

Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings

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1. Introduction

Relativism is a philosophical outlook that denies the existence of absolutely valid or universal truth claims of any kind, of ethical or legal standards, of religious revelation, of any universal point of view, of universal customs and of rationality or reasoning. In other words, the validity of all claims to any absolute or universal 'knowledge' can be reduced and limited to statements *possibly* valid in a particular context, to a particular situation and to a particular point of view. In sum, we cannot say that X is true but only that X *may be* true for someone in a particular context; "truth is relative to the standpoint of the judging subject."¹ Indeed, some forms of relativism reject the notions of 'truth' and 'objectivity' altogether.² Furthermore, there is no universal or Archimedean standpoint from which to judge the validity of various contesting truth claims - which means, in effect, that no truth claim can actually be proven wrong. There are no errors. All opinions and judgments are equally valid. Because truth claims are so hedged with conditions, there can be no certainty about anything. While this may be existentially salutary in keeping us modest, in epistemology and ethics its is, as we shall see, disastrous.

In its most succinct terms, relativism is an attack on the very idea of knowledge/truth and an insistence that all claims to knowledge/truth are no more than personally or culturally held opinions or according to Nietzsche, Lyotard and Foucault, expressions of the will to power, or of endless Nietzschean and Derridean interpretations or Rortian "solidarity" ... of anything except actual knowledge. Even the 'evidence' brought to support these opinions is itself no more than merely another opinion or interpretation or another exertion of power and so on in an infinite regress. Since there can be no neutral and transcendent Archimedean standpoint from which to arbitrate among various claims to knowledge/truth, all truth claims may

be rejected as in nihilism, held in abeyance as in scepticism (epistemological agnosticism) or accepted as equally valid as in relativism.

Any ideology or system of thought that claims to have knowledge/truth is, by virtue of this claim, is not relativistic since any arbitration among candidates for truth implicitly or explicitly requires the discovery of a neutral, privileged and transcendent Archimedean standpoint from which to render judgment. On this ground alone, it is questionable that the Bahá'í Writings may be accurately described as espousing relativism: they do, after all, categorically assert the existence of God and hold His existence as provable,³ that Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God for this age, that the universe is an emanation from God, that there are four causes and that all things have essence and attributes.⁴ Such assertions are simply logically incompatible with either epistemological or ontological relativism.

It is the contention of this paper that the Bahá'í Writings manifest not relativism but relationalism,⁵ an outlook that is often confused with relativism. In a nutshell, relationalism holds that all things exist in relationship to other things but it does reject the idea that the existence or reality of things is dependent on the perceiver, that there is no neutral, privileged Archimedean point from which to make judgments among competing knowledge claims, that all knowledge claims are equally valid, that error is impossible, that partial knowledge is incorrect knowledge and that no knowledge/truth whatever can be universal (true from all possible standpoints), objective (independent of the perceiver) and foundational (not susceptible to further analysis). This relationalism leads to a position which may broadly be described as 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.' It is 'evolutionary' because our knowledge increases or progresses over time; 'Platonic' because there are "eternal verities"⁶ true for all times and places and 'perspectivist' because there may be many perspectives on the truth although not all perspectives are necessarily valid. The doctrine of progressive revelation is an example of such 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.' For example, through successive revelations we have adopted various perspectives as we learn more and more about the relationship between the various Manifestations, but one of these possible perspectives, denying the "station of unity,"⁷ is simply not valid.

This change from 'relativism' to 'relationalism' is more than a mere change in terminology. In the first place, 'relativism' is

simply not an accurate description of the philosophy embedded in the Writings. If we do not use terminology correctly and accurately, we will inevitably raise misunderstandings about their philosophical nature and lead our thinking astray. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to teach, explicate and defend the Faith. Third, as we have seen, and shall see again below, relativism has a lot of philosophical baggage, i.e. brings with it a considerable number of philosophical problems that weaken any explication of the Writings, and leave it open to all kinds of attacks and misrepresentations. This, too, makes teaching, explicating and defending needlessly difficult and inefficient.

Relativism is an important issue because of the tremendous consequences for ethics, epistemology, ontology and metaphysics, law, religion, cultural studies and politics. For example, in international relations and law, cultural relativism prevents us from legislating in favour of universal human rights since our advocacy of such rights is merely a reflection of our particular political legal and cultural situation. Because human rights are merely cultural and not universal, we have no obligation let alone right to insist that other countries and other cultures abide by our views. Relativism renders all complaints about human-rights violations futile or worse, a form of imperialist bullying to impose one's own standards on others. Quite obviously, the practice of international politics is dramatically affected by the adoption of a relativist outlook. All too easily hard-heartedness and/or political cynicism can be the result. Relativism also undermines such Bahá'í teachings as the unqualified obligation to provide equal education to girls and boys, to provide equal rights for women and to end the extremes of wealth and poverty. Who, after all, has the right to insist that these teachings set the standards by which the world must abide?

Relativism also has enormous implications in regards to the subject of truth. For example, if all scientific truth claims are limited to a particular point of view, culture and situation, then there can be no universal scientific truth claims of any kind, and, conversely, there can be no erroneous ones. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* prepared the way for the acceptance of such radical relativist conclusions. According to Kuhn, all scientific theories and facts are relative to the paradigm - the assumptions, techniques and theories - which is being employed. While there are changes in the history of science, these changes do not involve an increase or clarification of improvement of knowledge because different

paradigms are “incommensurable.” They employ different concepts, change the meanings of terms as well as the standards for what are real ‘facts’ and real ‘explanations. Scientific theories change not because they are more ‘true’ but because of power relations, social-cultural customs and other interests at play in society. Kuhn’s protests that he was not a relativist notwithstanding, there can be little question that his book supported a radical epistemological or cognitive relativism. Indeed, the full fruit of his relativist views became evident in Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* which says that science has no claim to superiority over astrology or voodoo, that science is nothing less than a system of mythology like any other and should be taught as such in schools and that other approaches to knowledge such as magic should also be taught.

“All methodologies have their limitations and the only ‘rule’ that survives is ‘anything goes.’”⁸

Kuhn’s and Feyerabend’s relativism has received additional philosophical support from some of the most influential postmodern philosophers such as Frederich Nietzsche, Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty to name only the most prominent. By various paths they all come to agree that there are no facts, only individual or collective viewpoints, or “solidarities,” that no single all-inclusive perspective exists, that all these viewpoints are equal and none “privileged” above any other, and that there is no universal or Archimedean standpoint from which to judge among competing viewpoints.⁹ The influence of postmodern philosophy reaches throughout virtually all branches and levels of academia. Some subjects, such as literary studies, have been radically transformed by the encounter to the point where ‘theory’ to swamp the subject of literature itself. Philosophy has felt its very legitimacy and usefulness as a subject challenged¹⁰ not to mention basic concepts such as knowledge, rationality and truth as well as the whole notion of metaphysics.¹¹ History has been touched by, among other things, the struggle over the whole notion of grand narratives versus small or local narratives,¹² the knowability of the past, as well as the uses of history.¹³ Women’s Studies, though not in themselves part of postmodernism, have been affected by the entire deconstructionist project, by postmodernism’s analysis of power relations and, more controversially, by its antipathy to essentialism. Psychology feels the influence of postmodern thinking in its handling of gender and political science in discussions of marginalization and the workings of power.¹⁴ Cultural Studies have opened new vistas for exploration

through the study of simulations and simulacra.¹⁵ Postmodernism has also re-shaped and revised Freudian psycho-analysis.¹⁶

Because of its apparent intellectual egalitarianism and tolerance of all views as acceptable and equally valid, as well as its apparent ability to solve alleged contradictions in the Bahá'í Writings, relativism has attracted the favourable attention of a number of Bahá'í writers. These often take their cue from Shoghi Effendi's statement that

Its [the 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. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind.¹⁷

Shoghi Effendi also writes that

the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Bahá'í belief, [is] the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous and progressive and not spasmodic or final.¹⁸

These statements in conjunction with the teachings of the essential oneness of all religions have led some Bahá'ís to adopt relativism as a means of resolving philosophical, ethical and religious differences between the Bahá'í Faith and other religions. For some authors, such as Moojan Momen and Seena Fazel, relativism has become the intellectual foundation stone for establishing the unity among the diversity of religions.

This paper contends that these solutions do not accurately represent the Bahá'í Writings. There philosophically less problematic ways to understand the Bahá'í Writings and to explicate their teachings on religious unity and diversity than by adopting relativism. It holds that the most accurate and least problematic terms to describe the Writings are "relationalism" and "evolutionary Platonic perspectivism."

2. A Theoretical Framework for Relativism

All forms of relativism implicitly or explicitly reject three positions - universalism, objectivism and foundationalism and

that all forms of absolutism accept these three in one way or another. Universalism in its ontological and “discursive”¹⁹ variants asserts that certain ideas, truths, situations, natures and states-of-being are found everywhere and at all times. Ontological universalism asserts that there are “entities (classes of existents) which exist for all persons.”²⁰ “Discursive”²¹ universalism maintains there are statements and beliefs which are valid in all contexts, at all times and all places and for all peoples

Relativism also rejects objectivism which asserts that certain beliefs and truths as well as certain things, situations, states-of-being are what they are independently of an observer or a world-view. Ontological objectivism means that “there are entities (classes of existents) which exist independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to or employed by any particular person or society.”²² “Discursive” objectivism says there are beliefs that are true regardless of viewpoint, beliefs, or explanatory frameworks, which obviously conflicts with the idea that man, not the object of perception, is the measure of things, of truth and falsity.

Relativism also denies foundationalism according to which there are certain truths as well as existing things and states-of-affairs that are fundamental, i.e. not susceptible to further breakdown and analysis. Ontological foundationalism asserts that there is “a common ontology or set of basic existents, incapable of further analysis out of which all other existents are constructed.”²³ The “discursive” version of foundationalism asserts there are basic statements or propositions incapable of further analysis which serve not only as a foundation for other statements but also as an Archimedean point from which to make objective judgments.

In studying relativism, we must also be aware of its various subtypes. Some of these subtypes overlap. Perhaps the most obvious of these is ethical relativism which denies that there are any universal, objective or foundational ethical norms applying to individuals or cultural collectives. In the last analysis, ethics are a matter of preference, or, a matter of local necessities. There can be no definitive i.e. universal, ethical judgments, or as Shakespeare says in *Hamlet*, “There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”²⁴ The counterposition to ethical relativism is ethical realism which contends that at least some ethical standards are universal, objective and fundamental.

Cognitive or epistemological relativism maintains that what is considered ‘true’ either by individuals and by

cultures/societies will vary and that 'knowledge', i.e. so-called 'facts', are culture and/or theory laden and reflect only particular societies and individuals. There are no objective 'truths' since all truths are expressed from a specific individual and/or cultural point of view. In other words, the truth-value of a statement is relative to its context, and therefore, no statement or standpoint is privileged over any others. No possible Archimedean point, or universal viewpoint can be found to frame all forms of enquiry or to make objective judgments among different truth claims, world-views or paradigms. In a word, objectivity, including scientific objectivity, is impossible – a view we have already encountered in the work of Kuhn and Feyerabend. Cognitive relativism asserts that reason, rationality and logic are culturally determined and not objective, foundational or universally applicable. Reason is not an avenue to true knowledge.

At this point it is important to distinguish among three distinct but closely related concepts: scepticism, relativism and subjectivism. The boundaries among these three positions are fluid and one easily slides into the other. Scepticism refers to a complex of views that deny "that knowledge or even rational belief is possible, either about some specific subject matter (e.g. ethics) or in any area whatsoever."²⁵ Sceptics often maintain that "none of our beliefs is certain, that none of our beliefs is reasonable, that none of our beliefs is more reasonable than its opposite."²⁶ Scepticism can be limited to certain areas, but [g]lobal scepticism casts doubt on all our attempts to seek truth.²⁷ Sceptics deny that any knowledge can be universal, objective and foundational.

In its simplest form, relativism says that all truth claims are only 'true' from one individual or cultural standpoint and that there is no Archimedean point from which to choose the true one or even merely the 'truest' from among competing views. Relativism does not necessarily deny that we can know truth but insists that all truth-claims are standpoint-dependent. Another way of saying this is that we all have facets or aspects of the truth from our own viewpoints but that none of these facets are objective, universal or foundational.

