

# Minimalism from a Bahá'í Perspective \*

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## A Brief Historical Background

There is a general consensus that the foundations of what is called “modern philosophy” were laid in the middle of the 17th Century by Rene Descartes, the famed French philosopher/mathematician. He emphasized the authority of human rational power as the basic tool used to discover truth. The much repeated motto of “I think therefore I am” sums up his stance on the instrumentality of the human consciousness in any ontological paradigm. Contrary to the Platonic approach that starts from “reality as an abstract ideal trans-human, inaccessible phenomenon whose shadows we just resemble,” Descartes’ approach was from the bottom up. He starts with the fundamental reality of human intellect as a priori and logically deduces the possibility of an abstract ideal reality beyond the human realm.

Following in Descartes’ footsteps, Newton and Leibniz radically transformed the Platonic paradigm of a world full of allegories and mystical meanings to a cold, logical, scientific world, functioning solely on immutable cause-and-effect relations. The natural laws underlying such a precise system require the human intellect to discover the mysteries of this world by painstaking examination of the evidences at hand. The ensuing unrivaled successes of physical sciences and technology proved the validity of rationalism as a dominant school of philosophy for almost two centuries. This revolution

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\* When dealing with “minimalism” and “maximalism,” this article has liberally used the main ideas expounded by William Hatcher in *Minimalism: A Bridge between Classical Philosophy and the Bahá'í Revelation*.

in the prevailing philosophical mind-set had enormous consequences throughout the world within one generation. Rationalism along with its offshoots such as Logical Positivism, scientific positivism, materialism, and reductionism gained a total ascendancy in many areas of human intellectual, political, social, and academic endeavor. There was a shift in the previously held romantic view of the world. The entire cosmos was not circumambulating our planet in reverential adoration anymore; the earth was reduced to a speck of dust in the much larger, utterly predictable scheme of things. The nightingale did not warble as a token of its love for the beauty of the rose, but only to obey a preset reproductive urge. The universe lost its poetry and a mechanistic coldness settled in.

The new scientific picture of the world upheld the following, seemingly indisputable axioms:

1. This world is based on an elegant intelligible design that behaves according to unchangeable laws.
2. These laws can be discovered by human mind/rational ability.
3. The chain of cause and effect is at the heart of the reality of all phenomena
4. Scientific methodology and modern logic are the only valid tools of discovery.
5. Reducing complex phenomena to its simpler parts and analyzing the simpler parts will yield the knowledge of the more complex supersets (reductionism).
6. Objectification is the only way to obtain any valid knowledge of reality (positive objectivism).
7. The ultimate cause of anything material is necessarily material (materialism).
8. Whatever is not rational (explained in the language of mathematics, logic, objectivism) is necessarily irrational (emotions, human creativity, mysticism, religion, spirituality) and tacitly of lesser value.

9. The proper language to describe reality is linear very exact in nature, avoiding double or multi meanings, and totally communicable.
10. Verification through a constant process of fine-tuning the theory against the evidences obtained from empirical analysis is the only way to gain a more exact knowledge of reality.

For the first time in the history of revealed religions, the Bahá'í sacred writings explicitly discussed the singular role of human rationality in discovering the mysteries of the world. In the words of Abdu'l-Bahá, "*God's greatest gift to man is that of intellect, or understanding. The understanding is the power by which man acquires his knowledge of the several kingdoms of creation, and of various stages of existence, as well as much which is invisible.*"<sup>1</sup> Or, again in another statement: "*God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions.*"<sup>2</sup> In addition to such explicit praise for humanity's rational faculties, both Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá also pointed out the inadequacy of human rational ability as the only reliable means through which to discover all the possible facets of the relationships within and amongst phenomena. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century they called for a reconsideration of some of the basic axioms tacit in rationalistic/mechanistic systems. As an alternative, they offered other possible epistemological tools for revealing the mysteries of this world.

For example, in *Some Answered Questions* Abdu'l-Bahá expounds on at least four different modes of knowledge: knowledge through sense perception<sup>3</sup>, reason and logic, tradition or scriptural authority, and the medium of inspiration. Each of these modes may be applied to a greater or lesser degree. It is only when they act in a complementary fashion and act in harmony that one has hopes to approach a more reliable version of knowledge. However, as was expected, many multitudes remained oblivious to such an invitation. It took science itself to point out its own inadequacies.

