic terminology grounds Ibn Rosht's later accusation that Ghazālī commits duplicity in his polemic against Neo-Platonism.

³⁷ The Qur'an at 24:34.

³⁸ Fakhry at 249 (citing Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkat al-Anwar*, p.55).

³⁹ *Id.* at 301 (citing Ibn Sina, *Hikmat al-Ishraq*, pp.12,149).

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 253 (citing Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnu'l-'Arabī*, p. 71). Note the difference between this doctrine and the Christian doctrine of Christ as *the only* manifestation of the *logos*.

⁴¹ Fakhry at 252 (citing Affifi, *The Mystical Philosophy of Ibnu'l-'Arabī*, p. 82).

⁴² Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, at 176.

⁴³ Ibn Rushd, *Tafsir ma Ba'd al-Tabi'ah*, III, 1707.

⁴⁴ Ibn Rushd, *Tahafut al-Tahafut*, at 519,522.

⁴⁵ Ibn Rushd, *Tafsir ma Ba'd al-Tabi'ah*, III, at 1497-8.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 275. (noting, however, that amongst Ibn Rushd's European following, he was often "denationalized" from Islam – misperceived by some as a Christian leader of Latin rebellion against the Church, or as a Jewish intellectual leader in Spain and Southern France).

⁴⁷ To state the same inversely: if all beings are intelligible, then they are all, essentially, thoughts. As thoughts, they must proceed from a thinking mind that is creative. Man's thinking does not create beings; therefore all beings are thoughts of God.

⁴⁸ See Leibnitz, Wilhelm Von, *La Monodologie, Principles of Nature and of Grace Founded on Reason*, Item VII.

⁴⁹ See paper Section II(A) above.