

Baha'i Epistemology from the Perspective of Abdul-Baha

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Introduction

Baha'i epistemology should not be perceived as a static or rigid construct. Instead, it is in a perpetual state of dynamism and progression, akin to the growth of a fetus entering the world. This growth entails the enhancement of its internal qualities and capacities on one hand, and the expansion of its connections with the surrounding environment on the other.

The exploration of Baha'i epistemology through the lens of Abdul-Baha's perspective necessitates a contextual understanding within the broader vision and worldview of the Baha'i Faith, while also respecting the authenticity of its original texts. Currently, a meticulous process is underway, involving the collection, classification, arrangement, and translation of these texts, emphasizing the importance of treating this endeavor as an organic and continually evolving journey.

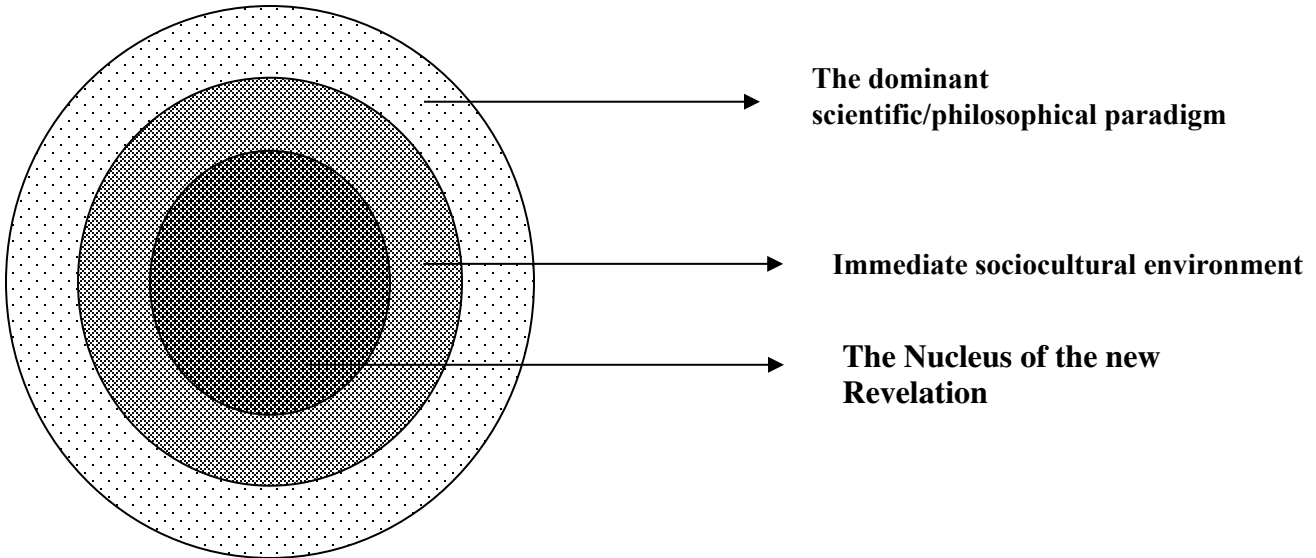
Religion transcends mere religious rituals and customs; it encompasses a profound historical role in shaping civilizations. When we delve into the annals of human history, it becomes evident that religions, in their nascent stages, have ushered in novel insights and wisdom. These early seeds of wisdom have not remained static but, instead, have thrived through intercultural exchanges, ultimately playing a pivotal role in rejuvenating civilization. *(See the next page)*

Religions have often been the cradle of innovative thought, birthing ideas that, over time, have intermingled with the scientific and philosophical doctrines of diverse cultures and civilizations. This fusion has culminated in the emergence of entirely new intellectual paradigms, carefully structured and refined through collective human intellect.

Take, for instance, the historical trajectory of Islam, where we observe that Islamic thought, scholarship, and education had an embryonic inception. Over time, they underwent substantial transformations and developments, spurred by the expanding web of cultural exchanges.

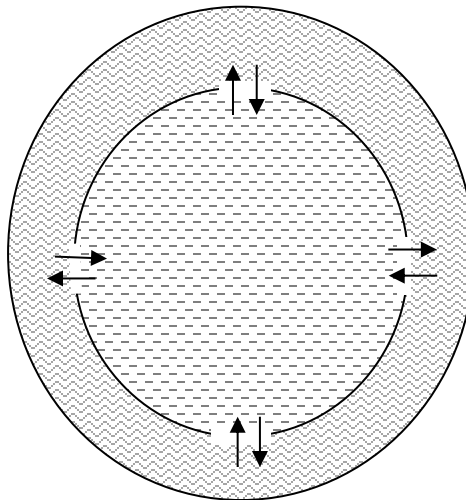
A general picture of three historical stages in the evolution of the epistemology of religion

Stage One (Potential)



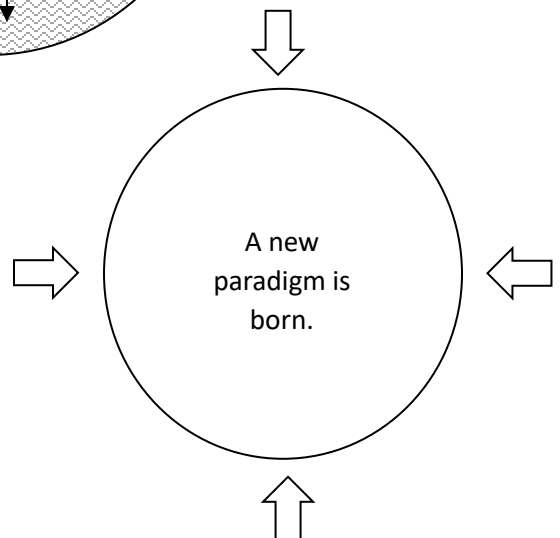
Stage Two (Transition)

A new revelation emerges, transcending the confines of the immediate cultural environment and engaging in a dialogue with the globally dominant culture.



Stage Three (Paradigm Status)

The new revelation gains momentum in presenting a fresh paradigm of understanding and begins to exert a significant influence on the culture.



Gradually, Islamic intellectualism evolved from its nascent core and became both influenced by and influential upon the scientific, artistic, and philosophical currents surrounding it.

In its early phases, Islam lacked the elaborate scientific and philosophical explanations that would later come to characterize it. The educational system of the time primarily emphasized the preservation of the Quran, Hadith, and the religious school curriculum. As per Abdul-Baha's perspective, even Muslims themselves initially grappled with comprehending the scientific and philosophical dimensions within the Quran.

However, this paradigm underwent a significant shift. Approximately two centuries after the migration of the Prophet, during the Abbasid era, Islam, having firmly established its social and civic foundations and expanded into a vast empire, witnessed both qualitative and quantitative cultural metamorphoses. This transformative period ushered in a profound evolution in the landscape of research and scholarship.

A pivotal catalyst for this transformation lay in the dynamic cultural exchanges between the nascent religion and diverse scientific disciplines of its era. In a remarkable convergence, scientific treatises spanning medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and more, originally authored in languages like Greek and Persian, found their way into Arabic translations. These translations not only enriched the tapestry of Islamic civilization but also offered Muslims a more profound vantage point for deciphering the concealed wisdom within their holy scriptures. This cross-cultural exchange didn't remain confined to Islamic territories alone; it reverberated further. Many of the ancient Greek works, having been translated from Arabic into Latin, made their way to Europe, becoming instrumental in shaping the intellectual landscape of the Western world.

Prominent scientists like Al-Khwarizmi in mathematics and astronomy, Khwaja Nasir al-Din al-Tusi in astronomy, and the medical trailblazers Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Razi made remarkable contributions that significantly bolstered the growth and global impact of Islamic civilization. During this transformative process, a pivotal development occurred as the madrasa (school, educational institution), previously integrated with the masjid (mosque), gained greater independence as scientific institution. Within the reformed educational system, alongside the

Quran, the study of mathematics, natural sciences, philosophy, and translated works became mandatory disciplines. This transformative phase gradually led to Islam and Islamic capitals assuming the mantle of centers for cutting-edge scientific and philosophical exploration, concurrently influencing scientific advancements and intellectual innovation in Europe.

Analyzing the rise and progression of religions unveils a recurring historical pattern in the evolution of religious epistemology. This trajectory commences with a divine and celestial orientation, later engaging in a dialogue with the prevailing philosophy and discourse of its era, ultimately culminating in a tangible manifestation within civilization. The Bahá'í Faith is no exception to this historical trend; therefore, its epistemology should be evaluated within the context of the dynamic interrelationship between religion and civilization.

The worldview embedded within each religious dispensation forms a dynamic current that exerts influence on the ever-evolving fabric of civilization. This worldview undergoes transformation, amalgamates with other ideas through mutual cultural exchanges, and matures in tandem with emerging civilization. Consequently, it is within this interconnected and evolving relationship that philosophical elements and expressions find fertile ground within Bahá'í epistemology.

Philosophical Concepts in the Works of Abdul Baha

In a letter addressed to Dr. Forel of Switzerland, Abdul Baha expressed deep admiration for the realms of science and philosophy, recognizing the pivotal role they play in humanity's advancement. He held philosophers in high regard, affirming, "We regard knowledge and wisdom as the foundation of the progress of mankind, and extol philosophers who are endowed with broad vision.." ¹ Furthermore, he extended his admiration to deistic philosophers, among

¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, Baha'i Reference Library
<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/1#690115704>

them Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, lauding them for their invaluable contributions to humanity's well-being, "As to deistic philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, they are indeed worthy of esteem and of the highest praise, for they have rendered distinguished services to mankind. In like manner we regard the materialistic, accomplished, moderate philosophers, who have been of service (to mankind)."²

It is noteworthy that Abdul Baha's praise for these philosophers extends beyond this particular letter, as they are also revered in his work "Some Answered Questions." Additionally, in the Tablet of Wisdom,³ also known as the Tablet of Philosophy, Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, similarly acknowledges and extols the virtues of these philosophers, acknowledging their significant contributions to the intellectual and philosophical landscape.

The intellectual lineage from Socrates to Plato and then to Aristotle had a profound impact on the trajectory of Greek philosophical thought. This transfer of knowledge and ideas gave rise to two distinct philosophical themes: idealism and realism, which have profoundly influenced philosophy and science throughout history. The foundational views established by these philosophers continue to shape the evolution of both fields.

Socrates, as the teacher of Plato, instilled his dynamic and probing mind into the thinking of his student. Plato, in turn, passed down Socratic ideals to Aristotle, resulting in divergent philosophical paths. Plato's emphasis on idealism and Aristotle's development of realism laid the groundwork for diverse philosophical perspectives that endure to this day.

The enduring legacy of these philosophers extended far beyond ancient Greece. Their ideas served as intellectual touchstones for centuries, with Christian and Muslim scholars in later eras drawing inspiration from their philosophical principles and techniques. This cross-pollination facilitated a closer relationship between the languages of religion and philosophy.

Socrates, a staunch believer in God, spirituality, and the afterlife, held unwavering faith in the immortality of the soul. Plato and Aristotle, while representing distinct philosophical realms, both grappled with fundamental questions about the existence of God, as well as the interplay

² Ibid.

³ Lawh-i-hikmat

between the supernatural and the material worlds beyond the physical realm. These deep engagements with spiritual and metaphysical themes led Abdul Baha to rightfully characterize Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as "divine philosophers," acknowledging the profound spiritual dimensions within their philosophical inquiries.

Similar to Aristotle, Abdul-Baha recognizes the significance of observation and sensory experiences in understanding the world. This empirical approach aligns with Aristotle's emphasis on the importance of gathering knowledge through empirical observation of the physical world. Furthermore, Abdul-Baha's emphasis on the principle of unity in the world of existence, echoing Aristotle's ideas, suggests that he sees a fundamental interconnectedness in all of existence. This unity serves as a foundational essence from which the diverse forms of life originate, akin to Aristotle's concept of the prime mover or the unmoved mover.

On the other hand, Abdul-Baha also shares similarities with Platonic thought by highlighting the role of reason⁴ and the ideal of human perfection beyond natural limitations. Much like Plato, who considered reason as a transcendental quality. Abdul-Baha's synthesis of these elements underscores the richness and complexity of his philosophical perspective, which draws upon a range of philosophical traditions to articulate his own understanding of the world and the human condition. This synthesis allows him to explore the intersections between empirical observation, reason, unity in existence, and the pursuit of human perfection, offering a holistic and spiritually oriented worldview.

Abdul-Baha's philosophy appears to transcend specific philosophical schools and instead offers a comprehensive worldview that can integrate elements of both idealism and realism. His philosophy seeks to reconcile apparent conflicts between various dimensions, such as spirit and body, and thought and matter, by embracing a holistic approach.