In the beginning of the 20th century the first jolt to the previously unchallenged authority of scientific method came

from Heisenberg, the most prominent German physicist of the time. His “indeterminacy” or “uncertainty” principle wreaked havoc not only in scientific circles but also in wider philosophical domains. Heisenberg’s principle states that, “no complete and exact description of physical reality is logically possible within the framework of the Hilbert Space of quantum mechanics.”<sup>4</sup> In particular, this principle showed that it is impossible to simultaneously determine the position and the momentum of an electron.

The next and even stronger blow to conventional scientific processes was landed by the famed logician of the early 20th century, Kurt Gödel. In his famous Incompleteness Theorem, he proved, without a doubt, “that any system by necessity will contain true propositions that cannot be proven within the system.”<sup>5</sup> In another words, there cannot exist any complete (meaning dealing with the totality of a system) and at the same time exact (being able to prove all its propositions) description of reality.

This jolt to the rationalistic view of the world caused a whole host of new philosophical systems to gain strength forming a united front to oppose what they called the “tyranny of science.” Armed with the weapon provided for them by science itself, schools such as relativism, total relativism, subjectivism, solipsism, existentialism, post modernism, deconstructionism, and the like announced the end of the supremacy of human rational faculties as the dominant force for gaining knowledge. Although covering a vast arena of human enterprises, proponents of such schools generally agree with the following underlying premises:<sup>6</sup>

1. There is a general sense of mistrust towards the use of rational/logical/scientific methods to gain knowledge. Science is just another (white man’s) cultural bias on par with magic, shamanism, or voodooism.
2. The individual’s perception of reality is the only and the ultimate source of authority (solipsism).
3. All cultures and cultural products should enjoy the status of equal validity, with no inherent merit accorded to any of them.

4. All moral values and codes of conduct are basically products of human culture and, therefore, equally justifiable.
5. All epistemological approaches, including intuition, revelation, mysticism, and the like are equally valid in forming a perception of reality.
6. Objectivity is a myth and only trivial matters can be objectified. Whatever is significant remains forever subjective.
7. There is no absolute authority save the authority of the self.
8. There is nothing meritorious about using logical and or mathematical languages. Using a poetic/non-linear language with multiple meanings is encouraged.
9. Inter-subjective communication is not probable. Therefore, one's perception of reality remains forever inaccessible to others and inherently resistant to reliable communication.

Throughout the past several decades, constant clashes between the two camps were not only limited to the academic and philosophical circles, but the impacts were reverberating in all of human endeavor from art and music to theatre and cinema; from child-rearing practices to interpersonal relationships; from policy making at the local level to the practices of international relations. Most of the absolute values had lost their meaning and the individual's interpretations turned into the ultimate authority. Nothing was a question of merit any longer, but was reduced to the question of mere difference.

## **What is Minimalism?**

In such chaotic circumstances, foreseen by Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá a century earlier, a newly emerging school of philosophy is gaining ground. Minimalism is a new alternative based on the supremacy of the human rational mind but at the same time relying on pragmatic approaches. While it tries to

avoid the dogmatism of positivism/objectivism, it is mindful of the pitfalls of subjectivism and the authority of the self. Dr. William Hatcher terms his method “minimalism” because it “results from consistently making the most plausible and rational choice in the light of current knowledge”<sup>7</sup> but goes no farther than is necessary.

Minimalism takes the stance that the fundamental goal of any philosophical system must be truth-seeking and not persuasion and/or continual debates amongst competing schools of thought. It is unproductive and unnecessary to put much emphasis on constant arguments between and amongst extreme points of view. Instead, the main objective must be to find the tools and tirelessly refine them to approach the truth. In many respects, minimalism offers an epistemological system congruent with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The following will be an attempt to draw a parallel view comparing the basic epistemological principles of minimalism and the Bahá'í Faith.