For its part, subjectivism maintains that there is no reality existing independently from the consciousness of a subjective observer who constitutes reality as s/he experiences it. Already evident in the Greek relativist philosopher, Protagoras, subjectivism is an extreme application to the individual of the relativist principle that all truth-claims or ethical claims depend

on standpoint or context. What we pass off as apparently objective statements are really the expression of our (often emotive) preferences.²⁸

At this point it is clear that relativism and scepticism are closely intertwined and that their differences notwithstanding, relativism can easily slip into scepticism – from ‘everything is true from its viewpoint’ to ‘we don’t know if anything is true’ and even ‘there can be no truth.’ The problem with relativism’s tolerance of all truth-claims as equally valid is that some truth-claims are so virulently incompatible – a rigorous materialism and theism for example – that a difference in viewpoint seems inadequate to resolve the conflict. It is difficult to imagine that there is a little patch of reality in which God plays no part from any standpoint whatever, and another part of the universe where God is omnipresent. Sooner or later, the friction between these viewpoints will force us to analyse them in regards to rational/logical and experiential adequacy in order to resolve the conflict. The same holds true with the various conflicting subjectivist claims: ‘true for me’ and ‘true for you’ seems an inadequate response to views about female circumcision for small girls or the willingness to accept poverty on a large scale. However, it is not difficult to see how relativism easily merges into a subjectivist attitude.

Anthropological relativism affirms that what is called ‘human nature’ is infinitely malleable and that there is no specifically definable human nature to study. In Sartre’s words, existence and freedom precede essence²⁹ – indeed, there is no human nature of essence that is given to us. Because there is no pre-given, pre-constituted human nature, we cannot argue that certain practices are ‘unnatural’ or counter to ‘natural law’, or that there are certain standards that all individuals and/or cultures ought to adopt.

Closely associated with anthropological relativism is cultural relativism according to which every culture and by implication every language organise the flux of impressions into their own version of reality as well as work out the associated values, their own protocols for discovering and assessing knowledge or truth and their own criteria by which to determine human nature. As a result of this organising or constructing of reality, all facts are value-laden, shaped and limited by certain biases inherent in every construction. These biases prevent us from obtaining an objective viewpoint independent of all observers, from obtaining a universal viewpoint true of all human beings and a foundational view necessarily true for all.

One form of cultural relativism might be called linguistic relativism. This kind of relativism, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, argues that different languages with different grammars and vocabularies require people to constitute/create the world variously because languages focus attention on different things, present time and space differently and conditions the thought patterns of its speakers. Consequently there is no way to use language to represent the world perfectly or for all. Again we see the denial of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism that characterizes relativist views. How can there be universalism if no language can express the world for all? How can there be objectivity if all – even contradictory world-views are equally valid? If all world versions are different, how can there be foundational truths?

Legal relativism is, of course, a subtype of ethical relativism. It asserts that laws do not reflect an objective, universal and foundational human nature or human situation and are entirely local to a particular time, place and culture. For this reason, laws and legal standards such as human rights and the definition of persons cannot be applied across cultures. There is no sense to the claim that one legal system is better or worse, or more or less progressive than any other.

Ontological relativism contends whatever things are deemed to exist or constitute reality is determined by individual and/or cultural beliefs and that all statements about the existence of things is context-dependent. The existence of any 'reality' is entirely dependent on the vision or version of reality we have constructed because there is no viewer-and-standpoint independent world. It is possible to take this quite literally by arguing in a manner reminiscent of Kant (on whom more below) that we humans take the raw materials presented by the universe and by means of our own concepts and choices of the boundaries of each thing construct the universe we live in.³⁰ Physics, painting or the writing of history or sociology are all ways of 'world-making.' Thus, there is no such thing as 'one world' and there is no Archimedean standpoint from which to decide which world is superior in any way. We can only adopt the pragmatic position that a particular world lends itself to our purposes more readily than other worlds.

The rejection of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism observed in the various types of relativism entails at least ten major consequences:

1. There is an infinite number of 'realities' which can be constructed by human beings, either individually or

collectively. These many or may not be reconcilable. There is no common reality or world for all people.

2. There is an infinite number of equally valid theories, descriptions and explanations of any one or all of these 'realities.' These may or may not be reconcilable.
3. There cannot be a single universally valid description, theory or even scientific explanation of all these 'realities.' In other words, there is no final description.
4. There can be no universally valid ethical prescriptions since ethical prescriptions are matters of individual and/or collective choice because there is no common ethical world for all people.
5. Consequently, there can be no universal language capable of expressing the truths of all 'realities.' The existence of such a 'universal language' is strictly prohibited and would be an undesirable attack on diversity.
6. There are no final, foundation propositions or truths that cannot be subject to other, contradictory but equally valid points of view.
7. Relativism makes it impossible to adopt the correspondence theory of truth because no one can know which version of reality is decisive, i.e. no version of reality can lead us to a final decision.
8. As Plato already pointed out in the *Theaetetus*, relativism makes it impossible for people to be wrong, misled, deceived, psychotic or simply perverse in their thinking. Everyone is right about everything.
9. Viewpoints change, but there is no Archimedean viewpoint from which to assert that a particular change represents progress or that one viewpoint is truer than any other. Thus, relativism makes the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation impossible along with the Bahá'í Faith's belief in scientific, social, economic and political progress.
10. Relativism makes the concept of a divine Manifestation impossible because a Manifestation has a privileged, Archimedean standpoint which make His pronouncements normative for all of humankind and all cultures at this time.

3. Virtues of Relativism

What, we may ask ourselves, does relativism have to recommend it, especially in the modern world? The answer that comes most readily to mind is that relativism helps make us aware of and sensitive to differing contexts and standpoint and, thereby, encourages not only a willingness to be open-minded but also the intellectual discipline of studying issues from new and unexpected viewpoints. This in turn, forces us to examine our own beliefs critically and to test their adequacy in regards to other candidates. These advantages, though apparently easy to state succinctly, can have an enormous impact on our intellectual culture and the way we approach knowledge-claims both our own and others'. Relativism also allows us to make sense of the bewildering variety of human customs, beliefs and practices without feeling the need to impose one particular belief or culture on others. We can embrace the various facets of truth (if there is such a thing) of each viewpoint. In other words, relativism can prevent a hasty rush to judgment about different or even outlandish beliefs.

Becoming more aware of the diversity of contexts we learn of the tremendous diversity of human cultures, thoughts, legal and social systems, bodies of knowledge and art forms. Because it rejects the claim that there exists any Archimedean standpoint from which to evaluate human constructs and activities, relativism is non-judgmental, open-minded and understanding. In a world plagued by all kinds of prejudices and animosities, relativism seems to foster attitudes and modii operandi that answer the world's needs for mutual appreciation and respect.

4. Background to Relativism

To understand why relativism is not compatible with the Bahá'í Writings, we must engage in at least a cursory exploration of the subject. The first explicit relativist is Protagoras, a philosopher in the 5th century B.C.E. Athens, who declares "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not."³¹ He also said that "things are to you as they appear to you and to me such as they appear to me."³² In these statements that Protagoras already strikes most, if not all, the major relativist themes in regards to epistemology, ethics and ontology. Epistemologically, he means that man, not the object of knowledge, determines what is true or false about what is perceived. The nature of an object as well as all of its attributes are governed by man, i.e. all attributes are relative to the

perceiver. Ethically, Protagoras' statement means that whatever is good or bad is decided by man and that "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."³³ Ontologically, it is man who determines whether something or some situation or state of affairs is or is not. Protagoras also introduces the theme of subjectivism which accompanies relativism by saying that things are as they appear to us as individuals, which is to say, you and I have different truths simply because we are different individuals with different points of view. In the last analysis "knowledge is only [personal] perception"³⁴

Protagoras' pronouncements are paradigmatic for relativism. Though he did not exhaust the subject, he certainly outlined most of its essential themes. First, there is the rejection of universalism both in its ontological and "discursive"³⁵ variants. Ontological universalism asserts that there are "entities (classes of existents) which exist for all persons."³⁶ "Discursive" universalism maintains there are statements and beliefs which are valid in all contexts, at all times and all places and for all peoples. Second, Protagoras also rejects objectivism. Ontological objectivism means that "there are entities (classes of existents) which exist independently of the point of view, corpus of beliefs or conceptual scheme held to or employed by any particular person or society."³⁷ When Protagoras says things are, i.e. exist because we think they are, he denies ontological objectivism, and, in effect, prefigures some ideas from postmodernist constructionism. "Discursive" objectivism says there are beliefs that are true regardless of viewpoint, beliefs, or explanatory frameworks, which obviously conflicts with the idea that man, not the object of perception, is the measure of things, of truth and falsity. Finally, Protagoras beliefs reject foundationalism which follows as an implicit consequence of his earlier statements. Ontological foundationalism asserts that there is "a common ontology or set of basic existents, incapable of further analysis out of which all other existents are constructed."³⁸ This violates Protagoras' dictum that man decides "things which are, *that* they are, and of things which are not, *that* they are not."³⁹ The "discursive" version of foundationalism asserts there are basic statements or propositions incapable of further analysis which serve not only as a foundation for other statements but also as an Archimedean point from which to make objective judgments.

In Protagoras' thought we can discern explicitly and implicitly, the three trade-mark attributes of relativism: the denial of universalism (no truth applies everywhere), of foundationalism (there are only viewpoints, no final truths) and

of objectivism (reality is only what it is to me or to you).

4.1 David Hume (1711 - 1776)

After Protagoras, the next major development in the history of relativism was Hume, a British philosopher whose work does not espouse relativism but nevertheless provides it with two of main ideas. According to Hume, facts and values are completely unconnected with another; we cannot (in his view) logically reason our way from a fact to a conclusion about value. Just because something is the case does not mean that it ought to be the case. Moral judgments, therefore do not deal with empirically verifiable facts but rather are matters of sentiment and emotion which are not subject to rational tests: we feel what we feel. As Hume writes,

“Moral distinctions [are] not deriv'd from reason.”⁴⁰

Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv'd from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov'd, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality. therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.⁴¹

By separating ethics and morality from reason, by showing how we cannot derive values from facts, and by asserting that values are fundamentally no more than emotional preferences, Hume opened the door to an all pervasive relativism about values. After all, how can we prove that anyone's emotions are better than anyone else's? (Hume, of course believed that all human beings had a similar emotional nature and would be repelled by or attracted to similar things but that is a different issue.) The message of Hume's texts was clear: we cannot reason about morals; our ethical choices are simply the expression of emotions and sentiments and the idea of rationally 'proving' our moral choices right was simply absurd.

Hume also contributed to the development of relativism in his denial of causality, i.e. the belief that one object or event in any way creates a subsequent event:

In reality, there is no part of matter, that does ever, by its sensible qualities, discover any power or energy, or give us ground to imagine, that it could produce any thing, or be followed by any other object, which we could denominate its effect. Solidity, extension, motion; these qualities are all complete in themselves, and never point out any other

event which may result from them.⁴²

In short, there is no causality but only succession. It takes little reflection to realise that denying causality undermines the entire project of explaining the world scientifically by reference to causal forces. Scientists can still work with the concepts of causality, but they must admit that their causal explanations are ad hoc, assumed, adopted as a matter of faith without any empirical or rational support. Thus, other, equally valid viewpoints are possible and a 'scientific' explanation is only one among many, equally valid competitors which are correct in relation to their own explanatory principles and frameworks. In other words, we see here a denial of foundationalism (causality is not a sure foundation), universalism (causality works everywhere) and objectivism (causality works regardless of how we think).

4.2 Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Immanuel Kant made two major contributions to the development of modern relativism. The first, which Harre and Krausz call the "constructivist insight"⁴³ is the theory of categories according to which our perceptions of the world do not arrive in the form in which we actually experience them. Rather they arrive as 'raw data' which the mind processes and shapes by means of the categories which are the conditions on which having an experience depends. "These categories therefore are also fundamental concepts by which we think objects in general for the phenomena, and have therefore *a priori* objective validity"⁴⁴ They organize raw data according to time, space, causality, necessity, contingency, subsistence and accident among other things, that is, constitute, or create our experience of the phenomenal world. Thus, our mind shapes or constructs the raw data of our perceptions into a coherent world which becomes the object of our experience. In short, we construct our world, both as individuals and as collectives. It is also follows clearly from Kant's views, that the perceiving subject cannot be taken as a mirror reflecting a pre-existing reality, which is to say, the subject cannot access reality and deliver accurate reports about it. Indeed, the subject is "an obstacle to cognition"⁴⁵ and cannot be trusted. Because we cannot gain an Archimedean point from which to make universally valid judgments of our various world-constructs, we cannot distinguish true constructs from false. All are valid relative to the principles by which they were constructed. This also means that since reality is a human construct, there can be no objective knowledge or representation of reality and that all

we have are various constructions or stories none of which is privileged over others in terms of its truth value. This ontological relativism in which all world constructs are equal readily lends itself to a profound epistemological relativism that challenges the scientific project of discovering the truth about reality. It is impossible to discover the truth because there is no one truth about anything. What we have here is the denial of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism that characterises relativist thought.