Abdul-Baha's recognition that truth can be approached from different perspectives underscores his philosophical openness and willingness to appreciate the diversity of human thought. Rather

⁴ عقل, A cognitive power that includes consciousness, knowledge, thinking, and judgment.

than favoring one school of thought over another, he seems to value the comprehensiveness and breadth of view exhibited by philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These philosophers, despite the passage of two millennia, have maintained their philosophical integrity and theoretical coherence, demonstrating the enduring value of their insights. In essence, Abdul-Baha's philosophy encourages a synthesis of diverse perspectives that seeks to harmonize various aspects of human understanding and experience. This approach allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced exploration of the complexities of existence and knowledge.

Abdul-Baha's critique of materialistic philosophy is evident in various writings as well as his speeches. In a particular tablet addressed to Dr. Forel, he explicitly addresses the shortcomings of narrow-minded materialists who adopt a sensory-focused perspective. These materialists, in Abdul-Baha's view, place excessive emphasis on sensory perception, considering it the primary measure of knowledge. They tend to regard everything as perceptible only if it can be sensed through the physical senses, leading them to dismiss or cast doubt upon anything beyond the realm of sensory perception, including the existence of divinity.

Abdul-Baha's stance suggests that he does not view this narrow materialistic viewpoint as representative of the entirety of philosophy. Instead, he characterizes it as a limited perspective held by materialists who prioritize the tangible and sensory aspects of reality while neglecting or denying the existence of the imperceptible, such as spiritual or metaphysical dimensions. His critique underscores his belief in the importance of a broader and more inclusive philosophical perspective that takes into account not only the material world but also the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of existence.

Interwoven Threads: The Historical Synergy of Philosophy and Religion

Philosophy

Every philosophical system operates within a framework that delineates the scope and boundaries of its principles and beliefs. At the heart of this framework lie the core ideas that serve as the foundational sources of belief within that philosophical system. These core ideas are surrounded by peripheral viewpoints that radiate outward like concentric circles around the central core.

The core ideas of a philosophical system can change and transform over time due to various factors, reflecting the dynamic nature of human thought and intellectual evolution.⁵ Core ideas in philosophy have the capacity to undergo diverse transformations and changes.

⁵ This serves as an illustration of the fundamental beliefs and historical evolution within the philosophical systems of Plato and Aristotle.

Socrates' philosophical core revolved around the belief in the existence of divinity and the immortality of the soul. He championed self-discovery as a moral duty, urging individuals to seek the truth. Building upon Socrates' foundational ideas, both Plato and Aristotle embarked on their philosophical journeys rooted in metaphysical principles and a belief in a divine creator. Plato's quest was centered on the pursuit of truth and the ideal of a just society or utopia. In this pursuit, he laid the groundwork for an educational system that encompassed ethics, politics, and governance. Aristotle, in contrast, expanded the horizons of his philosophy through the development of logic and scientific reasoning. His philosophy advocated for balance and the harmonious coordination of moral virtues.

While Plato and Aristotle share certain commonalities, they also exhibit significant differences. Aristotle's focus lies in the analysis of individual parts, whereas Plato emphasizes the holistic perspective. Aristotle places primary importance on sense perception, while Plato prioritizes the power of thought. Aristotle's attention is rooted in the present and the examination of existing reality, whereas Plato envisions a future ideal realm. Nonetheless, their shared pursuit remains the discovery of truth. Their intellectual spectra overlap in some areas and converge at certain points, but at other times, they diverge.

The influence of Plato's thought endures to this day. His philosophy left an indelible mark, finding alignment with Augustinian religious thought and the philosophy of illumination. Plato's contributions to philosophy have continued to inspire and captivate minds for over two millennia. His allegory of the cave, symbolizing humanity's universal quest for truth and liberation from the chains of ignorance, remains a powerful symbol.

Aristotle also made significant contributions to the philosophy of Christian thinker Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas adapted Aristotle's ideas in light of the Christian gospel, resulting in a comprehensive Christian philosophy integrated with the scholastic method. Aristotle was also recognized as a foundational figure among Muslim philosophers.

Nevertheless, the passage of time and the advancement of thought and science have gradually narrowed the spectrum and influence of Plato's and Aristotle's philosophies. Concepts such as Aristotle's cosmological hierarchies have been challenged and reshaped by discoveries like those of Galileo and Newton. Additionally, some of Aristotle's views on issues such as slavery and women's status have lost credibility.

Core ideas in philosophy are profoundly influenced by the historical and cultural contexts in which they emerge. The evolution of these ideas closely mirrors the transformations within societies and cultures over time. A vivid example of this evolution can be seen in the contrast between the core ideas of ancient Greek philosophy and those prevalent in contemporary Western philosophy, illustrating the significant impact of shifting historical and cultural landscapes.

Advancements in knowledge, particularly in fields such as science and technology, wield substantial influence over the core philosophical ideas. Scientific breakthroughs, ranging from revolutionary discoveries in physics to groundbreaking insights in neuroscience, often serve as catalysts for reevaluating metaphysical and epistemological concepts. In this dual role, they challenge established philosophical boundaries and expand the horizons of philosophical thought, fostering a dynamic interplay between philosophy and emerging scientific paradigms.

Philosophy, as an intellectual discipline, possesses an inherent capacity for rigorous self-examination and critical debate. Philosophers engage in a continuous process of questioning and scrutinizing existing ideas, creating an intellectual space where core philosophical concepts are subjected to refinement, revision, or even replacement. This intellectual endeavor is driven by the identification and subsequent resolution of weaknesses or inconsistencies within these concepts, ensuring that philosophy remains a vibrant and evolving field.

Moreover, philosophy frequently draws inspiration from interdisciplinary connections with various fields, including psychology, biology, economics, and more. Insights and perspectives from these diverse disciplines significantly shape and modify core philosophical concepts, fostering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the world. This interdisciplinarity enriches philosophical discourse, providing a broader foundation upon which core ideas are built and refined.

In today's globally interconnected world, philosophical ideas from diverse cultural and philosophical traditions engage in a dynamic and enriching dialogue. This cross-cultural exchange promotes mutual influence and mutual enrichment, leading to the adaptation and

integration of core ideas from various philosophical traditions. The result is a more inclusive and pluralistic philosophy, reflective of the rich tapestry of human thought and experience.

Religion

Religions are not exceptions to this principle. They also exhibit a spectrum and range that evolves within the context of time. While religions often share core beliefs that provide continuity and a sense of identity, they have also demonstrated a remarkable capacity for change and adaptation over time. This dynamic interplay between continuity and change within religious traditions reflects the complex and evolving nature of human spirituality and religious expression.

Like all aspects of culture, religions have core beliefs that provide stability and continuity over time. These foundational principles encompass fundamental concepts such as the existence of divine beings, ethical values, and the purpose of human life. These core beliefs serve as anchors for religious communities, shaping their identity and ensuring continuity.

However, religions are not static entities. They respond to changes in the societies in which they exist. Shifts in societal norms, values, and structures can prompt religious communities to adapt their beliefs and practices to remain relevant and responsive to the needs of their members. Factors such as evolving gender roles, technological advancements, and globalization influence how religious traditions are practiced and understood.

Additionally, doctrines and interpretations of sacred texts can evolve within religions. New theological insights, schisms, and debates among religious scholars can lead to shifts in understanding and belief. Different denominations may emerge based on varying interpretations of core religious tenets, showcasing the dynamic nature of religious thought.⁶

⁶ For example, different Christian denominations, while sharing a belief in God, often hold distinct interpretations of God's nature, and these interpretations define the boundaries of their faith. Some sects and denominations adopt a narrow definition of God, emphasizing God's existence solely within the physical appearance and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They use this definition as the cornerstone of their Christian doctrine. According to this perspective, the

One of the most historically significant changes has been the increased interaction between different religious traditions through interfaith dialogue. This engagement challenges and broadens the understanding of core beliefs, ultimately fostering greater mutual understanding and respect among diverse religious communities. It stands as a testament to the capacity for change and transformation within religious thought.

Furthermore, migration and the dispersion of religious communities to different parts of the world can lead to the blending of religious traditions and the emergence of new forms of belief and practice. These changes are often influenced by the need to adapt to new environments and cultural contexts, further illustrating the dynamic nature of religious evolution.

Moreover, in some societies, secularization and modernization have led to a decline in religious observance and a reevaluation of traditional beliefs. This can result in changes in religious adherence and the reinterpretation of core beliefs to align with contemporary worldviews,

Religions, although anchored by core beliefs that offer continuity and stability, are far from static entities. They have demonstrated a capacity for change and adaptation in response to the evolving dynamics of human society, culture, and thought. This adaptability allows religions to remain relevant and meaningful to their followers while navigating the complexities of the modern world.

Interplay of Philosophy and Religion Through History

Christian God is fundamentally distinct from the God of other religions. It's not merely a matter of linguistic differences in the name of God, but any belief that diverges from a specific interpretation of God's existence is seen as indicative of another deity, lying outside the parameters and confines of Christian faith, and consequently, is considered invalid.

Conversely, there are other Christian groups that view the God of the Gospel as the same omnipotent God who has also revealed Himself to other nations and religions. These sects adopt a more inclusive stance, which broadens the scope and range of their beliefs. Their approach is founded on the premise of a shared divine presence among different faiths, facilitating more open dialogue and interaction with other religious perspectives.

Indeed, the central point to consider is that every system of thought, whether it be philosophy, religion, or any other intellectual framework, is subject to change over time. As societies evolve, new knowledge emerges, and cultural, scientific, and philosophical shifts occur, these systems adapt and transform to remain relevant and responsive to the changing human experience.

One noteworthy aspect of this ongoing evolution is the intricate relationship between philosophy and religion throughout history. While these two domains have distinct approaches and objectives, they have frequently intersected, influenced each other, and even converged in various ways. This complex interplay between philosophy and religion highlights their shared pursuit of addressing profound questions about life, existence, morality, and the human condition. While they may approach these questions from different angles and with distinct methodologies, their interactions have enriched the intellectual and spiritual landscape of human history.

As both philosophy and religion continue to evolve and adapt in response to contemporary challenges and opportunities, the ongoing dialogue and integration between these realms serve as a testament to the enduring quest for understanding and wisdom that transcends the boundaries of individual disciplines.

History has consistently revealed that when the scope of intellectual exploration and the breadth of beliefs are expansive and inclusive, it fosters greater opportunities for transformation and cultural exchange. Conversely, when the realm of thought becomes narrow, both religion and philosophy tend to gravitate towards dogmatism and inflexible thinking.

For instance, if fundamentalist beliefs assert that God created the world in six literal days, that the Earth is no older than six thousand years, and deny the concept of evolution, this rigid stance hinders constructive dialogue and understanding with empirical science. Similarly, if materialist philosophy dismisses all mental phenomena, reducing the intricacies of reason, thought, and will to mere chemical reactions, or imposes a purely materialistic lens on the evolutionary process, or reduces all expressions of ethics, sacrifice, and human cooperation to mere natural stimuli, it confines itself within a limited spectrum akin to religious dogmatism.

This underscores the notion that intellectual dogmatism and its adverse moral and societal consequences are not merely matters of legality or tradition but rather represent a disarray in thought and a disruption in the framework of values. Thought tyranny, as history has shown, encompasses not only religious dimensions but also materialistic aspects. Across various historical periods, ideologies and beliefs characterized by a narrow scope of thought have often led their adherents into ethical crises in practice. This ethical turmoil can be seen as a tangible manifestation of the limitations imposed by constrained thinking.

According to the teachings of Abdul-Baha, a well-rounded approach to knowledge and belief entails the establishment of a harmonious relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of human existence, coupled with ethical considerations. Both religious and philosophical traditions have contributed to this holistic understanding, with certain philosophers directing their focus more towards spiritual aspects, while others emphasize material aspects of life. As long as there is a commitment to equilibrium and inclusivity, both religious and philosophical perspectives can be recognized as integral components of a broader, open-minded approach to comprehending the intricacies of the world.

The Four Criteria of Comprehension

Methodological and epistemological concerns, especially in the context of the relationship between religion and science, faith and reason, are extensively explored in his writings, sermons, and speeches. Notably, works such as "Some Answered Questions," "Tablet to Dr. Forel," and his commentary on the well-known Islamic tradition, "I was a Hidden Treasure," delve into these matters.

Within these discussions, the spiritual truth inherent in religion is depicted as a dynamic, creative, and transformative force capable of harmonizing human knowledge and awareness with the standard of truth. Moreover, there is a clear demarcation between religious knowledge and dogmatic or superstitious traditions. Religion is viewed as a phenomenon that evolves through its reciprocal interactions with civilization. The practical ramifications of this perspective should manifest in the positive transformation of human society.