## Metaphysics

In its metaphysical stance, facing the question of “existence” versus “non-existence,” minimalism is based on the axiom that “something does exist.” Therefore, existence itself is not an illusion but a reality independent of the observer. Therefore, the “out-there-ness” of reality is not under dispute. However, the observer’s perception of reality may very well be illusory. Also, it takes “being as basic and sees process as a succession of *states*, a state being defined as a (time-bound) existent at a given instant of time.”<sup>8</sup>

The stance of the Bahá'í Faith also testifies to the reality of existence.

## Epistemology

The main axiom explicitly clarified in minimalism is the law of “cause-and-effect” as a universal umbrella encompassing the emergence of all phenomena. Similarly, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh: “*All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.*”<sup>9</sup> What distinguishes it from materialism, however, is that minimalism does not adhere to the axiom that the root cause of all material phenomena is necessarily material. It leaves

the possibility for non-material causes open and subject to investigation. In general agreement with this position Abdu'l-Bahá confirms: "*Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to him who is the ever-living, the All-powerful, who is self-dependent and the Ultimate Cause.*"<sup>10</sup>

Methodologically, minimalism relies heavily both on the traditional syllogistic system of Aristotle and, even more so, on the modern relational logic developed over the past two centuries. Without going much into the details of the relational logic, it may suffice it to say that this new system is closely connected to the mathematical set theory (dealing with the concepts of supersets, sets, subsets, and their boundaries). Relational logic is key to developing new techniques to expand our ability to derive new logical conclusions (both inductive and deductive) from a given statement. In this regard, minimalism is closely associated with the bases underlying new mathematics/logic and artificial intelligence experiments.

In fact Abdu'l-Bahá constructed numerous arguments using relational logic as a tool to prove His point. A prominent example of such an argument can be found in His Tablet to Dr. Forel. In this Tablet Abdu'l-Bahá shows that a subset (human being) cannot possibly possess a quality whose superset (the nature) is bereft of.

*Should any one suppose that man is but a part of the world of nature, and he being endowed with these perfections, these being but manifestations of the world of nature, and thus nature is the originator of these perfections and is not deprived therefrom, to him we make reply and say: the part dependeth upon the whole; the part cannot possess perfections whereof the whole is deprived.*<sup>11</sup>

He uses a similar set of arguments to also prove the reality of divinity, spiritual realms, and other unobservable phenomena.

### *Scope*

Minimalism considers Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem as its guiding light and accepts the fact that no system is possibly able to cover the whole of reality and at the same time be exact

enough to verify all of its true propositions. In fact, exactness and completeness will occur at the expense of one another. A desire to increase exactness will necessarily yield a decrease in the scope of our knowledge of reality. Therefore, it acknowledges the fact that, at any given time, the system is only involved with a part, and not the entirety of reality.

The limit of the comprehensive ability of the human mind is at the core of the Bahá'í epistemology as well. Bahá'u'lláh, time and again, warns humanity against “*vain imaginings*,” a constant battle between reality and perception. This inherent limitation in the scope of human knowledge is also confirmed by Abdu'l-Bahá when He states “*For whatsoever can be conceived by man is reality that hath limitations and is not unlimited; it is circumscribed, not all-embracing. It can be comprehended by man, and is controlled.*”<sup>12</sup>

### *Objectification of Reality*

To avoid the reductionist nature of absolute objectivism, “minimalism accepts the objective existence of only those non-observable phenomena that are strictly necessary” in order to give a satisfactory explanation for observable phenomena. One should notice that “strict necessity” is of utmost importance in such an explanation. It is only as a last resort if and only if the assumptions of such non-observables conform in accordance with, and not contrary to, the other logical components of the argument at hand, that their objective existence will be assumed. Therefore, whatever can be objectified must be objectified. This objectification of a large segment of the human quest for knowledge is both desirable and helpful. At the same time, minimalism is mindful of the restrictions of total objectivism and acknowledges the fact that the totality of human knowledge cannot be objectified. Objectification in minimalism is a very strong tool for truth-seeking but never the only one, or worse, an end in itself.