Kant's second contribution to the development of modern relativist thought are his antinomies, i.e. demonstrations of the limitations of reason. He showed how with some questions show equally possible but rationally contradictory results i.e. demonstrate "discord and confusion produced by the conflict of the laws (antinomy) of pure reason."⁴⁶ In other words, on some subjects - the limitation of the universe in space and time; the concept of a whole cosmos made of indivisible atoms; the problem of freedom and causality; the existence of a necessarily existing being - reason can come to opposite but equally rational conclusions. There is simply no way to break the deadlock. Thus, "reason makes us both believers and doubters at once"⁴⁷ leaving us with grounds to believe and disbelieve in God and reason itself. This scepticism about reason makes it easy to reject reason as the arbitrator among various world-constructs. We can either become sceptics and doubt them all or relativists and accept them all as being true in their own way.

4.3 Frederich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)

Frederich Nietzsche is the pivotal figure in the history of modern relativism given his role as the chief source and inspiration of postmodernism. Nietzsche's special contribution to modern relativism is his attack on the concepts of truth as understood by most Europeans, as well as his attack on the Greek conviction that reason and rationality could provide an Archimedean standpoint from which to judge all statements, beliefs and truth-claims. With 'reason' and 'truth' swept aside, the way was open to open-mindedly examine standpoints and explanations that were outlandishly different from their European counterparts. Thus, his virulent scepticism about science and logic made it possible for western thinkers to - at least temporarily - abandon their usual standpoints and to entertain others.

Nietzsche's attack on reason and knowledge is plainly evident when he writes, "Truth is the kind of error without which a

certain species of life could not live. The value of life is ultimately decisive.”⁴⁸ Here we observe that Nietzsche himself has a standpoint – life and the enhancement of life – from which he critiques knowledge and reason so vigorously that he slides over into radical scepticism. For example, what is essential about truth is not that it is true but that it serves life: “[t]he criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power.”⁴⁹ (Later, with Rorty, ‘truth’ would be that which serves “solidarity.”) Truth is not what is actually the case but what meets our needs in the struggles of life – a view of truth that also exemplifies subjectivism and which allows there to be as many truths as there are individuals with needs. Elsewhere he says that truth is “Inertia; that hypothesis which gives rise to contentment; smallest expenditure of spiritual force.”⁵⁰ In a similar vein, he writes, “The biggest fable of all is the fable of knowledge,”⁵¹ thereby expressing his doubts about the existence of knowledge, something he had already done in *The Birth of Tragedy* by calling science a myth.

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins.⁵²

Nietzsche’s radical attack also includes the idea that truth is made, not iscovered, that the “will to truth”⁵³ and the “will to power”⁵⁴ are one and the same.

Will to truth is a *making* firm, a *making* true and durable, an abolition of the false character of things, a reinterpretation of it into beings. “Truth” is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered – but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end – introducing truth as a processus in infinitum, and active determining – not a becoming conscious of something that is itself firm and determined. It is a word for the “will to power”.⁵⁵

It is fairly obvious that when truth is reduced to power, then, in effect, we no longer have a belief in truth at all, especially since every individual and/or culture makes his own truth. According

to Nietzsche, "There exists neither "spirit," nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use."⁵⁶

Whether his position is best characterised as relativism – he still adopts the viewpoint of 'life' enhancement as decisive – or scepticism is a matter for further debate. Nietzsche also influenced the development of modern relativism through his doctrine of perspectivism, i.e. all truth-claims depend on a particular perspective or standpoint. There is no neutral, 'Archimedean point' from which reality can be 'objectively observed.' The unbiased, objective quest for truth as such is a willow-the-wisp; every claim to know truth is an expression of personal interest, of the will-to-power. According to Nietzsche, "facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself": perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing."⁵⁷ Nietzsche accepted the consequence that if interpretations are all we have, then we are unable to determine which view is true or better in any way:

The world with which you are concerned is false, i.e. it is not a fact but a fable and `approximation on the basis of a meagre sum of observations.; it is "in flux," as something in a state of becoming, as a falsehood always changing but never getting near the truth: for – there is no "truth."⁵⁸

The 'truth-game' is not worth the candle.

4.4 Jean-Francois Lyotard

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1924 – 1998), one of the premier philosophers of the postmodern movement, is best known for his book *The Postmodern Condition* which not only brought the term 'postmodern' into common usage but also explicitly established postmodernism as a relativist philosophy. This book provides one of the most frequently quoted definitions of postmodernism: "I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives."⁵⁹ By "metanarratives," (also called "grand narrative[s]"⁶⁰), Lyotard means those 'stories' or intellectual frameworks by which we interpret the world and our activities and thereby provide meaning for the whole and give certain data the status of being facts, truths or real knowledge. For example, Marxism supplied revolutionaries around the world with a metanarrative encompassing the behavior of matter i.e. dialectical materialism, as well as the nature, direction and future outcome of human history, i.e. historical materialism. The Enlightenment metanarrative concerned the gradual triumph of reason over irrationality and the progress of

humankind not only in scientific knowledge but also in the progress towards rational freedom and a tolerant society. The Bahá'í metanarrative is "progressive revelation" according to which God sends successive Manifestations to guide humankind through its evolutionary development.

All of these metanarratives offer a complete or total vision by which all possible human action as well as other metanarratives may be interpreted and/or judged and for this reason Lyotard describes them as a "project of totalization."⁶¹ The connotation of 'totalitarian' is fully intended by Lyotard who even describes metanarratives as "terrorist"⁶² because they can be used to "eliminate[] or threaten[] to eliminate, a player [point of view, culture] from the language game one shares with them."⁶³ In the terms provided by Harre and Krausz, metanarratives are universalist, i.e. applying to all peoples at all times and places, they are objective and foundational.

One of the tasks of a metanarrative is the "legitimation of knowledge,"⁶⁴ which is to say that the metanarrative provides the foundational principles by which to distinguish 'real knowledge' or objective knowledge from error, folklore, myth or the babblings of the insane. Thus, the metanarrative becomes the gatekeeper of knowledge - and, by extension, the guardian of crucial binary oppositions necessary for a system of thought or social system to maintain itself. Examples of such binary oppositions are order / disorder; sane / insane; noumenal / phenomenal; true / untrue; primitive / civilized; competent / incompetent; knowledge / superstition; and rational / irrational. By means of these oppositions, metanarratives take on a prescriptive function not only for individuals but for entire societies who must conduct themselves personally and/or collectively to its standards which are enforced not just by institutions but by all those who accept the metanarrative. Lyotard (like Foucault) of course believes this prescriptive function imprisons us and the "incredulity toward metanarratives"⁶⁵ is a means of freeing ourselves from their rule. For Lyotard, this means freeing ourselves from modernity which "is identified with modern reason, Enlightenment, totalizing thought and philosophies of history."⁶⁶ Lyotard "rejects notions of universalist and foundational theory as well as claims that one method or set of concepts has privileged status."⁶⁷ He also rejects the notion that one metanarrative is more objectively true than the rest.

Metanarratives can only be evaluated on their own terms and within the context they provide; we must not import concepts

or procedures from other metanarratives to appraise other metanarratives. Like Kuhn's paradigms, metanarratives are incommensurable, each one being a universe to itself, and therefore, each one can be assessed only in relationship to itself. There is no objective, universally valid and necessary or foundational Archimedean point from which to judge.

4.5 Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida (1930 - 2004) is the originator of deconstructionism, perhaps the most influential version of postmodernist philosophy developed so far. According to Jonathan Culler, one of deconstruction's foremost expositors

To deconstruct a discourse [text] is to show how it *undermines the philosophy it asserts*, or the hierarchical oppositions on which it relies by identifying in the text the rhetorical operations that produce the supposed ground of argument, the key concept or premise.⁶⁸ It is important to note that this subversion occurs from within. As Derrida says, The movements of deconstruction *do not destroy structures from the outside*. They are not possible and effective nor can they take accurate aim except by inhabiting those structures ... Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure ...⁶⁹

The text subverts or works against itself through its choice of words and phrases, the ambiguity of some words and phrases, rhetorical devices and/or imagery. Perhaps the best known example of this procedure is "*Plato's Pharmacy*," in which Derrida explores Plato's "*Phaedrus*":

The word *pharmakon* [remedy] is caught in a chain of significations. The play of that chain seems systematic. But the system here is not, simply, that of the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato.⁷⁰

However, as Derrida points out, *pharmakon* means not only 'remedy' but also 'poison' not to mention 'spell' or 'drug' (as in hallucinogen) and this "chain of significations" serves to destabilise any simplistic, final or so-called objective interpretation of the text. Writing, which Thoth had introduced as a remedy for humankind's poor memory, is also a 'poison' that weakens memory, and may cast a 'spell' over us by making us think we have understood an idea when we have not.

If the *pharmakon* is "ambivalent," it is because it constitutes

the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves,

reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (body / soul, good / evil, inside / outside, memory / forgetfulness, speech / writing, etc)... The pharmakon is the movement, the locus and the play: (the production of) difference.⁷¹

Each reading of 'pharmacy' evokes another, often contrary meaning; we recognize the difference (observe the spelling) between 'remedy' and 'poison' and in choosing one even if only for a moment, we 'defer' the other meanings which, despite being deferred, help complete our understanding of the text. These other meanings are referred to as 'supplements,'⁷² This process of recognizing difference and deferring Derrida calls *differance*' and in his view every text is an *endless play* of 'differance' as we defer, or momentarily push into the background, the meanings of various words. Each of these deferred meanings helps complete the full meaning of a word and for that reason, "The play of the supplement is indefinite."⁷³ Derrida makes the same point by stating that "writing structurally carries within itself (counts-discounts) the process of its own erasure and annulation..."⁷⁴ By "erasure" Derrida does not mean that one meaning of a word is absolutely excluded but rather that we read a word with awareness of all its other potential meanings instead of privileging one, usually conventional, meaning over all the others. We read the word with all of its meanings, aware of the ambiguity this causes in our understanding of the text itself.

It takes only minimal reflection to see how Derrida's deconstructionism supports relativism. If, as Derrida asserts the play of differance (note spelling) and supplement is "indefinite," then it follows logically the no interpretation can be foundational - since opposite readings are possible as we have already seen in "Plato's Pharmacy." Furthermore, no interpretation can be objective since there is no standpoint from which we can see the text 'as it really is.' Of course, no interpretation can be universal simply because any claims to universality are challenged by the existence of other, possibly contradictory interpretations. Finally, interpretations can only change - there is no progress from one to the next.

Derrida's deconstruction provides relativism with a particularly potent method of attack - each interpretation is shown to fail on its own terms, shown to undermine itself and lead to its opposite. This (apparently) undercuts any attempt to

assert the existence of an absolute, i.e. of a proposition claiming objectivity, universality and foundationalism. With this method (it is a method Derrida's objections notwithstanding) relativism can go on the offensive against all absolutist claims.

4.6 Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984)

Like Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault has been enormously influential in fields outside of his specialities of philosophy and social history. His writings cover such diverse topics as the social construction of madness⁷⁵ and sexuality⁷⁶, methods in historiography⁷⁷, penology⁷⁸, the nature of power and discourse. He has had an incalculable effect on cultural studies, political theory, feminism and sociology.⁷⁹ While there may be some debate about whether or not Foucault is really postmodernist,⁸⁰ there is no debate about his standing as a thorough-going relativist.