To engage in this discourse, one can pose the following inquiries:

1. What factors and qualities facilitate the alignment of an idea with the standard of truth?
2. What standards are necessary for recognizing truth?
3. Can empirical evidence or the extent of reason alone serve as complete and adequate criteria for ascertaining truth?
4. How does religious knowledge and awareness enhance the quest for truth?
5. Is there a potential conflict between sensory observations, rational deliberation, inspiration, or the often-mentioned illuminative method?
6. What significance does the grace of the Holy Spirit hold in human knowledge and comprehension?

Abdul-Baha outlines his perspective on the apprehension of reality and the progression of human awareness through the prism of four distinct criteria: the sensory scale, the rational scale, the traditional scale, and the spiritual scale of the Holy Spirit. Initially, what immediately stands out in this discourse is Abdul-Baha's acknowledgment of the limitations and deficiencies inherent in the first three scales—senses, reason, and tradition. He underscores their susceptibility to errors and underscores the imperative need for certainty, which he suggests can be achieved through the spiritual scale of the Holy Spirit.

The evaluation of different criteria for understanding truth is a central theme in Abdul-Baha's teachings. He critiques each of the four scales or criteria: the sensory scale, the rational scale, the traditional scale, and the spiritual scale of the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, Abdul-Baha highlights the limitations of the sensory scale, emphasizing its inherent incompleteness. Abdul-Baha underscores the potential for the five senses to give rise to inaccurate or mistaken perceptions. Nevertheless, the Baha'i writings underscore a fundamental principle: while the hierarchy of existence ultimately ascends towards the spiritual realm, its primary foundation is rooted in the sensory or material/phenomenal world. Consequently, the sensory world assumes a central and foundational role within the overarching structure of creation.

Secondly, Abdul-Baha expresses reservations regarding the rational scale. He highlights the historical pattern where philosophers and thinkers have, at times, reached a consensus on significant matters, only to subsequently reverse their positions and invalidate the same issues, all while employing rational arguments. This indicates the fallibility of relying solely on reason as a criterion for truth.

The fallibility of reason often arises from perceiving it as static and unchanging. However, when we examine the authenticity of reason within the context of the evolving human mind and the vast realm of knowledge, it remains robust and resilient. Similarly, if we view the phenomenon of revelation—the connection between the Holy Spirit and the Prophet—as a continuous, orderly, and progressive process, we prevent religions from becoming stagnant. Abdul-Baha's comprehensive model encourages the alignment of empirical and rational criteria with the universal divine reason, representing the ultimate synthesis of science and faith. To achieve this harmony, it is essential to perceive both science and religion as ever-advancing processes. Moreover, the effusion of the Holy Spirit fosters ethical conditions in which the pursuit of knowledge, contemplation, and the search for truth are liberated from selfish desires, resulting in pure and honest inquiry. This enables the exploration of the realities of existence without the interference of personal or cultural biases.

Thirdly, Abdul-Baha discusses the traditional scale, which refers to religious texts, narrations, and traditions that have been interpreted by scholars. He cautions that even this criterion is not foolproof, as it is ultimately based on human reason and interpretation.

Abdul-Baha's overarching message is that no single criterion—senses, reason, or tradition—is comprehensive enough to be the sole determinant of truth. He suggests that a more encompassing and comprehensive scale is needed for human perception to progress and develop in accordance with its evolution.

Abdul-Baha's critique of the shortcomings and limitations of these methods should not be misconstrued to imply, for instance, that the sensory or rational approaches lack validity, or that the Baha'i Faith opposes scientific methods. Instead, his aim is to ensure that if the process of inquiry and the pursuit of truth are confined to any one of these methods—something we've

observed in extreme philosophical tendencies—a full comprehension of the reality of existence becomes unattainable. While these four methods have been individually segmented and defined, a closer examination of Abdul-Baha's comprehensive theoretical and epistemological elucidations reveals the inherent interconnections among them. Their unity is essential to establish a cohesive, robust, and all-encompassing approach that facilitates dialogue and harmony between science and religion.

Shoghi Effendi, who was appointed as the successor to Abdul-Baha, places significant emphasis on a crucial aspect of the Baha'i Faith—the principles and beliefs of which are rooted in scientific methods.⁷ In doing so, he underscores the importance of understanding what the term "scientific method" signifies within the context of the Baha'i Faith. This invites us to explore how the criterion of the Holy Spirit can be seamlessly integrated into the intellectual framework of the Baha'i Faith while preserving its scientific nature.

It can be inferred that Shoghi Effendi's reference to the scientific nature of the Baha'i Faith is an endeavor to disentangle the concept of the Holy Spirit from superstitions, miracles, and surface-

⁷ The Revelation proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, His followers believe is divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, *scientific in its method*, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men. The mission of the founder of their Faith, they conceive it to be to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the nonessential aspects of their teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith.” His Cause, they have already demonstrated, stands identified with and revolves around, the principle of the organic unity of mankind as representing the consummation of the whole process of human evolution. This final stage in this stupendous evolution, they assert, is not only necessary but inevitable, that it is gradually approaching, and that nothing short of the celestial potency with which a divinely ordained Message can claim to be endowed can succeed in establishing it.

The Bahá'í Faith recognizes the unity of God and of His Prophets, upholds the principle of an unfettered search after truth, condemns all forms of superstition and prejudice, teaches that *the fundamental purpose of religion is to promote concord and harmony, that it must go hand-in-hand with science*, that it constitutes the sole and ultimate basis of a peaceful, an ordered and progressive society.

Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Ill., 1955. Italics mine

level religious definitions while also avoiding relegating it to the purely abstract or speculative realms of metaphysics. His goal is to integrate the concept of the Holy Spirit into the broader evolution of knowledge that has unfolded throughout history and societal development. In doing so, Shoghi Effendi seeks to align the Holy Spirit with the processes of change and innovation, with the ultimate aim of harmonizing it with empirically verifiable outcomes in the construction of a civilization.

The Four levels of knowledge, while distinct, all serve a common purpose that revolves around the unity of existence and knowledge. Each level of knowledge serves as a criterion for understanding reality at a specific stage of existence, but none of them can fully encompass the entirety of existence. For instance, the sense perception criterion is the most reliable tool for observing and experiencing nature and material phenomena, but it cannot be extended to grasp abstract concepts. While it provides a precondition for the discovery of abstract concepts, it cannot independently engage in the realm of abstraction. Each criterion of knowledge reflects a facet of reality at its respective stage and sets the stage for the introduction of another criterion. Through the combination of the two criteria, a broader layer of manifest reality emerges, granting access to a higher level of knowledge through their unity.

Abdul-Baha emphasizes that sensory perception, while valuable, has its limitations and provides only partial knowledge of reality. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, sensory knowledge must be complemented by intellect and reason. However, he cautions that reason itself, if constrained by cultural biases or preconceived notions, may not offer conclusive judgments. As an example, Abdul-Baha points to the historical evolution of the theory regarding the position of the sun and the motion of the Earth.

He highlights how Plato's theory on this matter was forgotten in favor of Ptolemy's perspective until Galileo's observations and experiments provided empirical evidence to support the heliocentric model. This historical context illustrates that while reason can perceive truths, it may not always deliver definitive judgments. Therefore, when reason and sensory perception are combined, they enhance the credibility and conclusiveness of knowledge. In the case of the sun's motion, rational arguments remained speculative until they were substantiated by Galileo's

empirical observations, leading to scientific certainty. This underscores the importance of integrating sensory perception and reason to arrive at more reliable and conclusive knowledge.

Abdul-Baha defines reason as an intrinsic quality of the soul. However, he emphasizes that reason evolves as society progresses, cautioning against viewing it as a fixed attribute. When reason is seen as a dynamic phenomenon, its nature, origin, influence, and limitations can be better understood. This understanding is enriched when reason is combined with sensory perception, observation, and experience, all within the context of the ongoing evolution of knowledge.

The relationship between sensation and reason has continually evolved, especially in the last 400 years, with the advancement of empirical studies and scientific tools. This evolution has enhanced the power of reason. Scientific developments and intellectual revolutions have fused empirical and rational methods, expressing new observations through broader rational terms. However, this fusion requires an exploration of another factor that needs to be sought in the context of the relationship between the criterion of tradition and the Holy Spirit.

As we've briefly discussed, the criterion of tradition relies on holy scriptures and the doctrines of past religions that shape a society's tradition and culture. On the other hand, the Holy Spirit represents divine inspiration, the commencement of prophethood, and the delivery of God's Word and guidance to the Manifestations of God (prophets) and, subsequently, to humanity. It is believed that the flow of inspiration, the force of revelation, and the spiritual grace granted to humanity are transformative for individuals and societies.

To explore the relationship between these two aspects of knowledge, we must first pose a fundamental question: Since Abdul-Baha views the grace of the Holy Spirit as the origin of all religions, why does he distinguish traditional texts from the influence of the Holy Spirit, presenting them as potentially different or flawed methods? Hasn't the power of the Holy Spirit been the instigator and generator of these texts?

One way to approach this question is to consider that each religious revelation contains a multitude of inherent potentialities. These latent possibilities are the driving force behind the

ethical and cultural systems that each religion seeks to establish and, at the same time, underlie the processes of both change and decline within a culture.

Abdul Baha's assertion, drawing a parallel between religions and the cyclical patterns of nature, suggests that religions undergo a cycle of emergence, renewal, and eventual decline. Consequently, the lifespan of a religious system is closely tied to the exhaustion of its potentialities. As the creative capacities of the system become depleted over time, the meanings, values, and norms associated with it lose their generative power. The consequence is a diminishing of the spiritual and moral influence of religion and the deterioration of its institutional structures.

Abdul-Baha's perspective highlights the contrast between traditional texts, which have lost their inherent creative power and have been subject to human interpretation by clerics, and the transformative force of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit serves as a revitalizing influence, bestowing higher wisdom upon the world at key moments in history, thus paving the way for new stages of human perfection. However, because this dynamic and life-giving power of religions operates within the flow of history, it is susceptible to vulnerabilities and necessitates periodic renewal.

For instance, the Holy Spirit played a pivotal role in the emergence of Christianity two thousand years ago and Islam fourteen hundred years ago. Nevertheless, these religions have experienced significant historical transformations, fragmenting into numerous sects with diverse interpretations and divisive disputes. Furthermore, as they unfolded within the ongoing course of human history, their creative potential has been examined over time. Sadly, rather than enlightening minds and purifying consciences, these religions have, at times, been misused as tools for personal ambition and power-seeking.

The juxtaposition between tradition and the Holy Spirit symbolizes the interplay of two facets of civilization: one rooted in the past and the other emerging and flourishing with the return of a spiritual awakening and the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. This dynamic represents a genuine comprehension of the ebb and flow of history and the evolution of culture and civilization. Within this realm, the values and meanings of a declining and disheartened civilization intersect

with the ideals and aspirations dedicated to perfecting civilization. This intersection leads to the most creative expressions and reflections of science and knowledge, emanating from the source of revelation. Ultimately, this contributes to social and cultural progress.

Abdul-Baha's discourse on the role of the Holy Spirit in the purpose and scope of religion shares similarities with the philosophy of Henri Bergson, a prominent French philosopher. A notable parallel can be drawn between Bergson's conceptualization of religion and Abdul-Baha's juxtaposition of the criterion of tradition and the Holy Spirit.

Bergson's philosophical framework discerns two fundamental elements within the domain of religion: the static and the dynamic. Static religion functions as a defensive mechanism in response to individual anxiety and societal disintegration. It intertwines with a society's cultural myths and traditions, constructing a value system designed to preserve ancestral connections and offer individuals a sense of stability and continuity in their lives. Historically, static religion has been associated with nomadic societies, yet its manifestations persist in contemporary times. Bergson's perspective gains particular relevance in situations of conflict, where groups or nations invoke divine favor to justify their traditions, despite these traditions being confined within na

Nonetheless, in Bergson's view, the dynamic facet of religion transcends limitations and is pertinent to all individuals. It operates beyond constraints, dedicated to the eternal manifestations of the divine that infuse the world with vitality and foster its evolution. Bergson's mystical perspective posits that technological progress lays the groundwork for the unity of humanity at a material level. Now, what the material civilization requires is the life-giving force of the spirit to propel it towards a significant leap and transformation.

Tradition often signifies an established religion deeply interwoven into culture and society, sometimes reduced to a mere social ideology. When a religion's core vitality wanes, it faces the peril of losing credibility as a comprehensive source of knowledge and guidance. Conversely, the Holy Spirit represents the divine manifestation of God's renewed communication, ushering in a fresh cycle within God's continually advancing civilization. This presence infuses religions with dynamism and vitality, breathing new life and purpose into their spiritual frameworks.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the essence of religion transcends its surface rituals and doctrinal laws; it resides in the animating spirit and transformative power that permeates its core. This spirit should not be reduced to mere symbolism or euphemism; rather, it embodies a creative force that resonates within the realms of both science and philosophy. Its effects on the world of observable phenomena can be assessed through sensory and rational criteria. Consequently, we can affirm that the degree of the Holy Spirit and sensory-rational criteria maintain intrinsic connections. Both have persevered throughout history, undergoing fluctuations and evolutionary transformations.