*Similarly in the world of being there exist forces unseen of the eye, such as the force of ether previously mentioned, that cannot be sensed, that cannot be seen. However, from the effects it produceth, that is from heat, electricity appear and are made evident. In like*



*manner is the power of growth, of feeling, of understanding, of thought, of memory, of imagination and of discernment; all these inner faculties are unseen of the eye and cannot be sensed, yet all are evident by the effects they produce.*<sup>13</sup>

### *Object/Subject relationship*

Minimalism pays special attention to the continual battle between the object-based epistemology of positivism (holding the stance that reliable knowledge can only be obtained if the objectivity/neutrality of the observer/subject is guaranteed) on one hand, and the subject-based paradigm of the subjectivist school (which cries out that neutrality/objectivism is only a myth and there is no reality but what the subject/observer perceives) on the other hand. Abdu'l-Bahá is also well aware of the philosophical dichotomy between the object and subject. He clarifies His stance when He says: “... *It is certain that all human conceptions are contingent, not absolute; that they have a mental existence, not a material one.*”<sup>14</sup> Minimalism explicitly acknowledges the fact that total neutrality of the observer is not an achievable goal. It is the “viewpoint explicitness” and not the “viewpoint neutrality” that leads to a more reliable path to approaching reality. Therefore, what it stresses is a system in which there is a constant and a sincere effort to explicitly spell out all the assumptions, axioms, and viewpoints in advance, for the sake of both the reader and potential critics.

The knowledge obtained in this way will be examined and re-examined against newly confronted evidences. When the current evidences at hand imply a host of possible theories/explanations, only the most plausible ones will be selected. As we can see, the truth-seeking methodology of minimalism is a dynamic, pragmatic and ever fine-tuning dialogue between the observer and reality. It allows itself to constantly revise and modify what it has achieved. It is through conscious and careful effort that there will emerge an ever increasing hope of closing the gap between perception and reality. So, whoever is on the path of a truth-seeking endeavor must try to remain open-minded in an open-ended process. Although an absolute level of viewpoint explicitness is not

possible, minimalism hopes to achieve gradual and exceedingly refined versions of human knowledge. Therefore, although the end result is not known (the truth is not a priori) such refinement is similar to the concept of finding the limit of series or sequences in mathematics. The limit (if it exists) can be obtained by rigorously applying refining techniques.

Going one step further however, minimalism considers a rather larger domain of applicability for rigorous and formal methods and language not only in their traditional roles in mathematical/computers/scientific investigations but also in seldom explored spheres of philosophy, religion, and humanities. By appropriately using the tools of modern logic and considering the most probable alternative, it introduces an approach within which one can search for the validity of both material and trans-material knowledge. In like manner, on numerous occasions in the Bahá'í writings there is a constant invitation to apply one's rational ability to explore various meanings of sacred text. In fact a good portion of treatise, tablets, and talks (including *Some Answered Questions*) given by Abdu'l-Bahá are excellent examples of implementing formal logic to prove a point.

### *Rationalism vs. other modes of knowledge*

Minimalism greatly values the rational faculty as the key to unraveling encountered mysteries, both material and trans-material. In fact, its reliance on the usage of formal logic, relational logic, and the process of verification as a means to refine human knowledge, and consequently modifying our views based on examining the newly emerged evidences, all testify to how crucial a role human's rational mind plays in achieving a better understanding of what reality is. However, it tries to avoid the dichotomy of the hard-line rationalistic view between rationality and irrationality.

It opens up a window to a third alternative, namely, "trans-rationality." According to minimalism, some levels of knowledge that are gained through other modes of exploration may not necessarily be irrational but trans-rational. Of course, one condition remains intact, that is, the knowledge gathered in such a way ought not to contradict reason, but may

complement it. In this fashion, minimalism leaves room for modes such as intuition, mystical experience, divine inspiration, prayers and meditations complementing the rational faculty where rigorous, formal, investigative methods may remain inadequate. Abdu'l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*, offers a thorough discussion of the validity of all these different modes of knowledge including sense perception, reason and logic, tradition or scriptural authority, and the medium of inspiration. He also emphasizes that all these modes must be in harmony and act in a complementary fashion.