Like Lyotard, Foucault rejects the concept of "grand narratives", i.e. he does not believe that any global meta-narrative can explain all aspects of a civilization. He writes,

the theme and possibility of a total history begins to disappear ... The project of a total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle - material or spiritual - of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion ...⁸¹

Rather, he proposes what he calls "the new history"⁸² which pays more attention to "discontinuity"⁸³, to the "series, divisions, limits, differences of level, shifts, chronological specificities, particular forms of rehandling, possible types of relation."⁸⁴ Just as Derrida proclaims the necessity of subverting any authoritative reading of a text, Foucault believes that "the tranquility with which they [the usual historical narratives driven by grand themes] are received *must be disturbed*"⁸⁵ by renounc[ing] all those themes whose function is to ensure infinite continuity of discourse."⁸⁶ Historical discourse must be broken up into what Lyotard calls "little narratives" or *petits recits* because only when the glossed over differences become apparent will new fields of research be visible and available for investigation. We will become aware of discrepancies and differences that have been covered up by large sweeping unifying concepts and no longer lose sight of subtle but important shifts in meaning and usage. Each concept, person and event must be understood in terms of its exact specificity

in time, place and culture. There are no bridges between epistemes.⁸⁷

Thus, Foucault's historiography not only stresses breaks and discontinuities rather than grand similarities, changes in ideas and practices rather than extended homogeneities, but also what he calls the "episteme" which is the 'soil' from which 'vegetation' of ideas, behaviors, experiences, customs and beliefs grows; it makes all these things possible and, at the same time, establishes their character and limitations. Epistemes are "the fundamental codes of a culture."⁸⁸ According to Foucault, an episteme

in a given period delimits in the totality of the experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in the field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognised to be true.⁸⁹

Thus, an episteme determines truth, meaning, identity, value and reality at a specific time and place. People need not even be consciously aware of the episteme or its power in their lives though it creates the environment or context in which individuals think and speak; it controls what can be said and understood as meaningful. Great social, cultural and intellectual changes are the result of changes in the underlying episteme. Archaeologies study these epistemes strictly for themselves without drawing any universal conclusions about 'humankind' or other epistemes.

For our purposes, it is clear that Foucault's theory of epistemes disallows universalist claims, any foundational claims and any objectivity claims by any episteme. All epistemes are just interpretations with none possessing primacy in any way. This includes the episteme of western science and particularly, that of medicine. Because epistemes are incommensurable (like Kuhn's paradigms) there is no progress from one to the other but only change.

5. Richard Rorty (1931 - 2007)

Richard Rorty is one of the most influential philosophers in contemporary North America. Though relativism is a label he strenuously rejects, as we shall see, his denials are not very convincing. He attempts to distinguish his views from relativism by saying, "[T]here is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that

we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify.”⁹⁰ After admitting that relativism is logically self-refuting, he clearly identifies his own position with the latter, supposedly non-relativistic view. To prove that he does not think all views are equally good, he asserts that a pragmatist like himself “thinks his views are better than the ‘realists,’ but he does not think his views correspond to the nature of things.”⁹¹ Basically, he thinks his views are better because he is a “liberal” and, therefore, “more afraid of being cruel than anything else.”⁹²

Rorty’s denials notwithstanding, it is difficult to take his claim that he is not a relativist at face value. Given his belief that statements cannot correspond to reality (and, therefore cannot be tested by reality), that rationality is simply a local cultural bias without general validity and that truth itself is a chimera, on what ground other than sheer dogmatic assertion can he claim that his philosophy is better? (Unless of course he relies on revelation which he does not.) He is also prepared to give up the quest for truth: “A scientist would rely on a sense of solidarity with the rest of her profession, rather than picture herself as battling through the veils of illusion, guided by the light of reason.”⁹³ If language games are incommensurable, if there is no rational or empirical way of ‘proving’ one view or another, then the alleged superiority of one view comes down to a dogmatic assertion of preference, i.e. of Nietzsche’s will-to-power. He wants to replace the whole idea of truth “with the desire for solidarity with that community”⁹⁴ In other words, he has replaced the quest for knowledge and truth with the ‘politics of knowledge’, i.e. the quest for consensus and solidarity. Most tellingly however, Rorty is unable to justify his beliefs in these reformed goals with anything more than a plea for us to recognise that his is a nicer way than its

the supposed alternatives. In the last analysis Rorty’s liberalism has nothing more than his preference to recommend it. Ironically, it is precisely such dogmatic assertion that his much recommended “edifying conversation” is supposed to replace. Judged by his own standards, Rorty’s views exemplify a thorough-going, i.e. radical relativism both in epistemology and ethics.

6 General Problems With Relativism

Before specifically examining relativism in regards to the Bahá’í Writings, we shall examine five serious philosophical problems with relativism.

The first of these problems is that if relativism is true, then it is impossible for anyone or any society/culture to be in error. Even if we show that a view lacks self-consistency, a relativist might claim it is simply our view that consistency is a requirement for viable positions. The problem with this necessary conclusion of relativism is that it is so contrary to our experience: we humans make all kinds of small and momentous mistakes on an on-going basis, and these mistakes indicate that at least for some things, there is a right and a wrong way, or more or less effective or efficient way. Moreover, some contentions are simply untrue: Franklin Roosevelt was not the dictator of the Soviet Union during the Great Terror of the 1930's⁹⁵.

The second problem and largest group of problems is that relativism is self-undermining and self-refutation. The statement "all truth is relative" is either absolutely true or it is relatively true. If the first, then it refutes itself because it is an example of an absolute truth. If it is relatively true, it undermines itself - because that opens the possibility that at least some truths might be absolute. The same type of problems faces the proposition that we cannot know anything for sure, i.e. there can be no certain knowledge. If we can know that proposition for sure, then it refutes itself, and if we can't, then it is possible that we can know something for sure after all. The same problem bedevils the claim that there are no absolute truths. If this claim is meant absolutely it refutes itself, and if it is not meant absolutely, then at least some claims may be absolutely true. The same problem undermines the claim that there are no neutral standards of truth as well as the How could one prove this except by implicitly appealing a neutral standard, an Archimedean point above and beyond our perceptions? In short, relativism is a dogmatic assertion, not a provable contention.

The theories of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard illustrate the self-undermining and self-refuting problems of relativism. According to Derrida, no interpretation of data can be "privileged" over any other - yet this interpretation of the data about literature, history and the like is itself an interpretation subject to further deconstruction to show the opposite, i.e. that some interpretations are "privileged." Furthermore, this interpretation "privileges" itself by claiming universal validity for all possible interpretations. Similarly, Foucault declares that epistemes are incommensurable, i.e. that there is no neutral or objective Archimedean point from which we can judge between conflicting epistemes (or Kuhn's paradigms). However, that

judgment itself is only possible if we implicitly assume that we have a neutral standpoint that allows us to judge all other standpoints. In other words, Foucault “privileges” itself. Lyotard of course, has the same problem. The declaration that there can be no “grand narratives” drawing universal conclusions about history is a universal statement about history, and thus refutes itself. These serious problems in the arguments of major philosophers, make it clear that it is impossible to develop a version of relativism that does not undermine and refute itself. Without that there is no reason – other than dogmatic assertion – to be convinced by it.

The third problem also concerns the declaration there are different truths: what’s true for you is not true for me. In other words, there are no universal, foundational and objective truths. But this is highly counter-intuitive. Can any human being imagine a context in which things do not exist? Even if the whole world is an illusion, or even a mental delusion, then things exist albeit not in the usual way. This, of course, was Augustine’s⁹⁶ and Descartes’⁹⁷ great philosophical discovery: the illusory manner of existence of things cannot undo the fact that they do, in fact, exist. Nothing that we can think of can be denied ‘being.’ In other words, the concept of ‘being’ can provide an objective, universal, foundational which is to say, Archimedean standpoint on which to begin our thinking. Most important for our purposes is the fact that ‘Abdu'l-Bahá agrees with this position:

This theory [that the external world is an illusion, is nothingness] is erroneous; for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this.⁹⁸

In other words, even illusions exist – as illusions but that is enough to give “a real and certain existence.” At first, this may not sound promising, but anyone familiar with the works of Thomas Aquinas and his successors in modern neo-Thomism will know how much can be built on this.⁹⁹

The fourth problem with relativism is existential and ethical, not logical. It is difficult to accept the suggestion that the self-sacrifice of a Mother Theresa and the actions of a Dr. Mengele¹⁰⁰ are morally equal and that our condemnation of one and admiration for the other are simply expressions of personal taste and preference. Who, other than a psychopath or a “wrangler,” a person who argues for arguing’s sake, would contend that the actions of these two are morally on par?

Intellectually it may be possible to do so, but who, except a psychiatrically disturbed person would aspire to actually follow in Mengele's footsteps - or want a child to do so? Applied to law, the impracticality of relativism is just as glaring. Imagine a lawyer defending a serial killer on the ground that his client's view that murder is a fine hobby is just as valid as society's view that it's a heinous crime! Such a defence would rightly be laughed out of court. In other words, relativism has a fatal existential weakness: we can talk the talk but don't want anyone to walk the walk.

The fifth problem of relativism concerns its implicit anthropology, viz., its denial of a universal, objective and foundational human nature. If there is no human nature and humankind is infinitely malleable by environmental and social forces, then there can be no truth about human beings as such and therefore, no basis for a universal human moral code or a universal code of law such as the declaration of human rights, or a world-unifying religion or any basis for the unification of humankind. There is diversity but no unity. Such a view, promulgated by Boas, Benedict and Mead to name only the best known, suffers from two weaknesses. First, the human body, although subject to some minor variations is universally alike, and this includes brain functions. The body and the brain thus represents an objective, measurable substratum which constrains, shapes, and directs human responses to environmental and social influences. In short, human physiological functions - including brain functions - are universal. This is the physical basis for the unity of humankind. Second, contemporary anthropological studies such as Donald E Brown's *Human Universals* (as well as various successors) show that there exist well over one hundred¹⁰¹ universal human traits such as facial expressions for happiness, fear, disgust and anger (basic emotions); anthropomorphization; use of metaphors and metonymies; systems of taxonomy; systems of counting; rituals and the self distinguished from others. In other words, there is a basic human nature which pre-disposes human beings to deal with the world and ourselves in similar ways.

7. The Bahá'í Writings and Anthropology

The Bahá'í Writings do not agree that there is no such thing as human nature. The first line of evidence in this regard are the passing references to human nature in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These passing references show that who remarks, the Master takes the existence of human nature for granted, as a given, self-evident fact. For example that the abuse of religion

makes “that which was a factor in the sublimity of human nature” into an instrument for its “degradation.”¹⁰² He tells us that “divine philosophy”

has for its object the sublimation of human nature, spiritual advancement, heavenly guidance for the development of the human race, attainment to the breaths of the Holy Spirit and knowledge of the verities of God-¹⁰³

He tells us that Christ’s disciples

were delivered from the animal characteristics and qualities which are the characteristics of human nature, and they became qualified with the divine characteristics ...¹⁰⁴

None of these statements would make sense if there were no such thing as human nature.

The Writings also tell us a great deal about human nature, that is, they identify certain human traits and/or predispositions as universal, objective and foundational. For example, “his [man’s] nature is threefold: animal, human and divine. The animal nature is darkness; the heavenly is light in light.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, human nature is constituted by animal capacities or potentials, specifically human capacities or potentials and divine capacities or potentials. Sometimes these divine capacities are called our “spiritual susceptibilities” which must be awakened “in the hearts of mankind, to kindle anew the spirit of humanity with divine fires and to reflect the glory of heaven to this gloomy world of materialism.”¹⁰⁶ The specifically human capacity or potential is our abstract reasoning power:

The human spirit which distinguishes man from the animal is the rational soul, and these two names--the human spirit and the rational soul--designate one thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is the rational soul, embraces all beings, and as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.¹⁰⁷

The animal capacities, of course, are based on humankind’s bodily needs as well as its instinctual nature. Speaking specifically in regards to morality, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says that our moral nature is constituted by two capacities, a lower and a higher:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches

God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint.¹⁰⁸

A survey of the Writings indicates that the Writings accept these attributes as universal, that is, applicable to all human beings regardless of time and place; as objective, that is, as not dependent on standpoint or, conversely, true from all standpoints; and foundational, that is, not susceptible to further breakdown and analysis. In other words, the Writing's view of human nature is not relative.

The third line of reasoning that shows the Bahá'í Writings do not have a relativist view of human nature can be found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's remarks about human evolution: "But from the beginning of man's existence he is a distinct species"¹⁰⁹ and "For the proof of the originality of the human species, and of the permanency of the nature of man, is clear and evident."¹¹⁰ Here, too, we observe, that humankind is credited with a nature that makes it identifiable and "distinct", in addition to being permanent, that is, "his species and essence undergo no change."¹¹¹ Thus, human nature has always been essentially what it is, which is to say, universal in time in addition to universal in space, i.e. planetary.

Finally, it is obvious why the Bahá'í Writings would insist on the absoluteness of human nature: without this basis, its teaching about the eventual unification of humankind into a single global commonwealth would lack a proper foundation. How could the human race be unified if all peoples did not have something in common, if there were no objectively real, foundational and universal capacity for rational thinking and decision making, for actualizing "spiritual susceptibilities", for freeing themselves from ancestral imitations and for adopting a global religion and loyalty? Indeed, the whole concept of progressive revelation makes no sense since without a human nature actualizing its latent potentialities, there would simply be change and not progress. Progress requires that some things change but also, that others are continuous since without such

continuity we could only say there is change. Whatever it is that changes is foundational, as well as objective and universal. Applied to man, this means, for example, that the historical appearances of human rationality can vary from place to place and time to time, but that the basic capacity for rationality remains the same.