Abdul-Baha's perspective on the concept of the Holy Spirit revolves around the fundamental principle that the Holy Spirit, as the bearer of divine revelation and message, exerts its profound influence throughout the entirety of creation. Over the course of history, the Holy Spirit has manifested its creative and enlightening influences in a progressive and forward-moving manner. This concept, epitomized as progressive revelation in Baha'i literature posits that religion is in a perpetual state of evolution, intricately entwined in the ongoing dialectic of continuity and rejuvenation. Abdul Baha's significant contribution to philosophical discourse rests on his embrace of the concept of progressive revelation and employing it as the foundational cornerstone for constructing a comprehensive framework for an integral philosophy combining metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, ethics, and an ideal political philosophy for just governance.⁸

In this perspective, the Holy Spirit, often synonymous with the "logos" - the universal divine reason that permeates nature while transcending imperfections - remains unbound by the confines of time or place. It does not favor any specific nation or group, but instead, it is recognized as a universal and all-encompassing phenomenon. This universal Holy Spirit serves as the eternal source of profound meanings and enduring values that enrich the world and all of existence.

⁸ Notable figures among philosophers whose work could enrich our comprehension of Abdul-Baha's philosophy include Mulla Sadra, a 15th-century Persian philosopher, and Alfred North Whitehead, a 20th-century British-American philosopher.

This approach to the concept of the Holy Spirit brings about a continuous renewal of civilization. Rather than allowing the spirit of the age to stagnate, it encourages a harmonious alignment with the rhythm of progress. This dynamic perspective ensures that civilization remains vibrant and adaptable to the changing times. Moreover, this concept of the Holy Spirit also serves as a purifying force within civilization. It acts as a safeguard against the undue influence of material temptations and fleeting desires. In this way, it helps maintain a balanced equilibrium between sensory perception and rational thinking, allowing for a more objective pursuit of knowledge. By keeping these influences in check, the Holy Spirit ensures that the quest for truth and understanding remains untainted by transient distractions.

When contemplating how the Holy Spirit manifests in human experience, it becomes clear that we can objectively study these manifestations within certain significant historical contexts. These contexts provide tangible avenues for examining the enduring impact of the Holy Spirit on various dimensions of human existence.

Firstly, we can discern the transformative influence of the Holy Spirit on religious thought and practices. Consider how a small religious movement has evolved into a thriving civilization encompassing science, art, culture, ethics, and ways of life. Religions often play pivotal roles in inspiring cultural and societal advancements, serving as concrete evidence of the Holy Spirit's influence.

Secondly, examining the refining and spiritual effects of religions on individuals' personalities and their moral value systems reveals the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in individual lives. This introspective exploration sheds light on the profound impact of the Holy Spirit at a personal level.

Moreover, religions, throughout history, have demonstrated a remarkable ability to shape the course of human events and transcend the constraints of time and space. Their teachings and principles have ignited social movements, inspired revolutions, and guided the moral and ethical development of societies. From the teachings of Jesus Christ spreading Christianity's reach to Islam's moral code shaping the Arab world, religion's historical significance is undeniable.

Additionally, the wisdom encapsulated within religious texts transcends temporal and spatial boundaries. These teachings offer enduring guidance to individuals and communities, addressing fundamental questions of existence, morality, and spirituality. Whether in the ethical precepts of Buddhism or the Ten Commandments of Judaism, religious teachings remain relevant across generations.

Furthermore, religion possesses a unique ability to influence people's hearts and minds. It shapes belief systems, values, and worldviews, nurturing a sense of purpose and belonging. The transformative potential of religion is evident through profound spiritual experiences and personal growth it fosters.

Religions have also contributed significantly to the evolution of human consciousness, fostering a new breed of individuals guided by moral and ethical principles. The teachings of compassion, forgiveness, and love found in various religious traditions have elevated humanity's moral compass and promoted social cohesion.

Religious institutions have served as potent educational platforms, imparting knowledge, wisdom, and moral guidance. Schools and universities associated with religious organizations have historically played pivotal roles in disseminating knowledge and nurturing intellectual growth.

Moreover, many religions claim the ability to foresee future events through prophetic visions or divine revelations. These predictions serve as sources of guidance and assurance for believers, reinforcing their faith and commitment.

The annals of religious history are replete with instances of followers displaying extraordinary resilience in the face of adversity and persecution. Martyrs and devout believers have endured suffering, oppression, and hardship, unwavering in their commitment to their faith.

Finally, religions often emphasize the importance of consistency between beliefs and actions. This principle encourages adherents to embody their faith through ethical conduct, charitable deeds, and social justice initiatives. The enduring consistency of

religious ideals and their practical application contributes to the lasting impact of religious traditions.

Body, Mind, and Spirit/Soul⁹

Abdul-Baha in a letter to Dr, Forel wrote:

Now concerning mental **faculties**, they are in truth of the inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun. The rays of the sun are renewed but the sun itself is ever the same and unchanged. Consider how the human intellect develops and weakens, and may at times come to naught, whereas the soul changeth not. For the **mind** to manifest itself, the human body must be whole; and a sound **mind** cannot be but in a sound body, whereas the soul dependeth not upon the body. It is through the power of the soul that the **mind** comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influence, whilst the soul is a power that is free. The **mind** comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete, but the soul hath limitless manifestations of its own. The **mind** is circumscribed, the soul limitless. It is by the aid of such senses as those of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch, that the **mind** comprehendeth, whereas the soul is free from all agencies. The soul as thou observest, whether it be in sleep or waking, is in motion and ever active. Possibly it may, whilst in a dream, unravel an intricate problem, incapable of solution in the waking state. The **mind**, moreover, understandeth not whilst the senses have ceased to function, and in the embryonic stage and in early infancy the reasoning power is totally absent, whereas the soul is ever endowed with full strength. In short, the proofs are many that go to show that despite the loss of reason, the power of the soul would still continue to exist. The spirit however possesseth various grades and stations.¹⁰

Continuing this discussion, which accentuates the differentiation between the spirit and the mind, with the mind being regarded as a faculty of the spirit, Abdul-Baha delves further into elucidating the various levels and stations of the spirit. He posits that the spirit is an intangible reality that pervades all of existence, revealing itself at each rank within creation. However, the true essence of the spirit surpasses the grasp of intellectual comprehension. This essence exhibits itself to a lesser degree in the mineral, plant, and animal realms. Within the realm of humanity, the spirit manifests itself as a discerning faculty, distinguished by its pervasive and comprehensive nature that transcends the confines of the material world.

⁹ In the writings of Abdul Baha soul and spirit are used interchangeably.

¹⁰ Bahai Reference Library

<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

Abdul-Baha, as evident in his writings such as the Tablet of Dr. Forel and Some Answered Questions, expounds upon the concept of a hierarchical and ascending progression within the world of existence. According to his teachings, each rank or category within this hierarchy is endowed with specific spiritual faculties that define its quality and essence. These spiritual faculties collectively form what is referred to as the spirit of each category, thereby distinguishing it from lower categories.

For instance, in the plant world, a specific faculty—the power of growth inherent in seeds—defines its characteristic. As we ascend to the higher stage, which is the animal world, we find the presence of both the aforementioned growth faculty and the all-encompassing sensory power. This sensory faculty is absent in the plant world. This pattern suggests that as beings become more complex and complete in their composition, they enable the manifestation of an all-encompassing invisible reality. This, in turn, allows the latent faculties within that reality to become manifest and apparent.

Likewise, within the human world, there exists a distinct and extraordinary faculty that distinguishes humans from animals. This unique human faculty holds a pivotal role in shaping the essence of human nature and character. It is through this faculty that humans are endowed with the ability to master and transcend their natural environment.

Abdul-Baha's teachings illuminate the profound significance of this human faculty, which he attributes to the human spirit. In his view, the human mind stands as the most potent and remarkable expression of this spiritual faculty. The human mind, according to Abdul-Baha, serves as the paramount force that empowers individuals to become masters of their natural surroundings.

By emphasizing the role of the mind and the human spirit in this manner, Abdul-Baha underscores the exceptional position of humanity within the hierarchy of creation. His teachings shed light on the transformative potential that resides within each human being, enabling them to not only understand and adapt to the world but also to shape and transcend it through the power of their intellect and spirit.

In this regard, Abdul-Baha writes in the Tablet of Dr. Forel:

The animal is the captive of nature and cannot transgress the rules and laws thereof. In man, however, there is a discovering power that transcendeth the world of nature and controlleth and interfereth with the laws thereof. For instance, all minerals, plants and animals are captives of nature. The sun itself with all its majesty is so subservient to nature that it hath no will of its own and cannot deviate a hair's-breadth from the laws thereof. In like manner all other beings, whether of the mineral, the vegetable or the animal world, cannot deviate from the laws of nature, nay, all are the slaves thereof. Man, however, though in body the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature.

Consider: according to the law of nature man liveth, moveth and hath his being on earth, yet his soul and mind interfere with the laws thereof, and even as the bird he flieth in the air, saileth speedily upon the seas and as the fish soundeth the deep and discovereth the things therein. Verily this is a grievous defeat inflicted upon the laws of nature.

So is the power of electrical energy: this unruly violent force that cleaveth mountains is yet imprisoned by man within a globe! This is manifestly interfering with the laws of nature. Likewise man discovereth those hidden secrets of nature that in conformity with the laws thereof must remain concealed, and transfereth them from the invisible plane to the visible. This, too, is interfering with the law of nature. In the same manner he discovereth the inherent properties of things that are the secrets of nature. Also he bringeth to light the past events that have been lost to memory, and foreseeth by his power of induction future happenings that are as yet unknown. Furthermore, communication and discovery are limited by the laws of nature to short distances, whereas man, through that inner power of his that discovereth the reality of all things, connecteth the East with the West. This, too, is interfering with the laws of nature. Similarly, according to the law of nature all shadows are fleeting, whereas man fixeth them upon the plate, and this, too, is interference with a law of nature. Ponder and reflect: all sciences, arts, crafts, inventions and discoveries, have been once the secrets of nature and in conformity with the laws thereof must remain hidden; yet man through his discovering power interfereth with the laws of nature and transfereth these hidden secrets from the invisible to the visible plane. This again is interfering with the laws of nature.

In fine, that inner faculty in man, unseen of the eye, wresteth the sword from the hands of nature, and giveth it a grievous blow. All other beings, however great, are bereft of such perfections. Man hath the powers of will and understanding, but nature hath them not. Nature is constrained, man is free. Nature is bereft of understanding, man understandeth. Nature is unaware of past events, but man is aware of them. Nature forecasteth not the future; man by his discerning power seeth that which is to come. Nature hath no consciousness of itself, man knoweth about all things.

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

Abdul-Baha's discourse highlights the concept of spiritual power as an essential force that transcends the confines of the material and natural world. This spiritual power serves as the

driving agent behind movement and life across various stages of creation. Within the realm of humanity, this spiritual force finds its manifestation in the form of reason, endowing individuals with the capacity to unlock the mysteries of nature and explore the depths of their own beings.

It's important to note that this spiritual and imperceptible power, as elucidated by Abdul-Baha, is not a mere abstract concept devoid of real-world implications. On one hand, the spirit represents an intangible reality, while on the other hand, it maintains a profound connection with the material world. It dwells in the higher realms of existence while also being intricately interwoven with the earthly realm.

The intricate relationship between body and soul- Abdul-Baha's exploration of the spirit can be seen as an examination of its role in the broader context of existence, particularly in the context of its journey toward perfection. This perspective underscores the dynamic and transformative nature of the spirit, which both emanates from and contributes to the ongoing process of spiritual evolution and growth.

This perspective underscores two seemingly paradoxical principles. *The first principle* asserts the distinctiveness of spiritual reality from the realm of nature. It firmly maintains that the spirit cannot be reduced to a mere byproduct or epiphenomenon of the natural world. Rather, the spirit exists independently and autonomously, separate from the material realm, transcending the notions of entry and exit. It suggests that the physical composition and intricate organization of the human body play a role akin to that of a magnet for the spirit. In this view, the spirit is drawn towards the physical vessel of the body, much like sunlight being reflected upon a mirror. This magnetic attraction prompts the spirit to manifest its latent faculties and potentials, bringing them into active expression within the material world.

Abdul-Baha states,

That is, when these physical elements are gathered and combined together, according to the natural order and with the utmost perfection, they become a **magnet** for the spirit, and the spirit will manifest itself therein with all its perfections.¹¹

¹¹ Some Answered Questions, Baha'i Reference Library.