### *Minimalism vs. Maximalism*

Maximalism refers to an ensemble of schools of thought on the opposite side of the spectrum from minimalism. In comparing the two systems, some of the major distinctive tenets of both will emerge even more pronouncedly:<sup>15</sup>

1. Contrary to minimalism, maximalism starts with a text in which the Truth itself is a priori and the meaning of the text a posteriori (i.e., the meaning of the statements may not be immediately accessible or even unique).
2. The language of maximalism is non-linear, poetic, multi-layered, allegorical, and ultimately contains multi-meanings, welcoming a variety of interpretations.
3. Maximalism gives free rein to refer to trans-material, non-observable, and imaginary phenomena.
4. The scope of maximalism is the totality of reality with little or no attention paid to the issue of exactness. It offers an all-encompassing paradigm (a mega-narrative) in which "completeness" is favored at the expense of exactness.
5. To unravel the meanings veiled in the poetry of language, the tools of scientific verification will seldom be sufficient, or necessary. Here all modes of knowledge may have to band together in order to explore fresh meaning for each statement.

6. Divine revelations are perfect examples of maximalism in which there is an abundant use of metaphor, non-linear language and unobservable phenomena.

In summary, what makes minimalism singularly useful is its fresh look at new applications of the language of modern logic and mathematics as a key to open so far unproven or unexplored realities. For example, Dr. Hatcher utilizes the very same tool to demonstrate how the existence of God/Divinity may be proved in a totally logical way.<sup>16</sup> It is true that to be able to follow his lines of argument there is a need for a prior knowledge of basic levels of modern logic, but by exerting some mental effort it is quite possible to trace the gist of his argument. This fine example makes us understand how modern logic combined with the “most plausible scenario” may lead one to more solid ground for exploration of non-observable realities that had previously kept their distance from such verifications. In this regard, in addition to stressing the value of logic/rationality, minimalism welcomes the contribution of other modes of knowledge in exploring different aspects of reality (provided they do not contradict logic).

When comparing the two, there is a natural affinity between the epistemological stance of the Bahá'í Faith and minimalism. Even so, one has to bear in mind that Bahá'u'lláh reveals a “complete” paradigm, a mega-narrative, while minimalism, by nature, tries to take the side of “exactness,” accepting the limitations it imposes on the system. The Faith, however, not only does not preclude, but actively encourages a rational investigation of the tenets of one's belief system. There are abundant references to “deliberation,” “reflection,” “thought,” “contemplation,” “reasoning,” and the like, when one wrestles with layers of meanings in a sacred passage. The “pearls of wisdom” preserved in the “depth of the Ocean of His Revelation” summon the seekers to “delve deep” to reach the “hidden treasures” therein. Therefore, on the one hand, the truth of a divine revelation is a priori, given in a top-down fashion in language rich in allegory, poetry, layers, metaphors and maximalist in nature. The “Creative Word” is an ever-generating source of hidden meanings that invite the soul and the mind to a feast of discovery by utilizing different

(including trans-rational) modes of knowledge, that are not contradictory to logical/rational conclusions.

Dr. Hatcher gives a parallel view of the essential elements underlying the two systems:

The study of science consists in confronting or experience of the phenomena of reality, formulating certain propositions whose meaning is a priori clear and applying appropriate verification procedures to determine the truth or falsity of these propositions. We call this whole process verification. Studying the revelation consists in confronting various portions of the text of revelation, focusing on certain statements whose truth is known a priori and then striving to determine various linear meanings of these statements. We will give the name explication to this process. Thus, for science, clarity of meaning is given a priori but truth is determined a posteriori. For revealed religion, truth is given a priori, but meaning is determined a posteriori.<sup>17</sup>

What is at the heart of his argument is that the two paradigms need not stay in adversarial positions, but can cooperate in a wholly complementary fashion. The process of “verification” can be applied in exploring, clarifying, refining, and improving our understanding of the divine revelation. Also, the creative word of the divine revelation may set the tone for the formulation of original perspectives, hypotheses, and theories. Such a continuous dialogue between the two complementary systems will assure an ever-improving experience when confronting the puzzling mysteries of both the observable and the non-observable.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*. U.K. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972, 41

<sup>2</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, 240

<sup>3</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*. US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990, 297-299

<sup>4</sup> Hatcher, William S. *Minimalism*. Juxta Publishing Ltd. Hong Kong, 2002, 11

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 124

<sup>9</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990, 162

<sup>10</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*. George Ronald Publishers, 1978, 19

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>15</sup> Hatcher, William S. *Minimalism*. Juxta Publishing Ltd. Hong Kong, 2002

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 99-107

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 115