The Bahá'í Writings show that on the subject of human nature they are not relativist.

8. Shoghi Effendi's Statements on Relativism

Superficially at least, some statements by Shoghi Effendi appear to support the view that the Bahá'í Writings advocate relativism. It is our contention that such is not actually the case. Here is one of the Guardian's statements:

“The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh ... is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the nonessential aspects of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society....”¹¹²

The statement that “religious truth is not absolute but relative” cannot have its seemingly obvious meaning since that would deny the statements that immediately follow about revelation being a “continuous and progressive process,” that “all the great religions are divine in origin,” that “they differ only in nonessential aspects of their doctrines” and so on. These claims - which are integral to the identity or essence of the Bahá'í revelation - are obviously intended as absolute truths which are foundational to the Bahá'í Faith, universal in scope and objectively true. They are not relative statements in the sense that their opposites are equally true or valid. In the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings, deconstructing these statements will not bring us to equally valid counter-truths; the denial of these claims is simply false. There is, moreover, no way a Bahá'í can reject any of them and/or accept their opposites and remain consistent with Bahá'í teachings. Of course Bahá'ís accept the fact that non-Bahá'ís may reject some or all of these claims, but this is regarded as error, rooted in the

failure to take the next step in humankind's religious evolution.

Just because we are all divine creations of God does not mean that all our opinions and views are correct. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá's says,

The divine Manifestations have been iconoclastic in Their teachings, *uprooting error*, destroying *false religious beliefs* and summoning mankind anew to the fundamental oneness of God.¹¹³

The fact that Manifestations have been "iconoclastic" means that They have evaluated various truth claims, found them wanting and swept them aside as erroneous. He also says,

And shouldst destroy them which destroy the earth" means that He will entirely deprive the neglectful; for the blindness of the blind will be manifest, and the vision of the seers will be evident; the ignorance and want of knowledge of the people of error will be recognized, and the knowledge and wisdom of the people under guidance will be apparent ...¹¹⁴

In the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

"Twelve hundred and eighty years have passed since the dawn of the Muhammadan Dispensation, and with every break of day, these blind and ignoble people have recited their Qur'an, and yet have failed to grasp one letter of that Book! Again and again they read those verses which clearly testify to the reality of these holy themes, and bear witness to the truth of the Manifestations of eternal Glory, and still apprehend not their purpose. They have even failed to realize, all this time, that, in every age, the reading of the scriptures and holy books is for no other purpose except to enable the reader to apprehend their meaning and unravel their innermost mysteries. Otherwise reading, without understanding, is of no abiding profit unto man."¹¹⁵

For his part, Shoghi Effendi writes,

He [Bahá'u'lláh] insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions¹¹⁶

Thus it is quite possible for God's children to be blind and in error. These statements undermines any assertion that the Writings espouse a simple relativism which allows virtually any viewpoint to claim validity by appealing to its own special standpoint. Indeed, the whole concept of progressive revelation means that that not all standpoints are valid for all times and for all times, that religious history shows progress from one standpoint to the next which is why each Manifestation brings his own solutions.¹¹⁷

It almost goes without saying that any simplistic reading of "religious truth is not absolute but relative" falls into the trap of self-refutation and self-undermining. If this statement of "religious truth" is meant to be taken absolutely, then it obviously refutes itself by violating its own message. If, however, it is meant to be only relatively true, then the door is open to the possibility that at least some religious truth may be absolute, that is, universal, objective and foundational. That would defeat the entire purpose of the statement. Thus, there are good logical reasons for rejecting any simplistic reading of Shoghi Effendi's declaration.

If Shoghi Effendi's statement about religious truth being relative cannot mean that religious truth is relative in the sense of all possible viewpoints on an issue being equally valid, what does it mean? If we read the Guardian's entire statement, we find that it discusses progressive revelation, the historical changes of presentation undergone by their essentially unified principles. In other words, what changes are the surface, historical, phenomenal forms of the divine teachings but the essential teachings remain the same. In other words, what changes and is relative is the adapted, phenomenal form of religions but not the "eternal verities they enshrine,"¹¹⁸ which are true for all time i.e., under all conditions past and future and for all humans, or, in philosophical terms, they are universal, objective and foundational.

From this we conclude that relativism does not apply to the "eternal verities"(universal, objective and foundational) but only to the way they may be expressed outwardly, or historically. Because they are "eternal," they are absolute, i.e. true independently of the standpoint, beliefs, hopes and fears of any individuals or collectives. (Though they are true independently of all standpoints, this does not prevent some from denying them for reasons of their own.) The historical or, as we may call it, outer, worldly, existential expression of the infinite potentials inherent in the "eternal verities" is what

varies, and not the essential teachings or the “eternal verities” themselves. These remain constant and actualise their implications for humankind through our evolution. It is obvious, of course, that the Bahá'í model of absolute, essential and constant truths given various existential expressions throughout human history cannot be accommodated by a concept of relativism according to which no perspective is essential or foundational, no concept is universal or applicable to all peoples at all times and no concept is objective, or true for all standpoints. Moreover, in violation of relativism, the Bahá'í Faith “distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.”¹¹⁹ Making these distinctions assumes that there is an Archimedean standpoint from which such judgments can be made - a notion flatly denied by relativism. Another aspect is that the Bahá'í model accepts the possibility that some views are simply erroneous. Such assertions are irreconcilable with any form of relativism.

Although the Bahá'í position is not relativist but absolutist on some issues - Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation for this age, that HIV is related to AIDS - it rejects as contrary to the doctrine of progressive revelation the absolutist suggestion that religious truth is revealed once and for all in full by any Manifestation. In regards to epistemology, the Bahá'í position may be described as ‘evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.’ The reason for calling it ‘Platonic’ is because there are “eternal verities” which obviously do not change and are true from all possible standpoints (unless one chooses to be deceived, but that is a different issue). Because they are eternal and unchanging, they resemble the Platonic ideas’ insofar as they are absolutely universal, objective and foundational: “This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”¹²⁰ Of course, it is evident that we do, in fact, have *some* knowledge of these “eternal verities” or other absolute truths but what and how much we know depends on our perspective or standpoint in history, on our spiritual, social, cultural development and what we learn from the Manifestations throughout human evolution. Thus, throughout history, we attain *partial glimpses* of the essential truths, the “eternal verities” as their various previously hidden potentials become known to us. That is why this position is described as evolutionary and perspectivist.

It is important that we not confuse and conflate ‘partial’ knowledge with ‘incorrect’ knowledge. If we only know plane

geometry, our knowledge of geometry is partial, but what we know about it is certainly correct: the interior angles of any plane triangle have always added up to 180 degrees and we have no reason to expect a change; Roosevelt was not the Soviet dictator during the Great Terror. In a more directly Bahá'í context, we *know that* Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation for this age, but we have not by any means discovered all the implications of that fact. Moreover, because the Bahá'í Faith has privileged, divinely appointed interpreters who occupy an Archimedean standpoint, it is possible to know that certain religious and philosophical claims are correct, though not fully understood by us.

Moreover, the existence of privileged interpreters also allows us to rule out particular perspectives and claims as untenable. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that a materialist approach to science and reality is inadequate¹²¹ and that pantheism¹²² and reincarnation¹²³ are untrue beliefs. This limits and constrains how Bahá'ís may understand the Writings, i.e. these perspectives are ruled out of bounds. On the positive side, “although human souls are phenomenal, they are nevertheless immortal, everlasting and perpetual.”¹²⁴ This truth, however partial or perspectival our understanding of it may be, is nonetheless true universally i.e. from all perspectives, foundationally and objectively. A contrary perspective is simply an error, both in the factual sense and existentially insofar as it contributes to human “degradation.”¹²⁵

9. Relativism versus Relationalism¹²⁶

Whereas in regards to epistemology, the Bahá'í position may be described as ‘evolutionary Platonic perspectivism,’ in regards to ontology, i.e. the theory of reality, it is best described as ‘relationalism.’ Relationalism is based on the belief that all things exist in relationship to one another,

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings.¹²⁷

Speaking specifically of humankind, the Master says, the existence and perfection of humankind

is due to the composition of the elements, to their measure, to their balance, to the mode of their combination, and to *mutual influence*. When all these are gathered together, then man exists.¹²⁸

In other words, things exist relationally to each other, but this must not be confused with ontological relativism according to which

What exists for human beings is relative to the concepts they possess and the procedures of enquiry with which their culture equips them ... *Ontological relativists are not saying that it is just what people believe exists* [that would bring us back to epistemological relativism] *that varies from culture to culture, but something much stronger, that what exists can only be said to exist for this or that culture.*¹²⁹

The logical consequence of this immediately makes its untenability clear: what we don't know doesn't exist – and, therefore, according to this view, shouldn't be able to hurt us. But we know this is false. The world's Aboriginal Peoples, for example, who knew neither gunpowder nor measles and had no concept of either, were very seriously hurt by both. Here we have historical proof that either individual or collective human perception does not constitute reality, that regardless of how we may constitute reality, factors not included in our construction may well be at work and able to affect us whether we recognise them or not.

Let us examine relationalism more closely. Unlike any form of relativism, it does not mean that there are standpoints from which real relationships can be validly denied and said not to exist. Doing that would make the nature of reality itself dependent on the perceiver – which is a form of ontological relativism. For relationalism, relationships are real whether or not they are perceived by anyone; for example, the relationship between fire and gunpowder has always been such that one should be extremely careful introducing them to each other. In other words, relationalism is a form of ontological realism, i.e. the belief that reality is independent of our ontological conceptions and schemes. Relationalism recognises that because things exist in relationship to one another, they may exhibit different characteristics in regards to different things. Indeed, they can even display opposite attributes with different things. Sea water, for example, allows ocean plants to thrive whereas it kills land plants. Exercise that may be valuable stimulation for one person's heart may kill another person. However, it is important to realise that relationalism still allows us to say that certain statements are absolutely true, e.g. that sea water is deadly for daisies, that there is no viewpoint from which this is not true. We may not completely understand all the details

about why this is true, but the assertion of the opposite is simply false. Thus, relationalism is able to retain the concept of truth and of distinguishing among a wildering wilderness of images/perspectives. It is able to accommodate the idea that at least some statements are universal, objective and foundational, and that others are in error.

Thus, it is plain that relationalism and relativism are not the same and must not be confused and conflated. The Bahá'í Writings are relationalist and not relativist.

Let us observe relationalism in the following statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá':

This dust beneath our feet, as *compared with our being, is nonexistent*. When the human body crumbles into dust, we can say it has become nonexistent; therefore, its dust in relation to living forms living forms of human being is as nonexistent, but in its own sphere it is existent, it has its mineral being. Therefore, it is well proved that absolute nonexistence is impossible; it is only relative.¹³⁰

The statement says that in its relationship to human being, dust is non-existent although, "in its own sphere", in relationship to itself, dust exists. It is important to notice that it is not merely a matter of opinion whether or not dust is dead in relationship to or relative to the human being - this is presented as an ontological fact. There is no cognitive relativism about this; no matter what standpoint we choose to observe this fact, it will be the same, i.e. it is universal, objective and foundational. From this example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá' draws a general conclusion: "absolute non-existence" does not exist, "it [non-existence] is "only relative." Here, too, we have a universal claim that is not standpoint dependent but is offered as a principle of universal ontology. That our understanding of this principle will grow and expand throughout our evolutionary history is not in question, but the basic insight reflects an abiding truth on which we have one true perspective. This brings us back to the 'evolutionary Platonic perspectivism' where we may get various successive perspectives on the "eternal verities" or unchallengeably true propositions, as, for example that "nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable."¹³¹ Nonexistence is always non-existence in relationship to something and existence is always existence in relationship to something.