The second principle regards the spirit as an emergent quality or latent potentiality that arises from within the complex composition of material form. Abdul-Baha elaborates on this concept by stating:

Although in infancy the signs of the mind and the spirit are already present in man, they do not appear in a state of perfection, and remain incomplete. But when man attains maturity, the mind and the spirit manifest themselves in the utmost perfection.

Likewise, at the beginning of his formation in the matrix of the world, man was like an embryo. He then gradually progressed by degrees and grew and developed until he reached the stage of maturity, when the mind and the spirit manifested themselves in the utmost perfection. From the beginning of his formation, the mind and the spirit existed, but they were hidden and appeared only later. In the world of the womb, too, the mind and the spirit exist in the embryo but are concealed and appear only afterwards. It is even as the seed: The tree exists within it but is hidden and concealed; when the seed grows and develops, the tree appears in its fullness.

This principle assumes great significance in Baha'i epistemology, as it bestows a unique centrality upon material composition within the hierarchy of existence.¹² In line with this principle, we can deduce that while the spirit possesses an immaterial and indivisible essence, its origin is corporeal. Therefore, its progression and point of origin commence within the material realm. Since humans are born into the earthly realm, their ultimate spiritual fulfillment and happiness depend on their actions within this material world.

The information provided suggests that the relationship between the soul and the body can be approached from two distinct perspectives:

1. The dualistic perspective: It views the soul and the body as separate entities. The soul is immaterial, non-physical, and an invisible spiritual power. The body, on the other hand, is a combination of material elements. Since the soul is immaterial, it endures, while the body, being the result of combination, is subject to decomposition and death. The body

<https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/>

¹² In a tablet, Bahá'u'lláh conveys the idea that all the worlds of God revolve around this earthly world.

كَلَّ عوالم الهی طائف حول این عالم بوده و خواهد بود

Baha'i Reference Library

<https://www.bahai.org/fa/library/authoritative-texts/bahauallah/additional-tablets-bahauallah/490420650/1#881330643>

acts as a magnet attracting the soul, and the soul, like sunlight, radiates upon the body and signifies the luminosity of the intellect. This perspective revolves around the duality of the soul and the body.

This perspective aligns closely with the traditional religious and philosophical interpretations of the soul. In traditional religious doctrines, human beings are typically seen as entities with two entirely distinct natures: a spiritual essence connected to heavenly or higher realms, and a physical nature originating from and ultimately returning to the earthly realm. Furthermore, these religions extend this perspective to encompass the broader understanding of human nature, positing that humans have existed in a consistent form and the body since the inception of creation. The perspective regards the soul as employing and acting upon the body, functioning as its commander, without being a part of it.

2. The second perspective perceives the soul, which includes the faculties of discernment in various classes of beings, as an outcome of existential combinations. According to this viewpoint, the more intricate and extensive the combinations, the more complex the manifestations of the soul become. In this view, the process of emergence and manifestation has led the attributes of the soul to surface from within, as a natural consequence of these combinations.

A thorough examination of Abdul Baha's writings suggests that he posits a view in which the soul and the body are not entirely distinct entities; instead, they exist in a state of interconnectedness within a singular existence. In this perspective, the body is regarded as a manifestation or expression of the soul within the material world, whereas the soul embodies the immaterial and intellectual facets of one's existence.

Material combinations and organizations progressively reveal their distinct properties, with increasingly complex manifestations emerging, including thoughts and willpower. The soul, in this context, transcends material conditions while serving as the wellspring for essential relationships within existential combinations. It represents an intellectual reality that, following a hierarchical progression of combinations, gradually unfolds its latent faculties until it reaches the pinnacle of the best and most complete combination and realization.

Indeed, these two perspectives should be regarded as complementary, creating a circular pattern of interaction. This approach allows us to uphold the hierarchical order of creation while affirming the unity in the progression of beings. It involves acknowledging that biological life transcends and exists independently of matter, while also recognizing that matter plays a crucial role as the foundational substrate for its manifestation.

Intelligence and thinking are intricately linked to the brain and the nervous system, representing complex and sophisticated attributes of the human organism. However, they transcend mere physics and chemistry because they are fundamentally influenced by the causal agency of the soul. While there are inherent distinctions between the processes of thinking and the functions of brain cells, these aspects are interdependent.

To illustrate this concept, consider a computer: its hardware, its physical existence, is a prerequisite for executing logical computations. One could argue that the computer's "brain" is designed based on mathematical and logical models. However, it's essential to recognize that the computer's brain or hardware cannot be equated with the reasoning and thinking capacity of the human mind. There is a crucial distinction between the mechanical processes of computation and the cognitive faculties of human thought.

The soul and the body are not entirely separate entities but intertwined within a single existence. The soul undergoes a process of developmental stages, progressing from potentiality to actuality, beginning as a potential entity intricately connected with the material body. As it evolves, it traverses various stages of intellectual and spiritual actualization. This journey unfolds as the soul transforms from a primarily material orientation to acquiring knowledge and cultivating virtues. In doing so, it can attain a profound union with the divine, reflecting the ultimate reality.

The invisible spiritual force, which is the foundation of existence, emerges from *within* the matter and manifests in all phenomena and all compositions, increasing its manifestations based on the complexity of compositions. For example, the manifestation of the spirit is less evident in an atom compared to its manifestation in a cell. By analogy, an atom is more elemental and material than a cell. Hence, an atom is considered closer to nature. In summary, all of creation, from inanimate objects to humans, as being alive, possessing a soul and consciousness, even

though the manifestations of life and consciousness may not be apparent at all stages. Therefore, Abdul-Baha considers the entire nature as a rational reality.

Transcending Materialism: A Journey to Integral Understanding

The origins of systematic thought in materialistic philosophy trace back to ancient Greek philosophy. In essence, materialistic philosophy posits that human existence can be entirely explained by their physical body, without the presence of a non-material, metaphysical entity like the soul. According to this view, humans are a composite of material elements, and when this amalgamation disintegrates, their existence and life come to an end, leading to their extinction. The idea of their survival beyond this point is neither feasible nor appropriate. Consequently, the concept of immortality emerges as a psychological coping mechanism constructed by humans to ease the anxiety stemming from the prospect of ceasing to exist.

Materialistic philosophers argue that, as humans confront the inevitable reality of non-being and death, their thoughts may seem futile and devoid of meaning. To mitigate the hardships of life, they endeavor to find solutions, resulting in the creation of notions such as the immortality of the soul or an afterlife within their minds.

In the realm of materialistic philosophy, belief in the existence of God is absent. It contends that the world arises from accidental and random physical and biological processes, devoid of any spiritual or supernatural purpose or significance. As materialistic philosophy fundamentally grounds itself in matter, it also regards mental phenomena like thinking as akin to mechanical or machine-like processes.

Materialistic philosophy has evolved and adapted over time in response to shifts in social and cultural contexts. One of the more recent developments in materialistic psychology is behaviorism, which asserts that any facet of human behavior involving mental states not amenable to scientific observation and experimentation should remain beyond the scope of psychology. Behaviorist psychology contends that it can systematically categorize all human behaviors in a manner that is both desirable and suitable. Essentially, it seeks to establish a form of social engineering that operates independently of any divine intervention or the influence of supernatural powers.

Another manifestation of materialistic beliefs can be observed in Freudian psychology, which conceptualizes human nature as immersed in a profound conflict between potent material desires and societal norms. From this perspective, religion and spiritual beliefs are regarded as illusions manufactured by troubled minds.

Marxism represents another systematic and all-encompassing expression of materialistic perspectives concerning the nature of existence and social order. Within Marxism, the belief prevails that notions of God, spirituality, and the afterlife function as a kind of opium intentionally propagated by the bourgeoisie class to exploit the proletariat. This ideology asserts that class contradictions serve as the catalyst for a dynamic dialectical materialist progression throughout history, influencing the direction of the future. In this context, contemporary humans are tasked with the responsibility of acknowledging and understanding their historical role to pave the way for a society free from class distinctions.

The predominant belief in most materialistic philosophies has been that thoughts and mental phenomena are secondary manifestations of the material organism. Just as everything has a shadow, thoughts are also a shadow or a secondary manifestation of neural activities. The soul is not an essential and self-existent entity; it is the result and effect of the physical and natural aspects of human beings. Empirical knowledge of material and natural relationships can fully explain all mental and spiritual manifestations.

Materialistic thinking experienced a significant transformation and advancement during the 19th century, with the theory of evolution serving as a catalyst for this intellectual leap. Charles Darwin's groundbreaking work highlighted fundamental parallels in the abilities of humans and animals. He concluded that although there exist noteworthy disparities between humans and animals, these distinctions are not of a fundamentally different nature but rather vary in magnitude and degree.

The theory of evolution challenged conventional religious and cultural beliefs that perceived humans and animals as entirely separate entities, dependent on distinct realms. Darwin's findings suggested that the human brain, over an extended period of evolution, expanded both in terms of physical size and its capacity to engender intricate mental processes. This gradual development

gave rise to cognitive faculties and mental creativity in humans. Fundamentally, humans and animals share a common origin, according to the theory of evolution. This perspective views humans as an integral part of the natural world, rather than as distinct and separate from it. It posits that humans have emerged as a product of a multi-million-year evolutionary journey that intertwines their material existence with their social history. Throughout this extensive process, the human brain has accumulated a record of all biological instincts and social norms.

In the past, prior to the theory of evolution, materialistic thought existed in a static and inflexible state. Matter was perceived as having dimensions of width, length, and height. It was assumed that atomic structures or atomic particles constituted the small material units that, when combined, gave rise to the structure and substance of the universe and its inhabitants.

The advent of evolutionary theories marked a transformative moment in materialistic thought. Material particles were no longer regarded as purely mechanical and solid entities; instead, they were seen as dynamic entities capable of movement and undergoing changes. The revolution brought about by evolutionary theories in the realm of materialistic philosophy laid the groundwork for materialistic philosophy to evolve into a comprehensive worldview, challenging thousands of years of religious traditions.

One perspective that intertwined materialistic philosophy with modern biology and the theory of evolution is the socio-biology worldview, often referred to as sociobiology. According to this philosophy, all human behavior is exclusively an outcome of genetic influences passed down to individuals. To fathom the essence of human beings, one must delve into the realm of biology, as only biology and the field of genetics can elucidate all facets of behavior. Sociobiology posits that thoughts, cognitive abilities, and even ethics are derivative expressions of brain function and the nervous system. Within this framework, all branches of knowledge and science are regarded as offshoots of biology.¹³

¹³ Sociobiology entails the extension of biological principles and the theory of evolution into the realm of interpersonal relationships and social structures. This field, which has been formulated and advanced since the latter half of the 20th century, particularly through the contributions of scholars like Edward Wilson, represents a nuanced iteration of social Darwinism, a concept

Materialistic thinking redirected the focus of science and philosophy from the domains of the unseen and intangible to the tangible physical world and material concepts. In divine philosophy and theological contemplation, the exploration of nature and humanity took on a transcendental approach, treating them as irreducible phenomena. The primary objective was to grasp the purpose of existence rather than merely comprehending existence itself. Consequently, the realm of existence was enveloped in a halo of ideas, illusions, and sanctity. Investigating specifics pertaining to Earth, animal behavior, and human physiology was not prioritized, and some even deemed it incompatible with wisdom.

One of the consequences of materialistic thinking was a profound transformation in the realms of science and technology, as material phenomena took center stage in intellectual discourse. With the fading influence of scholasticism and religious philosophy, empirical investigation emerged as the primary focus, ushering in a newfound potential for growth. The scholastic worldview, in contrast, was not oriented toward uncovering the true nature of things; its purpose lay in establishing religious foundations. Consequently, philosophical and scientific debates often revolved around verbal and literal interpretations.

For instance, discussions would center on questions like, "Was the dove in which the Holy Spirit appeared an actual animal? Where did angels reside before the creation of Adam? What were the physical characteristics of Adam at the time of his descent?" Speaking based on observation and experience in such discussions would often lead to accusations of heresy and blasphemy. The sensate culture/movement¹⁴, by challenging and undermining this worldview, granted the necessary freedom for the development of empirical thinking.

initially championed by thinkers such as Herbert Spencer and Thomas Malthus. Sociobiology has, at times, been associated with problematic racial interpretations.

Despite sharing certain theoretical elements with social Darwinism, sociobiology endeavors to connect its scientific perspective with humanistic aspirations and a commitment to environmental sustainability, peace, and the pursuit of social justice.

¹⁴ I am adopting this term from the distinguished sociologist Pitirim A. Sorokin, who identified the "sensate pattern of culture" as the belief that the objective and empirical world of observable phenomena represents the ultimate manifestation of true reality.