What follows is another statement which illustrates the difference between relationalism and relativism:

Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, in relation to the existence of God it is nonexistent and nothingness. Man and dust both exist, but how great the difference between the existence of the mineral and that of man! The one in relation to the other is nonexistence. In the same way, *the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence*. Thus it is evident and clear that although the beings exist, *in relation to God and to the Word of God they are nonexistent*.¹³²

Again we observe that in these statements the attributes of existence and nonexistence are not simply matters of opinion or viewpoint in the relativistic sense of our being able to hold the opposite view with equal validity. There is, for example, no standpoint from which creation is not contingent and dependent upon God, nor is there a standpoint from which God Himself depends on creation. (This should not be confused with the claim that humans may devise various concepts of God; the concepts, but not God Himself are dependent on man.) This is true even of the "First Mind" or "First Will": "for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness."¹³³ This ontological principle also applies at the most humble level "the life of the nail in relation to the life of the eye is nonexistent."¹³⁴ The failure to adequately consider the relational nature of existence causes some thinkers to conclude that the world is an illusion

This theory [that the external world is an illusion, is nothingness] is *erroneous*; for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, *in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this*.¹³⁵

Aside from the characterization of a particular view as "erroneous" - which implicitly denies epistemological relativism - this passage shows that things are involved in two kinds of relationship, a relationship to others or not-self (in this example, God) and a relationship to itself, its own "condition of being." All things thus have a double nature; more importantly they can have apparently opposite attributes in different relationships. Furthermore, each of these relationships is absolutely true and not relative. In respect to God, the world does not exist - and there is no alternative standpoint from which to validly assert the opposite. In regards to itself, the world exists - and as Augustine and Descartes know, there is no logically defensible standpoint from which to assert the opposite. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that it is "futile" to deny

what he says demonstrates the universal, objective and foundational nature of his claim, and thereby illustrates a vital difference between relationalism and relativism.

What follows is an application of relationalism to the human soul after death.

*In the same way, the souls who are veiled from God, although they exist in this world and in the world after death, are, in comparison with the holy existence of the children of the Kingdom of God, nonexistent and separated from God.*¹³⁶

Here, too, we observe the double-relation: in regards to themselves as well as the world and “the world after death”, these veiled souls exist, but in regards to the “children of the Kingdom”, they are nonexistent. Each statement is true, and not subject to equally valid contradiction as it would be with relativism; together these relations constitute the being of those particular souls. There is no standpoint from which a soul could be “separated from God” and still exist since that would assert the independence of the created from the Creator. Nor is there any standpoint that could validly assert the nonexistence of a soul “in the world and the world after death” while still existing for God, because that would be to declare the world more powerful than God.

Relationalism also applies to ethics according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*a scorpion is evil in relation to man; a serpent is evil in relation to man; but in relation to themselves they are not evil ... The epitome of this discourse is that it is possible that one thing in relation to another may be evil, and at the same time within the limits of its proper being it may not be evil. Then it is proved that there is no evil in existence; all that God created He created good. This evil is nothingness; so death is the absence of life.*¹³⁷

Once again, we note how the relationship to not-self/other is distinguished from relationship to self along with the assertion that nothing is evil “within the limits of its proper being.”¹³⁸ This relationship to itself is the ontological foundation for the teaching that God’s creation is good; all things are good in and of themselves. In addition, this passage also reinforces the distinction between relationalism and relativism because there is no standpoint from which we may correctly say that the scorpion is evil in regards to itself because that would be to deny the inherent goodness of God’s creation. In other words,

we know this truth from a privileged standpoint from which we may reject the contrary view as false.

Similar thinking applies to morality as well. `Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The sin in Adam is relative to His position. Although from this attachment there proceed results, nevertheless, attachment to the earthly world, in relation to attachment to the spiritual world, is considered as a sin. The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the Near Ones.*¹³⁹

This statement exemplifies relationalism not relativism because it is not a matter of questioning Adam's sin – which is flatly asserted to be sin and not subject to contrary perspectives according to which it is not – but only that what is factually a sin in relationship to Adam is not necessarily a sin in relationship to other beings. This is consistent with relationalism because, as already explained, an entity may exhibit different qualities in relationship to different things because it interacts differently with each. Thus, what is good in the “righteous” is “sin” for the “Near Ones.” The statement that “The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the Near Ones” is not dependent on perspective but is offered as a truth that is universal, objective and foundational. There is no perspective that could prove `Abdu'l-Bahá wrong.

Another example of relationalism can be found in *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*:

*Although a brief example hath been given concerning the beginning and ending of the relative world, the world of attributes, yet a second illustration is now added, that the full meaning may be manifest. For instance, let thine Eminence consider his own self; thou art first in relation to thy son, last in relation to thy father.*¹⁴⁰

Here, too, we find no suggestion that the claim “thou art first in relation to they son, last in relation to thy father” is subject to equally valid contradictory claim, which is to say that this statement is universally, objectively and foundationally true. In other words, this statement implicitly assumes there exists a neutral, Archimedean standpoint from which its claim can be made, thereby ruling it out of consideration as an example of relativism.

The passage goes on to declare that “first” and “last” as well as “outward appearance” and “inward being” are “four states” that are “true of thyself.”¹⁴¹ If we allowed a truly relativistic reading instead of a perspectivist reading, the truth of this

passage would no longer be universalist, objectivist and foundational – and thus would lose its value as a guide in the quest for religious truth.

Continuing this passage, we read,

These statements are made in the sphere of that which is relative, because of the limitations of men. Otherwise, those personages who in a single step have passed over the world of the relative and the limited, and dwelt on the fair plane of the Absolute, and pitched their tent in the worlds of authority and command--have burned away these relativities with a single spark, and blotted out these words with a drop of dew. And they swim in the sea of the spirit, and soar in the holy air of light. Then what life have words, on such a plane, that "first" and "last" or other than these be seen or mentioned! In this realm, the first is the last itself, and the last is but the first.¹⁴²

Here Bahá'u'lláh reminds us that we live on a “relative” ontological plane where everything exists in relation to other things and thus suffer the problem of being limited by particular perspectives i.e. relating to one thing in one way and to something else in another. However, it is possible to surpass this relational plane – to “burn[] away these relativities,” to transcend the differences of words and attain a plane where first and last are one and the same, i.e. where things do not exist relationally as on this earthly plane. What precisely that mode of existence is we are powerless to say because the words have been blotted out “with a drop of dew.” We have reached the limit of rationality. An adherent of philosophical relativism must, of course, claim that this may be true from a particular perspective but that the direct contrary view is equally possible – and there is Archimedean standpoint from which to judge between the alternatives. The problem is that nothing here suggests this is what Bahá'u'lláh means.

10. A Test Case¹⁴³

In his well-know article “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*,” Moojan Momen claims that relativism can reconcile ontological dualism and ontological monism. Writing about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden treasure,*’ ” Momen contends that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adopts a relativist approach to achieve “a reconciliation of the dichotomy”¹⁴⁴ between an ontological dualism asserting that “there is a fundamental difference between the human soul and

the Absolute”¹⁴⁵ and an ontological monism stating that “there is no fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute.”¹⁴⁶ The case of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary*” is intended to be paradigmatic in solving the apparent problem between the teaching of the essential unity of all religions and humankind’s conflicting religious beliefs.

It is the contention of this paper that Momen’s use of relativism as a solution to the monism/dualism conflict in the Writings is a supposed ‘solution’ to a non-existent problem. There is, as we shall see, no monist position in the Writings. But is this really the case? After his exposition of both 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.¹⁴⁷

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 and the quality of their knowledge, 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.¹⁴⁸ 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 for an endorsement of both their opinions.¹⁴⁹ Such is patently not the case. Momen quotes the following passage to support his case for relativism:

It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision. We shall give an example of this, that its meaning may become fully clear: Consider the visible sun; although it shineth with one radiance upon all things, and at the behest of the King

of Manifestation bestoweth light on all creation, yet in each place it becometh manifest and sheddeth its bounty according to the potentialities of that place. For instance, in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror; in a crystal it maketh fire to appear, and in other things it showeth *only* the effect of its shining, but not its full disk. And yet, through that effect, by the command of the Creator, it traineth each thing according to the quality of that thing, as thou observest.¹⁵⁰

While this passage certainly supports perspectivalism or relationalism – there are many perspectives on or relations to the sun and each of them originates with the wayfarer – this passage clearly indicates that not all perspectives are equal: “in a mirror it reflecteth its own disk and shape, and this is due to the sensitivity of the mirror.” In other words, the mirror reflects the sun more accurately, faithfully, adequately than in other things which show “*only* the effect of its shining, but not its full disk.” Each reflects “according to the quality of that thing” but nowhere is it claimed that the quality is everywhere equal. Indeed, in this very image Bahá'u'lláh suggests an Archimedeian standpoint from which to judge the reflections: the more one is sensitive like a mirror, the more closely we will reflect the light, “disk and shape” of the sun. This passage does not support a relativist reading.

If 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, as we have shown with the foregoing passage, the Writings do not espouse such a subjectivist theory of truth.¹⁵¹ If They did, they would be maintaining that standpoint and spiritual condition is sufficient to establish objective truthfulness – which in turn would prevent Them from dismissing some beliefs as “vain imaginings,”¹⁵² “error,”¹⁵³ and “the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness”¹⁵⁴.

In attempting to prove that relativism can serve as the “basis for a Baha'i metaphysics,” Momen endeavours to show how it can resolve the conflict between monism and dualism by citing apparently ‘monist’ passages in the Writings. Our contention is that these passages are not monist at all. For example, Bahá'u'lláh's injunction, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee”¹⁵⁵ is not really monist. Because we can find God's universal presence reflected in the

mirrors of our hearts¹⁵⁶ 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.

Another passage Momen quotes to support a monist interpretation of the Writings is found in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*. Some wayfarers behold various colors, but "some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself."¹⁵⁷ 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"¹⁵⁸ and the sun itself are actually one, that the person who gazes is one with what he gazes upon. However, this passage also preserves the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived and, therefore, cannot serve as an example of a monist tendency in the Writings. Indeed, it is explicitly dualist.

The following is another passage quoted to support a monist tendency in the Writings:¹⁵⁹ "Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend."¹⁶⁰ There is no suggestion here or in immediately subsequent statements, that the seeker becomes ontologically one with God since the passing away of the world or self or loss of awareness of them as separate entities - does not imply such actual, ontological one-ness. This passage is not really ontologically monist - and therefore, relativism does not need relativism to reconcile with dualism. Furthermore, we should recall Bahá'u'lláh's condemnation of those who, "deluded by their idle fancies, have conceived all created things as associates and partners of God."¹⁶¹ There is no way that the monist vision can be true without erasing the ontological distinctions between God and man - a concept that requires us to become one of God's 'partners.'

This statement and others like it irrevocably invalidate any monist views regardless of our sincerely they might be held. Sincerity is not a measure of truth, since erroneous views can be sincerely held.

Finally, it is claimed that the Bahá'í belief that only God has absolute existence and that human existence is contingent is "in essence a monist position."¹⁶² Such is far from being the case.

First, the fact that only God possess absolute existence means

only that creation has lesser degrees of being, not that all things are ontologically one with God. Indeed, to insist on such identity is, in effect, to insist that God is nothing (like creation) and that creation is absolute (like God.) Both positions are untenable for Bahá'ís. Second, the assertion of ontological oneness between Creator and created means that God is somehow present - albeit in different forms - in His creation. This position would be "appearance through manifestation"¹⁶³ which 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically rejects as "quite impossible."¹⁶⁴ The reason is straight forward: for the human soul to become one with God would be for it to leave its own condition as human, and this is rejected:

but it [the human soul] never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop. For example, the reality of the spirit of Peter, however far it may progress, will not reach to the condition of the Reality of Christ; it progresses only in its own environment.

*Look at this mineral. However far it may evolve, it only evolves in its own condition; you cannot bring the crystal to a state where it can attain to sight. This is impossible.*¹⁶⁵

This statement makes it clear that there is absolutely no standpoint from which the soul can alter its essentially human condition and become ontologically one with God. To become one with God, also violates Baha'u'llah's injunction not to "transgress the limits of one's own rank and station."¹⁶⁶ This re-emphasizes the dualist position: man is always man and God is always God. In other words, we always remain in one of the three stations of existence: "Know that the conditions of existence are limited to the conditions of servitude, of prophethood and of Deity."¹⁶⁷ Man is always in the (ontological) condition of servitude and nothing can change that, either in this life or the life to come. Furthermore, 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?"¹⁶⁸ Since the knowledge of God is utterly impossible, 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.

Because of the vast ontological gulf between the two¹⁶⁹ - a difference of kind, not of degree - it is impossible for God to become man or vice versa as held by some mystics. 'Abdu'l-Bahá

describes this view, which he identifies with the Sufis but which also applies to Christian incarnationism, as “evident error.”¹⁷⁰ There is no way that “the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms.”¹⁷¹ He also rejects the view that man may become God; he asks rhetorically, “[H]ow can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality?”¹⁷² 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.*”¹⁷³ He reinforces this point by asking rhetorically, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?”¹⁷⁴ In other words, the ontological difference between the Creator and the created is too great to be overcome by the mere efforts of humankind.