For the sake of clarity, it's important to differentiate between the sensate pattern of culture and outright materialistic philosophy. The sensate culture represents a natural response to the excesses of the ideational pattern of culture, which tends to overemphasize spirituality and subjectivity. However, if the sensate pattern becomes excessively dominant, it can lead to an overwhelmingly materialistic worldview that permeates every aspect of life.

Materialistic thinking arises from human skepticism about the subjective and unobservable aspects of reality. It seeks to comprehend the world through the faculties of the senses and the rational mind. Therefore, it predominantly leans on empirical sciences for its concepts and methodologies. This close association between materialism and science has led them to be often perceived as intertwined. However, science, by its inherent nature, remains neutral. Consequently, the unwarranted imposition of materialism when interpreting scientific data should not be considered a genuinely scientific approach but rather a form of scientism.

The religious response to materialistic philosophy- The religious response to materialistic philosophy can either reject it outright and consider it entirely futile or engage in a constructive dialogue with it. Outright rejection is a one-sided and biased approach that overlooks the fact that materialistic philosophy has a rich history spanning several millennia and has played a significant role in modern philosophical, scientific, and social thought. Rejecting it would mean disconnecting from a substantial branch of human intellectual and cultural heritage.

Moreover, neglecting materialistic critiques can constrain religion within traditional frameworks. By disregarding the inquiries raised by materialistic philosophy and its challenges to conventional religious interpretations, religion runs the risk of growing apart from the curiosity and scientific skepticism of today's individuals. Therefore, if religion seeks to offer a comprehensive response to materialistic thought, it must broaden its horizons and adopt theoretical boundaries that encourage inclusivity, facilitating the reconciliation of science and religion. Only through this approach can rigidity and bias transform into a more expansive and tolerant perspective that accommodates a variety of opinions and actions.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, in his Tablet to Dr. Forel, asserts that the Bahá'í Faith offers a comprehensive spectrum of thought with the aim of establishing harmony and reconciliation among science,

religion, and reason. Religion, philosophy, and science are integral components of a vast tree that has borne the fruits of human civilization. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, truth is singular. Religion, philosophy, and science all strive to uncover this truth. When divisions exist, our understanding of truth becomes limited and confined. By expanding our conception of truth, these realms of thought—religion, philosophy, and science—naturally converge and unite.

Materialistic has gone through various stages. At one-point, materialistic philosophy was so narrow-minded that it likened the relationship of thought to the brain to the relationship of bile to the liver. In later stages, materialism became more enlightened, viewing matter as a dynamic and variable entity that, in its spiral motion, gives rise to the emergence and evolution of the mind. Nevertheless, it was still assumed that matter was the primary element and that thought, and perception were its derivatives. However, with the rise of the philosophy of *emergence*,¹⁵ a significant shift in the thinking of scientists and philosophers occurred, which must be attributed to the scientific and intellectual observations of the twentieth century.

The emergence of higher orders - One interpretation of the emergent perspective suggests that the material or natural world inherently possesses the potential for perfection. The emergence of mental and rational aspects serves as an indicator of this inherent drive towards perfection. It posits that the emergence of organic life and the subsequent development of thinking and cognition are essential prerequisites for material and biological advancement. Just as fire naturally produces heat, the combination of the highest material composition in the human body inevitably leads to the emergence of cognitive faculties. In this context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá regards the natural world as the reality that has gradually actualized its potentialities in the realm of the perceptible. This implies that even primary material existence alludes to the emergence and manifestation of the spirit.

¹⁵ Emergence refers to a broad concept whose understanding is dependent on interdisciplinary studies. Its foundation lies in the structure and evolutionary process of complex systems in nature, living beings, and social organizations. The philosophy of emergence has been addressed in theology, physics, biology, anthropology, sociology, economics, political philosophy, and the growth of social organizations from their initial stages to globalization.

Some ask: If humans represent the pinnacle of biological evolution, why did they appear so late in the evolutionary process? If we imagine the course of evolution as a single hour, scientists believe that humans, in the sense of thoughtful beings, likely emerged in the final minute. Traditional religious views about the creation of Adam, however, do not align with this evolutionary process. These views suggest that God created humans with their current form and appearance six thousand years ago and then expelled them from paradise due to disobedience. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective differs from these views. He interprets the story of creation symbolically and believes that although humans appeared in the final stages of the evolutionary tree, their emergence was potentially embedded in the mechanism of organic evolution from the very beginning.

If we remove the emergence and manifestation of the progressive spirit from the course of evolution, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, we will, thereby, render this world of existence devoid of meaning. He writes in his Tablet to Dr. Forel:

Now concerning philosophers, they are of two schools. Thus Socrates the wise believed in the unity of God and the existence of the soul after death; as his opinion was contrary to that of the narrow-minded people of his time, that divine sage was poisoned by them. All divine philosophers and men of wisdom and understanding, when observing these endless beings, have considered that in this great and infinite universe all things end in the mineral kingdom, that the outcome of the mineral kingdom is the vegetable kingdom, the outcome of the vegetable kingdom is the animal kingdom and the outcome of the animal kingdom the world of man. The consummation of this limitless universe with all its grandeur and glory hath been man himself, who in this world of being toileth and suffereth for a time, with divers ills and pains, and ultimately disintegrates, leaving no trace and no fruit after him. Were it so, there is no doubt that this infinite universe with all its perfections has ended in sham and delusion with no result, no fruit, no permanence and no effect. It would be utterly without meaning. They were thus convinced that such is not the case, that this Great Workshop with all its power, its bewildering magnificence and endless perfections, cannot eventually come to naught.¹⁶

'Abdu'l-Bahá considers the emergence, rise, and manifestation of the attributes of the spirit to be an ultimate purpose towards which the movement of life is directed and for which it exists.¹⁷

¹⁶ Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

¹⁷ The French philosopher Teilhard de Chardin also recognized the truth that the evolutionary process of matter leads towards the spirit.

Some scientists have posed questions and expressed viewpoints that were traditionally within the domain of religion and philosophy. According to their perspective, the universe exhibits an exceptional degree of perfection, precision, and order, enabling the emergence of life and various phenomena of existence, ranging from the simplest to the most complex. The appearance of human beings, occurring millions of years into the evolutionary process, can be interpreted in two ways. One interpretation suggests that humans in this world are insignificant entities, and their existence is the product of a random, purposeless process. The other interpretation posits that the universe has been anticipating the emergence of conscious and intelligent beings, and cosmic developments have created the conditions necessary for nurturing their inherent capacities. This is analogous to the fruit on a tree, where, from the outset, it is the intended outcome and agent of growth but remains concealed initially. It requires a considerable duration for the tree to establish roots, strengthen its stem and trunk, extend branches, bloom, and ultimately, at the final moment, yield the desired result, which is the fruit. Freeman Dyson, a theoretical physicist and mathematician says: " I do not feel like an alien in the universe. The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known that we were coming." ¹⁸

'Abdu'l-Bahá does not propose a final or definitive conclusion to the process of perfection. It is not a matter of supernatural forces intervening, leading to an overnight miraculous change in humanity's destiny, resulting in the cessation of history. The ongoing journey towards perfection is intricately woven into the tapestry of biological evolution and the course of civilization.

One might question how it is possible to reconcile the seemingly random and accidental phenomena observed in nature with a purposeful and conscious progression. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's perspective is that the order of the universe is a harmonious blend of divine will, natural mechanisms, and human free will. While God possesses the capability, akin to a supreme ruler, to enforce His command upon the universe, He instead allows for human free will and agency. He has established the order of the universe on the principle that excellence and higher forms emerge from the midst of disintegration and crisis.

¹⁸ Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1979), p. 250.

In daily life, there is a resemblance to the process of natural evolution. Witnessing disintegration and dispersal is common. Objects and phenomena undergo disintegration. Iron rusts, rocks crumble under the whip of the turbulent nature. The physical life of a human being grows and also moves towards decomposition. Events occur without seemingly having a reason or meaning beyond them. When observing a fragment of life, individuals often perceive nothing but scattered events. They might view themselves as helpless particles being thrown from one side to another in the storm and tumult of events. However, as insight expands and events are perceived in their entirety, the existence of a conscious flow that has given meaning to all events becomes apparent, like a harmonious thread. A purpose is sensed, calling individuals towards improvement, along with the knowledge and will that has aided them in their pursuit of perfection.

What may not appear consciously and willfully, and may indicate randomness and dispersal, is, in fact, a realm in which natural laws and human will have come into play. This realm may seem contradictory to divine will, but as a whole, it is part of divine will. It has been brought into existence by God Himself to provide a platform for the movement and activities of free will. In the life of an individual, an event may seem random and meaningless. However, when examining that event within the context of the entirety of their life, greater meaning becomes evident. And when examining that event within the framework of necessary relationships connecting that individual to their social environment, its meaning expands even further.

When we consider the entire history of society and civilization, we will observe a more explicit and transparent deliberate path towards perfection. The transition from tribal systems towards a global society or the emergence of shared global norms in ethics and values are indicators of this social evolution. Just as historians and sociologists have been able to search for meaning and purpose in historical developments, the logic that finds meaning and purpose for these transformations can also be applied to natural evolution. Although natural evolution may indicate randomness, and its events may seem unpredictable, an overall gradual movement can be observed that separates humans from nature, extends their conscious experiences, and constantly renews and transforms their lives.

According to this perspective, the universe is more than a mechanical reality composed of matter. The energy that resides within matter and molds it from a rudimentary state to a complex and perfected form is the very same spiritual force that becomes tangible within matter and gains prominence as material forms evolve. Recent advancements in modern physics have called into question the validity of mechanistic and deterministic physics.

The Principle of Uncertainty¹⁹ has introduced a new dimension to philosophical discourse, enabling scientific exploration into the influence of an imperceptible and invisible force within the material realm of existence. In the realm of new physics, all natural phenomena are ascribed to forces, yet these forces remain currently incomprehensible from a physics standpoint. Physicists like Einstein argue that new physics should fundamentally depart from the traditional concept of materialistic mechanics and instead emphasize the concept of fields or forces, as everything that affects matter is, in essence, that very force. Abdul-Baha identifies this force as a spiritual power and refers to it as the essence of essences. In his Tablet to Dr. Forel, Abdul-Baha also alludes to an imperceptible force that serves as the source of sensory phenomena, manifesting itself through the effects and fluctuations of light, heat, and electricity. This force possesses the capacity to influence and be influenced, impacting material forms and configurations without violating the laws of nature.

¹⁹ The Principle of Uncertainty, also known as Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, is a fundamental concept in quantum mechanics. It states that it is impossible to simultaneously measure both the position and momentum (or velocity) of a subatomic particle with absolute precision. In other words, the more accurately you know one of these properties (position), the less accurately you can know the other (momentum), and vice versa. This principle arises from the inherent probabilistic nature of quantum physics and has profound implications for our understanding of the behavior of particles at the quantum level.

In summary, the Uncertainty Principle and quantum mechanics, in general, reveal a quantum world that is inherently probabilistic, non-mechanistic, and influenced by the act of observation. These features challenge the reductionist and deterministic views that underpinned classical materialism and the mechanistic universe. While quantum mechanics does not necessarily refute all aspects of materialism, it does require a significant shift in our understanding of the nature of reality, causality, and the role of consciousness in the universe. It emphasizes the limitations of classical reductionism and highlights the need for a more nuanced and holistic worldview.

Abdul-Baha defines nature as follows: Now concerning nature, it is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things."²⁰ His emphasis in this definition lies in the concept of "necessary relationships" that exist among things, as well as within each entity among its constituent elements and parts. In essence, an object cannot be defined in isolation within the natural world. Instead, there exists a universal and logical unity among things and phenomena, and it is through these essential relationships that the characteristics of each object and phenomenon become apparent. The existence of the world holds meaning when it can be comprehended within the context of its intrinsic relationships.

Abdul-Baha emphasizes the harmony between science, reason, and religion. He does not regard science and reason as insignificant; instead, he sees them as integral components of acquiring knowledge. He believes that when science and reason are in alignment with spiritual meanings and ethical values, they provide the foundation for the scientific method. Consequently, adopting a spiritual perspective does not entail replacing the scientific approach with mysticism, becoming overly esoteric. In this context, science's objective is to align knowledge with reality, a reality that we perceive exclusively through our understanding of the essential relations derived from the realities of things.

Abdul-Baha, for example, refers to the human composition, which encompasses cooperation and coordination among its components and the comprehensive power of the human soul, connecting these components and organizing them under orderly laws. He says,

Consider the body of man, and let the part be an indication of the whole. Consider how these diverse parts and members of the human body are closely connected and harmoniously united one with the other. Every part is the essential requisite of all other parts and has a function by itself. It is the mind that is the all-unifying agency that so uniteth all the component parts one with the other that each dischargeth its specific function in perfect order, and thereby co-operation and reaction are made possible. All parts function under certain laws that are essential to existence. Should that all-unifying agency that directeth all these parts be harmed in any way there is no doubt that the constituent parts and members will cease functioning properly; and though that all-unifying agency in the temple of man be not sensed or seen and the reality thereof be unknown, yet by its effects it manifesteth itself with the greatest power.