Not only does ontological monism undermine Bahá'í theology because it makes Manifestations superfluous as mediators between God and humankind, but it also ignores logic. First, if man truly becomes one with God, the Creator of all other beings, then the claimant in effect becomes his own creator, which is to say, he exists before he exists because 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 can be no possible point of view, position or stance within creation where the distinction between Creator and created is overcome, where the primordial relationship of dependence on God is invalidated, or effectively negated in some way. To claim otherwise – as ontological monism does – is to ignore Baha'u'llah's warning that “He hath assigned *no associate* unto Himself *in His Kingdom* ...”¹⁷⁵

However, we must 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.

The conclusion that ontological or even cognitive/epistemological monism are not an option is inescapable on the basis of the Writings. The monism/dualism dichotomy simply doesn't exist in the Writings, and, therefore, requires no solution. Moreover, even if such a dichotomy

existed, to propose relativism as a 'solution' creates more philosophical problems than it solves. This is what we shall demonstrate next.

11: Relativism: A Basis for Metaphysics?

We are still left with the question of whether relativism be “a basis for Bahá’í metaphysics”¹⁷⁶ or ontology as Momen claims. Analysing this issue in light of the serious philosophical problems entailed in espousing relativism leads us to the conclusion that this is not a tenable proposal. As we shall see, applied to ethical subjects, relativism undercuts the very possibility of any normative morality, in effect, reducing morals, vice and virtues, the praiseworthy and the blameworthy to a matter of personal taste and preference. Applied to epistemology, it undercuts the very possibility progress in human intellectual, scientific, technological and spiritual knowledge, reducing such progress to mere change. It denies as well the bedrock idea that some cultures are more advanced than others, as pointed out by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in various statements.¹⁷⁷ In the realm of religion, it denies the very the foundational Bahá’í doctrine of progressive revelation, since, according to relativism, there can be no progress, only change. As already seen, relativism makes the entire concept of a metaphysics untenable.

According to Momen, 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.”¹⁷⁸

There are several problems here. The first, and perhaps most obvious is that if there can be no correct or incorrect interpretations – by what criteria could we make such judgments since all interpretations are correct from their various perspectives? – it will be impossible to do metaphysics at all. Philosophy and metaphysics are more than free-style expression of viewpoints: “metaphysics [is] most generally the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution and structure of reality.”¹⁷⁹ There are questions of logical correctness and consistency to consider, not to mention the use, analysis and critiquing of factual evidence and its meaning. When all opinions are correct from their perspectives and subsequently immune from evaluation, how could we ever reach even the simplest conclusions about “Bahá’í metaphysics” i.e. about the allegedly “Bahá’í” understanding of the “constitution

and structure of reality”? If that is the case, we cannot claim to have a “Bahá'í ” or any other kind of metaphysics: all we have is a collection or heap of viewpoints many of which exclusive to one another. This completely undermines the possibility of developing a coherent metaphysics - or a coherent ethics or code of law for that matter.¹⁸⁰

For relativism, there is an infinite number of equally valid ‘realities’ which can be constructed by human beings, individually and/or collectively. These may or may not be reconcilable. There is no common reality or world for all people. As a result, there is no common reality or world for all people. As seen immediately above, this leads to the impossibility of developing an even minimally coherent metaphysic - theory of reality - or general world-view (Weltanschauung). Even more, it also makes the entire Bahá'í project impossible. The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is to provide a spiritual framework in which all the religious dispensations can find their place and be elevated to a new level,¹⁸¹ and in which the dream of a unified world order can be achieved. Such unity requires that to a considerable degree we share a common reality, that at least a sufficient number of people agree about the nature of reality, the nature of man and the world we live in. The lack of such a common viewpoint or framework is precisely what plagues the world today and prevents cooperative action. Among other things, the Bahá'í Faith

proclaims its readiness and ability to fuse and incorporate the contending sects and factions into which they have fallen into a universal Fellowship, *functioning within the framework, and in accordance with the precepts, of a divinely conceived, a world-unifying, a world-redeeming Order.*¹⁸²

Relativism, which has no way of distinguishing true from false, or the useful from the counterproductive or simply irrelevant, is not capable of developing such a unifying vision and framework and thus fails to meet the desperate need of humankind for unity. “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements,”¹⁸³ says Bahá'u'lláh, and thereby provides us with at least one criterion by which we can distinguish among contending viewpoints. This allows us to escape the quicksand of competing views and - unlike relativism - start the process of selecting among them.

Another severe problem with relativism and the Bahá'í Faith is that there can be no universally valid ethical prescriptions

since ethical prescriptions are matters of individual and/or collective choice: there is no common ethical world for all people. However, it is precisely the aim of the Bahá'í Faith to provide a common spiritual and ethical framework within which all of humanity can live and work together. That is why the Faith promulgates teachings on the importance of justice, of human rights, honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, moderation, knowledge, spirituality and so on. These are not just a matter of opinion according to the Writings; they are objectively real virtues consonant with the best in the nature of man: "The Prophets come into the world to guide and educate humanity so that the animal nature of man may disappear and the divinity of his powers become awakened."¹⁸⁴ There is no question here of the equal validity of opposing viewpoints: "The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy."¹⁸⁵ Here, too, we find that relativism is out of step with the goals of the Bahá'í Faith.

Furthermore, relativism makes the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation impossible along with the Bahá'í Faith's belief in scientific, social, economic and political progress. To assert that a certain development is 'progressive' requires that we attain a universal, objective and foundational Archimedean point from which to make such a judgment. Relativism, of course, denies that such an Archimedean standpoint exists; we can only assert that things change, not that they 'progress' – whatever that might mean. Indeed, relativism must also recognise as equally valid the view that progressive revelation is false, and 'imperialist dogma' for the conquest or subjugation of other religions. Such a position, of course, cannot be harmonized with the Bahá'í teachings. Indeed, undermining of progressive revelation undermines one of the essential identifying features of the Faith.

Nor can we escape the fact that relativism makes the concept of a divine Manifestation untenable because a Manifestation has a privileged, universal, objective and foundational Archimedean standpoint which make His pronouncements normative for all of humankind and all cultures at this time. IOW, His pronouncements are universal, objective and foundational. Relativism is simply incapable of recognizing the existence of such a being – though by its own principles it cannot rule out His existence – and thereby plunge itself into self-refutation again. Because what is revealed by the Manifestation is universal, objective and foundational, there is no room for equally valid but contrary viewpoints. If

contradictory viewpoints were just as valid, why would we need the Manifestation? Everyone can be his own manifestation! Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that this solution is not acceptable for the simple reason that only one genuine Physician exists for the world's ills.

*At one time it [the world] hath been agitated by contentions and disputes, at another it hath been convulsed by wars, and fallen a victim to inveterate diseases. Its sickness is approaching the stage of utter hopelessness, inasmuch as the true Physician is debarred from administering the remedy, whilst unskilled practitioners are regarded with favor, and are accorded full freedom to act...*¹⁸⁶

This passage makes it clear that there is no alternative to the remedies prescribed by the “unerring Physician,”¹⁸⁷ that there is only one Physician whose viewpoint matters. Baha'u'llah's “Book itself is the “Unerring Balance” established amongst men,”¹⁸⁸ a statement demonstrating the Manifestation's absolute “epistemic privilege.” Such a position conflicts with relativism in all its forms.

Yet another problem undermines relativism: as Plato pointed out in the *Theatetus*, relativism makes it impossible for anyone to be wrong, misled or simply perverse in their thinking. Maintaining that everyone is correct from his own standpoint is tantamount to saying that people cannot err, and, in effect, have essential infallibility. Not only does this violate common life-experience, but it also leavers us unable to explain references to “the divines and the foolish of this age,”¹⁸⁹ to “certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies,”¹⁹⁰ or to those who are “ignorant of the mysteries that lie enfolded within him.”¹⁹¹ These quotations make it clear that relativism is not an accurate description of what we find in the Writings. It would, of course, also present insurmountable ethical problems, we would not be able to distinguish between the actions of a Mother Theresa and a Dr. Mengele or Stalin's chief butcher Lavrentiy Beria.

Relativism also confuses and conflates two distinct propositions: (a) knowledge is relative to standpoint and (b) all viewpoints are equally correct.. Two hidden assumptions should also be mentioned. The first is that there is no Archimedean standpoint from which to judge amongst competing views, and the second is that everyone interprets his viewpoint accurately. The fact that knowledge is relative to standpoint does not

logically lead to the conclusion that all perspectives are equally valid. Making that leap is precisely what distinguishes relativism from relationalism and evolutionary Platonic perspectivism. The Bahá'í Writings certainly believe that knowledge is relative to standpoint but they do not believe all perspectives are equal. If that were the case, how could we find such passages as “Even as it is evident in this day how the people of error are, by their countenance, known and distinguished from the followers of divine Guidance.”¹⁹² Or take the following:

He is indeed a true believer in the unity of God who, in this Day, will regard Him as One immeasurably exalted above all the comparisons and likenesses with which men have compared Him. He hath erred grievously who hath mistaken these comparisons and likenesses for God Himself.¹⁹³

There is no suggestion in either of these quotations that those who are in error are correct from their own particular standpoint.

It is important as well to mention the self-refutational problems of relativism because Moojan Momen, in his article, “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics*” claims that “there can be no “absolute statements about Reality.”¹⁹⁴ The problem is that this itself is an absolute statement about reality and rules itself out of court. Once we understand the self-refutational nature of such relativist pronouncements, we can see why they cannot form the basis of any programmatic thought and thus lose any epistemic privilege to become the “basis of Bahá'í metaphysics.” Furthermore if such categorical statements about reality are forbidden, what are Bahá'ís to make of the assertion “God exists”? For Bahá'ís, this declaration cannot be anything less than absolute, i.e. universal, objective and foundational, since ‘Abdu'l-Bahá himself provided “proofs and evidences of the existence of God”¹⁹⁵ without any conditions on that conclusion. It is affirmed absolutely as true from all possible viewpoints and because nothing can be added to make it more or less true than it already is. Furthermore, from God's absolute existence, we can - contrary to Momen's claim - make indisputable ontological deductions. For example, God's existence puts Him at the head of a hierarchy of being whose other members are existentially dependent on Him. This dependence is true from all possible viewpoints within creation. Denying or relativizing this irreparably undermines the foundations of the Bahá'í theology.

Another problem is that the denial of “absolute

statements about reality”¹⁹⁶ in effect asserts that all viewpoints are equally true (or false) which in turn undermines the central doctrine of “progressive revelation.”¹⁹⁷ Guided by successive Manifestations, humans attain ever more adequate – though never perfect – knowledge of reality. We were “created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization.”¹⁹⁸ This injunction implicitly suggests an *evolutionary Platonic perspectivism* which asserts that knowledge – while never perfect – is nonetheless genuinely improving, i.e. being augmented, becoming more accurate and therefore, progressive.

A fourth 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? How can the Writings be explicated or defended if what opponents of the Faith says is as true as what the proponents say? Obviously, the very *raison d'être* of the Bahá'í Faith is removed by an unqualified epistemological relativism.

How can we distinguish various degrees of truthfulness without infringing on every Bahá'ís 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 retaining doctrinal cohesion. 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. Such negative gate-keeping would bar all forms of monism since they assert the possible one-ness of God and the creature. By adopting negative gate-keeping, Bahá'ís have, in fact, adopted inasmuch as negative gate-keeping stipulates that within the framework provided by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá , Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, all understandings that are not forbidden are equally valid or true.

The fifth problem with 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.”¹⁹⁹ He appears to

understand this as a blanket relativism applicable to all subjects, but such is not the case. The context of this statement is progressive revelation in regards to which we must recall Abdu'l-Baha's statements that "every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time."²⁰⁰ It is the "material ordinances" *not* the "essential ordinances" or "golden core"²⁰¹ which are relative. Because these "essential ordinances"²⁰² of religion are not relative, but "eternal; verities" seen from various perspectives by successive ages, we have earlier in this paper described this view as evolutionary Platonic perspectivism.

12. Conclusion

The Bahá'í Writings do not exemplify relativism as a philosophy but rather something superficially similar but actually quite different, namely, relationalism and an evolutionary Platonic perspectivism. Nowhere do the Writings align themselves with the various philosophical aspects of relativism, and therefore, to say they are relativistic misrepresents their philosophical nature both to Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís. Such misunderstanding can make the work of teaching, explicating and defending the Faith even more difficult than it already is by creating needless obstacles.