²⁰ Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

Thus it hath been proven and made evident that these infinite beings in this wondrous universe will discharge their functions properly only when directed and controlled by that Universal Reality, so that order may be established in the world. For example, interaction and co-operation between the constituent parts of the human body are evident and indisputable, yet this does not suffice; an all-unifying agency is necessary that shall direct and control the component parts, so that these through interaction and co-operation may discharge in perfect order their necessary and respective functions.

You are well aware, praised be the Lord, that both interaction and co-operation are evident and proven amongst all beings, whether large or small. In the case of large bodies interaction is as manifest as the sun, whilst in the case of small bodies, though interaction be unknown, yet the part is an indication of the whole. All these interactions therefore are connected with that all-embracing power which is their pivot, their centre, their source and their motive power.

For instance, as we have observed, co-operation among the constituent parts of the human body is clearly established, and these parts and members render services unto all the component parts of the body. For instance, the hand, the foot, the eye, the ear, the mind, the imagination all help the various parts and members of the human body, but all these interactions are linked by an unseen, all-embracing power, that causeth these interactions to be produced with perfect regularity. This is the inner faculty of man, that is his spirit and his mind, both of which are invisible.²¹

The existence of God- In response to Dr. Forel's question regarding the existence of God, Abdul-Baha highlights the notion that objects and creatures originate from the fusion of basic elements. Through continuous amalgamation and disintegration, an infinite array of universes has come into existence. Abdul-Baha's perspective suggests that the complexity and diversity observed in the cosmos emerge from the intricate interplay of these fundamental elements and their perpetual interactions.

"In fine, that Universal Reality with all its qualities and attributes that we recount is holy and exalted above all minds and understandings. As we, however, reflect with broad minds upon this infinite universe, we observe that motion without a motive force, and an effect without a cause are both impossible; that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences. For instance, plants grow and flourish through the outpourings of vernal showers, whilst the cloud itself is formed under various other agencies and these agencies in their turn are reacted upon by still other agencies. For example, plants and animals grow and develop under

²¹ Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

the influence of what the philosophers of our day designate as hydrogen and oxygen and are reacted upon by the effects of these two elements; and these in turn are formed under still other influences. The same can be said of other beings whether they affect other things or be affected."²²

Abdul-Baha further emphasizes that these chains of causes and effects must ultimately converge toward a specific culmination point. To claim that this process continues infinitely is illogical and in direct contradiction with the principles of both logic and science. At this culminating point, these causes and effects must converge towards the All-Powerful, who represents the absolute and sacred origin of all influences and amalgamations. These intricate combinations must have originated from a conscious and intelligent source. This implies that, given the meticulous order and precise arrangement of the components in each combination, we can reasonably infer the presence of will and consciousness in their creation. If the combinations of individual entities signify consciousness and will, then undoubtedly, the order prevailing throughout the entire cosmos also points to an ancient power that serves as the driving force, source, and central axis of all these relationships and amalgamations.

From the perspective of Abdul-Baha, combinations fall into three categories: random combinations, necessary combinations, and purposeful combinations. A combination cannot be random, as an effect does not arise without a cause. The philosophy of causation and the First Cause have been discussed by philosophers and thinkers for centuries, and despite criticisms, it still holds scientific and logical credibility. Aristotle formulated the four causes (material cause, efficient cause, formal cause, and final cause), and subsequent philosophical traditions have rejected the possibility of random combinations. According to the theory of probability as well, the randomness of the order in the universe with all its complexities does not seem likely.²³

Moreover, Abdul-Baha also rejects necessary combinations because,

²² Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

²³ The example that has been discussed repeatedly is the monkey and the typewriter. According to probability theory, it has been suggested that if a monkey randomly and accidentally types on a typewriter for an infinite amount of time, it is possible that eventually, it may type a word or a meaningful sentence by chance. They have calculated that if a monkey were to attempt to type a simple four-word sentence randomly, it would require wasting so much paper that the number of pages would exceed 1 followed by 27 zeros.

“for then the formation must be an inherent property of the constituent parts and the inherent property of a thing can in no wise be dissociated from it, such as light that is the revealer of things, heat that causeth the expansion of elements and the solar rays which are the essential property of the sun. Thus under such circumstances the decomposition of any formation is impossible, for the inherent properties of a thing cannot be separated from it. The third formation remaineth and that is the voluntary one, that is, an unseen force described as the Ancient Power, causeth these elements to come together, every formation giving rise to a distinct being.”²⁴

Another argument against the negation of willful combination comes from the theory of natural evolution, which its proponents believe has shaken the foundation of belief in God and deliberate creation. Materialistic philosophy, utilizing the theory of evolution, has presented its strongest argument against the existence of God or the necessity of a Creator. The theory of natural evolution also introduces another form of random combination.

It's important to note that even if we accept the materialistic expressions of the theory of evolution and argue that the complexity of organic beings has evolved according to the laws of survival, the principle and foundation of willful combination remain intact. This is because the theory of evolution remains silent about the origin of primordial matter and the magnificent order and beauty of the Earth, the skies, the sun, and the galaxies. The theory of evolution assumes that there was some material existence, the Earth came into being, suitable conditions for life emerged, and the first manifestations of microbial life appeared. Beyond that point, natural evolution is believed to have given rise to the development of animals and other beings. However, the question remains: What force and impetus were the cause of the emergence of the universe?

The theory of evolution operates at the biological and life sciences level. The question related to the creation of the universe is raised in the field of physics, and it appears that biology has not significantly benefited from the recent developments in physics. If biology aims to provide a comprehensive theory about the creation of the world, it needs to establish a close connection with physics and chemistry. New physics has raised questions that are mostly in the domains of

²⁴ Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Dr. Forel, Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdu-l-baha/tablet-auguste-forel/>

theology and philosophy. For instance, the Anthropic Principle suggests that the universe is so finely tuned that it allows for the conscious and exceptional emergence of humanity. If the fundamental constants of physics were to deviate, the universe and the manifestations of life within it might not have come into existence. In recent scientific discussions, the topic of the purpose, or final "cause" has been revived, and it has become the subject of philosophers' attention. These interpretations suggest that modern science portrays the realm of existence in such a way that the precision and order governing creation cannot be explained or justified by the belief in a random creation of the universe.

Abdul-Baha does not reject the appearance and transformation of humans and the adaptations of living beings to their environment over millions of years of natural history and societal changes. He symbolically interprets traditional religious expressions of human creation. The question at hand is whether the theory of natural evolution and random mutations can explain all aspects of evolution. Abdul-Baha believes that the theory of evolution, instead of negating purposeful combinations, affirms and emphasizes them. In a world where, according to the laws of thermodynamics, all physical combinations tend towards disintegration, we witness a force that has created order from chaos, brought forth life from the natural world, and manifested civilization and ethics from within life. This means that a purposeful and meaningful force has propelled evolution forward.

Similarities and Differences between the Baha'i Viewpoint and Thoughts on Evolution

There are four main explanations for the origin and role of human life in biological evolution. These are *natural selection*, *creationism*, *intelligent design*, and *evolutionary creation*.

Natural selection is the theory that organisms that are better suited to their environment have a greater chance of survival and reproduction. Charles Darwin developed this theory and is currently considered the leading model for explaining evolution.

Creationism is a religious belief that God created the universe and all life. This belief is rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible.

Intelligent design argues that the complexity of life is evidence of an intelligent designer, a supernatural being who created the universe and its inhabitants. Proponents of intelligent design do not accept the scientific theory of evolution, which explains the diversity of life on Earth through gradual changes over time.

Evolutionary creation combines natural processes and God's creative activity to explain the universe and life on Earth. Evolutionary creationists accept the scientific theory of evolution but believe that God guided the evolutionary process.

We will now discuss each of these in further detail:

Natural Selection. One of the most impactful scientific theories of modern times is Darwin's theory of natural evolution. It proposes that natural selection is responsible for the emergence and development of all living beings, including humans. This theory also suggests that the age of the Earth and its inhabitants is much older than what is described in creation stories and religious texts.

According to natural evolution, there is no overarching truth governing nature. Instead, the natural evolutionary mechanism is enough to define and explain all aspects of life, no matter how complex. Some materialistic philosophers view natural evolution as a significant blow to the notion of an intentional force behind creation.

Abdul Baha holds a distinctive viewpoint on evolution and the essence of human beings. His teachings recognize the importance of scientific findings, such as the theory of evolution. According to his worldview, the process of evolution is a natural force that has been at work to generate the extensive range of life forms on our planet. Hence, Darwin's theory of natural selection offers a solid argument that living organisms have physically evolved. Abdul Baha, Abdul-Baha, endorsing this concept of physical evolution, stated:

"It is therefore evident that the original matter, which is like unto the embryo, initially took the form of composed and combined elements, and that composition gradually grew and developed over myriad ages and centuries, passing from one shape and form to another."²⁵

²⁵ Some Answered Questions, Baha'i Reference Library, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/>

While the theory of natural selection offers a valuable scientific explanation for the development of species, it may fall short in explaining the complexities of consciousness, the rise of civilizations, and the origins of life itself. Abdul Baha's teachings emphasize a deep respect for scientific inquiry and methodology, yet they firmly reject the narrow ideology of scientism. In Abdul Baha's view, humans are not solely material beings; they possess a spiritual dimension that cannot be overlooked in the discourse on evolution.

This recognition of humanity as spiritual beings opens the door to a more comprehensive perspective on the evolution debate. While the materialistic interpretations of evolution stemming from natural selection are valid within their domain, they may not fully encapsulate the profound aspects of human existence. Abdul Baha encourages us to explore the unity of knowledge, recognizing that science and spirituality need not be in conflict but can complement each other in our quest to understand the mysteries of existence.²⁶

When it comes to teaching biology or addressing these complex topics, it is prudent to follow the mainstream content of the discipline. However, it's essential to remain open to evolving viewpoints and integrated approaches that bridge the gap between science and spirituality. As our understanding of reality deepens and widens, mainstream beliefs in the scientific community may also evolve over time. This dynamic perspective fosters an environment where scientific exploration and spiritual contemplation can coexist harmoniously.

Creationism. The Christian literalist view of creation may be expressed within the following scenario: God created the world around six thousand years ago (give or take a few thousand years). Endless creatures were created in absolute perfection. Evolution never entered the grand scheme of creation. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate from the forbidden tree, they were expelled from paradise and cursed to toil throughout eternity. From that moment, God disappeared from the arena of human history. The world of existence was divided into the invisible realm of the divine presence and the realm of a fallen world ruled by evil forces and

²⁶ <https://bahaiteachings.org/four-ways-knowing-according.../>
<https://bahaiteachings.org/religion-science-reason.../>

subjected to eternal damnation and the bondage of the original sin. Amid this darkness, however, God, out of His loving grace, chose to descend and incarnate Himself in human flesh in order to give the descendants of Adam another chance at salvation.

Jesus Christ was the epitome of that divine reality. Ultimately, by shedding his blood on the cross, Christ freed man from the bondage of original sin by offering him eternal life through faith in Him. This single event, fundamentalists believe, is the hinge around which revolves the past, present, and future. History stands still under the bearing of this once-and-for-all-time revelation. In brief, the Christian literalist view attempts to rewire history and impose a static and fixed conjecture upon its evolutionary course. Baha'i teaching repeatedly emphasizes that the six thousand stories of the Bible need to be interpreted in a metaphorical context. Abdul Baha wrote:

“If we were to take this account according to the literal meaning of the words as indicated by their common usage, it would indeed be exceedingly strange, and human minds would be excused from accepting, affirming, or imagining it. The account of Adam and Eve, their eating from the tree, and their expulsion from Paradise are, therefore, symbols and divine mysteries. They have all-embracing meanings and marvelous interpretations, but only the intimates of the divine mysteries and the well-favored of the all-sufficing Lord are aware of the true significance of these symbols.”²⁷

Even though the literal interpretation of creationism is refuted in Baha'i literature, there are rightfully meaningful references to these stories to the point that they can be a rich source of ethical insight for generations as they depict the never-ending struggle between good and evil. Traditional religious themes also have the power to stimulate imagination and enhance intuition.

Intelligent Design. Although there are some similarities between intelligent design and the Baha'i perspective on evolution and the nature of man, they diverge when it comes to the role of the evolutionary process. While intelligent design dismisses it, Baha'i teaching recognizes the

²⁷ Some Answered Questions, Baha'i Reference Library. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/>

possibility that humans may have once belonged to the animal kingdom. However, even in that position, the tree of life was believed to possess spiritual energy that facilitated the emergence of all the potentialities inherent in humans, who are viewed as the primary agents of the evolution process. Abdul Baha stated:

“There is no doubt that initially there was a single origin.”