Nor can relativism be employed as a solution to the problem of religious diversity. First of all, Bahá'ís have to remember that

Bahá'u'lláh does not include all religious phenomena in His definition of the religion of God ... Bahá'u'lláh has not taught that every school, every branch of the true religions of God are rightly guided and hence reflect truly reflect the intentions of their Founders.²⁰³

For example, Bahá'u'lláh says that some religions are "the outcome of human perversity."²⁰⁴ This alone should prevent Bahá'ís from simply accepting at face value any and all religious claims; rather they should examine them critically to see if they accord with Bahá'u'lláh's divine teachings and reason, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá does in his discussions about Sufism, Theosophy²⁰⁵, Hinduism²⁰⁶ (in regards to reincarnation), Catholicism (in regards to monks and the doctrine of transubstantiation²⁰⁷) and Buddhism.²⁰⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussions show no sign of wanting to accept any and all ideas and developments in religious thought - and this alone

demonstrates that he does not express or conduct himself like a relativist. The Master loves people, but this does not prevent him from examining their ideas in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings²⁰⁹ and critical reasoning. The teachings are the Archimedean point from which other religious claims must be evaluated:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring Balance established amongst men. In this most perfect Balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it.²¹⁰

Relativism is also powerless to solve the problem of conflicting religious diversity because relativism has no answer to the conflicts except to let them continue since all viewpoints are true from their own standpoint. There is no possible way to resolve their differences on the basis of relativist philosophy because a relativist philosophy encourages the perpetuation of these differences and sees no need to bring them together. They are not seen as problematical in the first place. Why should it, if everyone is right? And on what basis could it do so? Choosing any such basis, would, in effect, be choosing a Archimedean standpoint from which to evaluate other beliefs – and that leads to all sorts of difficulties relativism seeks to avoid.

Here is yet another reason to conclude that the Bahá'í Writings do not exemplify a relativist philosophy. Rather, as we have seen, it illustrates an approach we have called relationalism and evolutionary Platonic perspectivism which do justice to the Faith's respect for diversity without sinking in the quicksand of relativism.

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, p. 326; see also *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, *The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

² Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.27 and 32.

³ "Tablet to Dr. Forel" in *Bahá'í World Faith*, 343; *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 19.

⁴ See Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, Volume 4, 2003.

⁵ Relationalism is generally associated with the process philosophy of Whitehead and his successors. It is supported by the Writings, e.g.

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- Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.178 - 179; See also *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 160
- ⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 14; p.108.
- ⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXII, p.51.
- ⁸ Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method*, p.5.
www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/feyerabe.htm
- ⁹ For a full discussion of this subject see Ian Kluge, "Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan* 9, 2008.
- ¹⁰ Rorty
- ¹¹ Derrida *Of Grammatology*.
- ¹² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.
- ¹³ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*;
- ¹⁴ Foucault
- ¹⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*.
- ¹⁶ Lacan; Deleuze and Guattari
- ¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.58.
- ¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.115.
- ¹⁹ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.. The identification of universalism, objectivism and foundationalism as pivotal concepts for studying relativism is based on this book.
- ²⁰ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- ²¹ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4
- ²² Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- ²³ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- ²⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.255-256.
- ²⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Simon Blackburn, p. 340.
- ²⁶ *Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, p. 795.
- ²⁷ *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. by Ted Honderich, p.794.
- ²⁸ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, p. 885.
- ²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 30.
- ³⁰ See Nelson Goodman in *Ways of World-Making* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978). Goodman, unconvincingly tries to dissociate himself from more radical consequences of his views.
- ³¹ Plato, *Theaetetus*,
- ³² Plato, *Theaetetus*.
- ³³ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 2.2.255-256.
- ³⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*.
- ³⁵ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- ³⁶ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.4.
- ³⁷ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.
- ³⁸ Rom Harre and Michael Krausz, *Varieties of Relativism*, p.5.

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- ³⁹ Plato, *Theaetetus*, emphasis added.
- ⁴⁰ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Section 1, p. 278.
- ⁴¹ David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Section 1, p. 279.
- ⁴² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Book I, Sect. VII, Part I, p.32.
- ⁴³ *Varieties of Relativism*, p. 20.
- ⁴⁴ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2, Section II, Subsection IV.
- ⁴⁵ Stephen R.C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, p. 37.
- ⁴⁶ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Book I, Chp. 2.
- ⁴⁷ Ammittai F. Aviram, "Asking the Question: Kant and Postmodernism?"
- ⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #493.
- ⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #534.
- ⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #537.
- ⁵¹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #555.
- ⁵² Nietzsche, *Of Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense*.
- ⁵³ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I,1.
- ⁵⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552.
- ⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 552; emphasis added.
- ⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 480.
- ⁵⁷ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, # 481.
- ⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, #616.
- ⁵⁹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.
- ⁶⁰ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiii.
- ⁶¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.34.
- ⁶² Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- ⁶³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.63.
- ⁶⁴ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.31.
- ⁶⁵ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.xxiv.
- ⁶⁶ Best and Kellner, "The Postmodern Turn in Philosophy: Theoretical Provocations and Normative Deficits"
- ⁶⁷ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, p.146.
- ⁶⁸ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction*, p.86; italics added.
- ⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 24; italics added.
- ⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 95.
- ⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Disseminations*, p. 127.
- ⁷² Derrida who is very inventive in coining new terms for his concepts and often has several terms for identical concepts.
- ⁷³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.298; also p.281.
- ⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, p.58.

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- ⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*.
- ⁷⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.
- ⁷⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.
- ⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.
- ⁷⁹ Andrew Thacker, “Michel Foucault”, *The Literary Encyclopedia*.
- ⁸⁰ Scott H. More, “Christian History, Providence and Foucault”, *Fides et Historia*, XXIX:1 (Winter/Spring 1997): 5-14
- ⁸¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.10.
- ⁸² Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- ⁸³ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.23.
- ⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.11.
- ⁸⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28; emphasis added.
- ⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p.28.
- ⁸⁷ J.G Merquior, *Foucault*, p.50.
- ⁸⁸ Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theories: Critical Interrogations*, p.41.
- ⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, interview in *La Quinzaine Literature*, quoted in J.G. Merquior, *Foucault*, p.36.
- ⁹⁰ Richard Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism :” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.202.
- ⁹¹ Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity:” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.23.
- ⁹² Richard Rorty, “Solidarity” in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p.192.
- ⁹³ Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.44.
- ⁹⁴ Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.39.
- ⁹⁵ Someone might claim such was the case in an alternative world, but that does not make it true in this world. There simply is no viewpoint from which such a claim is true for the world we live in.
- ⁹⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, 11:26.
- ⁹⁷ Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditation IV*.
- ⁹⁸ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.278.
- ⁹⁹ I do not intend to suggest Thomism is the last word in philosophy but its beginning with the concept of ‘being’ certainly puts it on solid philosophical ground.
- ¹⁰⁰ Dr. Josef Mengele, the “Angel of Death” at Auschwitz, infamous for his experiments on live and often conscious human subjects as well as twins.
- ¹⁰¹ See also Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, for more.
- ¹⁰² ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.179.
- ¹⁰³ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 326 - 327.
- ¹⁰⁴ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 224.
- ¹⁰⁵ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 465.

- ¹⁰⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.7.
- ¹⁰⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.208
- ¹⁰⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 60.
- ¹⁰⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.184.
- ¹¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.184.
- ¹¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p.184.
- ¹¹² Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come.*, p.2. See also *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.58, 111; *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 185.
- ¹¹³ PUP 154; emphasis added.
- ¹¹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.59.
- ¹¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p.172.
- ¹¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108.
- ¹¹⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 213.
- ¹¹⁸ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.
- ¹¹⁹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p.108.
- ¹²⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXX, p. 136.
- ¹²¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262.
- ¹²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 290.
- ¹²³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.282.
- ¹²⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 151 – 152.
- ¹²⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 89.
- ¹²⁶ The term is mainly associated with Whitehead's process philosophy and its later developments.
- ¹²⁷ SAQ 178 – 179; See also SWAB 160
- ¹²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.179; emphasis added.
- ¹²⁹ *Varieties of Relativism*, p.111. See Nelson Goodman's *Ways of World-Making* for example.
- ¹³⁰ PUP 89; emphasis added.
- ¹³¹ PUP p. 88.
- ¹³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281; emphasis added.
- ¹³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.203.
- ¹³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- ¹³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.278; emphasis added.
- ¹³⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- ¹³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.263 – 264.
- ¹³⁸ 'Proper' here is meant more in its traditional sense of 'belonging to itself.'
- ¹³⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.243.
- ¹⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28.
- ¹⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28.
- ¹⁴² Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 27-28
- ¹⁴³ Terry's article "*The Oneness of Reality: A Response to Relativism*" focuses

- specifically on the religious/theological difficulties with Momen's thesis. bs.ericwil.nl/modules.php?op=modload&name=UpDownload&file=index&req=getit&lid=142.
- ¹⁴⁴ Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics" Bahai-library.com/articles/relativism.html . Posted with permission of author and publisher (Kalimat Press 1988.)
- ¹⁴⁵ Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- ¹⁴⁶ Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- ¹⁴⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá , "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'" ; emphasis added.
- ¹⁴⁸ 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.
- ¹⁴⁹ 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.
- ¹⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 18 - 19.
- ¹⁵¹ 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. Published in *Lights of Irfan, Vol.4*, 2003.
- ¹⁵² *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 41.
- ¹⁵³ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 10.
- ¹⁵⁴ SAQ 137. 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."
- ¹⁵⁵ *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* (Arabic) #13, 7.
- ¹⁵⁶ SWAB 108
- ¹⁵⁷ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20 - 21.
- ¹⁵⁸ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 20.
- ¹⁵⁹ Quoted in Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- ¹⁶⁰ *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* 36 - 37.
- ¹⁶¹ GWB LXXXIV, p.166; see also 187.
- ¹⁶² Momen, "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."
- ¹⁶³ *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹⁶⁴ *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹⁶⁵ *Some Answered Questions* , p. 233.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XCIII, 188.
- ¹⁶⁷ *Some Answered Questions* , p. 230.
- ¹⁶⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá , "Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: 'I Was a Hidden Treasure'" ; emphasis added.

- ¹⁶⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá , of course, reveals a three-fold division of existence – the stations of Creator, Manifestation and the rest of creation. (*Some Answered Questions* 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.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Some Answered Questions* 195
- ¹⁷¹ *Some Answered Questions* 195
- ¹⁷² *Some Answered Questions* 221.
- ¹⁷³ SVFV 23 (“The Valley of Unity”); emphasis added;
- ¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* XCV, 192; emphasis added.
- ¹⁷⁷ For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, SAQ 119; SDC 86.
- ¹⁷⁸ “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*”
- ¹⁷⁹ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi, p. 563.
- ¹⁸⁰ It would, for example, make impossible William Hatcher’s project in *Minimalism: A Bridge between Classical Philosophy and the Baha’i Revelation*. Minimalism depends on the acceptance of certain basic principles as foundational to the Baha’i Faith.
- ¹⁸¹ “Verily I say, in this most mighty Revelation, all the Dispensations of the past have attained their highest, their final consummation.” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CLXI, p. 340.)
- ¹⁸² Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 100.
- ¹⁸³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CVI, p.213.
- ¹⁸⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.41.
- ¹⁸⁵ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CVI, p. 213.
- ¹⁸⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XVI, p. 39 – 40.
- ¹⁸⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXXIV, p. 81.
- ¹⁸⁸ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* 13.
- ¹⁸⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 7.
- ¹⁹⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XCIII, p.187.
- ¹⁹¹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XCIII, p. 186.
- ¹⁹² Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 173- 174.
- ¹⁹³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CLX, p.336 – 337.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics* .
- ¹⁹⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 5. 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.
- ¹⁹⁶ *Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics*”
- ¹⁹⁷ *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* p. 220.
- ¹⁹⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* CIX, p.215; emphasis added.

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- ¹⁹⁹ *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* p.58; see also the Preface to *The Promised Day is Come; Bahá'í Administration* p.185.
- ²⁰⁰ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p.106.
- ²⁰¹ Alexander Skutch, *The Golden Core of Religion*.
- ²⁰² *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* p.106.
- ²⁰³ Peter Terry, "The Oneness of Reality: A Response to Relativism."
- ²⁰⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CXI, p. 217.
- ²⁰⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.290.
- ²⁰⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 167.
- ²⁰⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 213.
- ²⁰⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 165.
- ²⁰⁹ People and their ideas are not the same things; an essential part of the art of consultation is learning how to distinguish the two and how to separate oneself from one's ideas.
- ²¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p.56.