“It is therefore evident that originally matter was one and that one matter appeared in a different form in each element. Thus various forms appeared, and as they appeared, they each assumed an independent form and became a specific element. But this distinction attained its full completion and realization only after a very long time. Then these elements were composed, arranged, and combined in infinite forms; in other words, from the composition and combination of these elements, countless beings appeared.”

“Briefly, we have said that from the composition of the elements; from their combination, manner, and proportion; and from their interaction with other beings, countless forms and realities and innumerable beings have come to exist. But it is clear that this terrestrial globe in its present form did not come into existence all at once, but that this universal existent gradually traversed different stages until it appeared in its present completeness.”

“There is no doubt that, like the embryo in the womb of the mother, the embryo of humankind did not appear all at once in this form and become the embodiment of the words “Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!” Rather, it gradually attained various conditions and assumed diverse forms until it attained this appearance and beauty, this perfection, refinement, and grace. It is therefore clear and evident that the growth and development of man on this planet unto his present completeness, even as the growth and development of the embryo in the womb of the mother, has been by degrees and through passing from state to state, and from one shape and form to another, for this is according to the requirements of the universal order and the divine law.”²⁸

The statements above acknowledge the gradual process of evolution but also suggest a belief in intelligent design and that life has a predetermined plan and purpose. This concept implies that

²⁸ Some Answered Questions, Baha’i Reference Library. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/>

life was not accidental, and that human nature cannot be simply explained by laws of biology and physics. Abdul Baha explained it in these words:

“Universal existences can be likened and compared to particular ones, for both are subject to one natural order, one universal law, and one divine arrangement. For instance, you will find the smallest atoms to be similar in their general structure to the greatest entities in the universe, and it is clear that they have proceeded from one laboratory of might according to one natural order and one universal law and can therefore be compared to one another.”²⁹

Evolutionary Creation. As seen above, Abdul-Baha emphasized the harmony between the natural order and divine wisdom. This view suggests that the processes of the natural world, including evolution, are not separate from the will of God but are instead a part of His grand design. This understanding reconciles scientific discoveries, such as biological evolution, and the Baha'i theological perspective.

Baha'i teachings posit that God is the Creator of the universe and that creation has unfolded through a progressive process. This implies that the stages of life and the development of the natural world have been part of an unfolding plan. The concept of progressive creation aligns with an evolutionary process that gradually brings about the complexity and diversity of life on Earth.

In the Baha'i belief system, there is an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between biological evolution and social history. The progressive unfolding of life is not limited to the biological realm but also extends to the advancement of human society. The Baha'i perspective on evolution sees the ultimate goal of this extensive evolutionary process as establishing a global civilization characterized by the unity and solidarity of all humankind.

One of the central principles of the Baha'i Faith is the concept of progressive revelations. Baha'is believe God's guidance and wisdom have been continually revealed to humanity through a series

²⁹ Some Answered Questions, Baha'i Reference Library. <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/some-answered-questions/>

of Divine Messengers, including Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Baha'u'llah. Each of these Messengers has brought teachings suited to the specific needs and capacities of the people at the time. This concept adds a dynamic and evolving dimension to God's universal wisdom, allowing for the advancement and development of human civilization over time.

Abdul-Baha's expansive viewpoint on evolution becomes more comprehensive when considered alongside the following principles:

Human Nature as Spiritual and Ethical. Human nature is viewed as inherently spiritual and ethical. This perspective recognizes that humans possess an internal drive towards excellence, seeking to develop their spiritual qualities and refine their moral character.

Two Strands of History. Two contesting strands of history have shaped human civilization. On the one hand, the struggle for physical survival has been a driving force in human history. On the other hand, there is a parallel pursuit of moral refinement and spiritual advancement. These two strands are intertwined and have contributed to the evolutionary progress of humanity.

Evolution as an Expression of Spiritual Energy. Biological evolution is seen as an outward expression of the spiritual energy and blueprint latent within the original seed of creation. This perspective aligns with the idea that the physical realm is interconnected with the spiritual and that the unfolding of life reflects a deeper spiritual reality.

The Analogy of a Tree. To explain this further, the analogy of a tree is often used. Like how a tree grows to bear fruit, the driving force behind human nature also exists as a potential force and later manifests more of its power as we develop. However, just like how we cannot visibly observe the invisible determinant that the very life of a tree depends upon, we cannot empirically watch the march of the spirit in the evolution of life. This is because no remains of human ancestors can singly exhibit the invisible spiritual determinant behind the evolutionary process.

Invisible Spiritual Determinant. The spiritual dimension of human evolution is not directly observable through empirical means. While biological remains and fossils provide insights into the physical aspects of human history, the invisible spiritual determinant behind the evolutionary process remains beyond empirical observation.

Potentiality and Actuality. The concept of potentiality and actuality plays a fundamental role in Abdul-Baha's philosophical/metaphysical framework. Potentiality refers to the inherent qualities

or possibilities that exist within phenomena, while actuality pertains to the realization or manifestation of those inherent qualities. This relationship is evident in various aspects of existence:

1. **Transition from Subatomic Particles to Life Forms:** The progression from subatomic particles to complex life forms can be seen as a transition from a state of potentiality to a state of actuality. Within the fundamental building blocks of the universe, there exists the potential for life to emerge and evolve into diverse forms.
2. **Emergence of Consciousness:** The emergence of consciousness signifies the actualization of the potential mind, which is a latent reality within the evolutionary process of life. This transition from potential to actual is a significant aspect of the development of sentient beings.
3. **Development of Cultures and Civilizations:** The evolution of human societies, from the early unification of tribes to the establishment of new world orders, demonstrates the ordered expression of potentialities inherent in the process of social organization. It showcases how human potential for cooperation, culture, and governance can become actualized over time.
4. **Divine Revelation:** The continuous and progressive process of divine revelation, from its embryonic stages to the full realization of a golden age, reflects a transition from potential forces that the Manifestations of God set into motion to the complete realization of God's vision for humanity. This process involves the unfolding of spiritual potential within individuals and societies.

In essence, the interplay between potentiality and actuality is a central theme in Baha'i metaphysics, illustrating how latent possibilities within the fabric of existence can gradually unfold and manifest, leading to the ever-advancing development of life, consciousness, society, and spirituality.

Harmonizing Scientific Thinking and Philosophy of Life. Abdul-Baha encourages harmonizing scientific thinking with a unifying philosophy of life. By integrating scientific discoveries with spiritual insights and principles, a more comprehensive understanding of the evolutionary process and humanity's role within it can be achieved.

Emerging Global Civilization. Abdul-Baha posits that the ongoing collective evolution of humanity culminates in the emergence of a global civilization. This global civilization is envisioned to be characterized by unity, justice, and peace, reflecting humanity's moral and spiritual advancement.

The Necessary Relationship Between Religion and Science and the Crisis of Tradition and Materialism

The writings of Abdul-Baha emerged during an era dominated by the tide of materialistic philosophy in Europe, which posed a significant challenge to conventional religious doctrines. The historical Enlightenment movement, with its emphasis on reason and empirical scientific exploration, had cast skepticism upon traditional religious teachings. Scientific investigation had supplanted the reliance on conventional discourse. Intellectuals grappled with the task of harmonizing these novel scientific advancements with their religious convictions and the interpretations of the Church regarding the universe's origin and the essence of existence.

Aristotle's philosophy, which became intertwined with Christian beliefs and served as the intellectual and philosophical underpinning of Christianity for centuries, was rooted in the principle of causality. It embraced teleological causation, which attributed a central role to God in the act of creation, as the cornerstone for comprehending the universe. The wisdom inherent in teleological causation was regarded as an essential prerequisite for understanding any natural phenomenon. Consequently, the ultimate cause behind the existence, motion, and development of any phenomenon lies in its teleological cause, concealed within it and guiding it from within. The physical and observable manifestations represent external indicators of this teleological cause. For instance, a flower or fruit possesses a teleological and ultimate cause, with its various components like roots, stems, and leaves serving as outward expressions of this teleological cause.

The philosophers and theologians of the time were tasked with providing explanations based on teleological causes for everything in the natural world. Aristotelian philosophy, despite offering one of the most comprehensive worldviews of its era and laying the initial groundwork for various disciplines, from biology to psychology, had become tightly interwoven with a dogmatic religious perspective within the medieval system of knowledge. Opposing this viewpoint was considered heretical and subject to punishment.

Galileo, with his observations and experiences, challenged this intellectual model. His discoveries in physics and cosmology not only made a significant impact but also paved the way for a new approach to scientific and philosophical thought. Galileo's experience implicitly

conveyed a message: regardless of the nature of the teleological cause, the scientist's duty is to understand how nature functions and to uncover the relationships between its phenomena through observation and experimentation. The role of the scientist is not to establish preconceived assumptions as the basis for intellectual judgment but rather to conduct scientific research based on empirical evidence. Philosophers and theologians are free to draw conclusions from these observations, experiences, and discoveries, such as affirming or denying the existence of a first cause. However, the primary task of science is the observation and explanation of phenomena, not delving into their essence or existential cause.

As a result, Galileo initiated a modern era that gradually departed from the Aristotelian model and the search for a teleological cause of creation. Teleological wisdom gave way to the study of the mechanisms governing objects and phenomena. This pivotal historical transformation can be viewed as the prelude to new scientific and philosophical thinking. The expansion of scientific discoveries progressively unveiled the secrets of nature, transforming the realm of the unknown into the realm of the known. What had previously been attributed to God and the teleological cause was now within the domain of science, which sought to study and identify all phenomena based on their natural mechanisms.

Over time, this trend diminished the influence of religion and its institutions in intellectual and social life. The 19th century witnessed significant scientific, intellectual, and social developments that further fueled the sensate movement. One of the most influential theories and findings of that era was Charles Darwin's theory of natural evolution, which proposed natural selection as the mechanism responsible for the emergence of life and the diversification of living beings, including humans. Materialistic philosophers considered Darwin's theory a significant blow to the concept of a deliberate creative force in the universe. The theory of natural evolution provided evidence suggesting that the age of the Earth and its inhabitants was much greater than depicted in traditional creation narratives and religious texts. Natural evolution did not posit the existence of a universal truth governing nature and considered the natural evolutionary mechanism adequate for defining and explaining life in all its complexity.

The denial of the existence of God profoundly unsettled the entire metaphysical system. Concepts like the soul, once believed to transcend the material world and endure after the body's

demise, came under scrutiny. Beliefs in an afterlife and the hereafter were dismissed as products of human fear of annihilation and a longing for perpetual existence. Marxism claimed to have unearthed the concealed key to social transformation through dialectical materialism. Sigmund Freud laid the foundations of his psychological theories, delving into the intricacies of the human psyche, which challenged conventional religious and moral frameworks. These intellectual developments marked a significant 19th-century shift towards materialistic philosophies and worldviews that negated the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of human nature, seeking to analyze human behavior based on natural instincts.

In such a prevailing intellectual and cultural environment, Abdul-Baha engaged critically with both materialistic philosophy and dogmatic religious ideologies. He presented his philosophical perspective on the potential reconciliation between science and religion within this context. A study of Abdul-Baha's works reveals his familiarity with Western intellectual trends, and he articulated his arguments in response to the growing influence of materialistic philosophy.

Abdul-Baha affirmed and reinforced the concept of divine wisdom, establishing the existence of God as a prerequisite for a genuine comprehension of reality. His approach in these discussions was not to diminish philosophy, science, or reason, nor was it a blind rejection of beliefs and opinions. Instead, his approach involved expanding the spiritual perspective and adapting it to historical circumstances. In essence, if materialistic philosophy led to what Martin Buber referred to as an "eclipse" of God,³⁰ it should be viewed as a historical phenomenon that laid the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of divine truth—one that continues to evolve over time.

Abdul-Baha's perspective on the relationship between religion and science emphasizes that both are essential aspects derived from the fundamental realities of existence. These necessary relationships encompass both material and spiritual dimensions. For instance, matter possesses both an external, perceptible aspect and an inner rational reality. This inner aspect holds potential

³⁰ Buber, Martin. *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

realities that gradually manifest themselves through external, material manifestations. This inner force not only unites and harmonizes objects and phenomena but also propels the world toward its final destination, which involves the complete manifestation of the perfection of the soul. This viewpoint leads to the unification of matter and spirit, initially highlighted by Descartes but ultimately converging into a broader unity.

In this perspective, metaphysics is not imposed upon physics; rather, it asserts that the necessary relationships of existence naturally encompass the spiritual dimension. Abdul-Baha's definition of science and religion doesn't involve adding one to the other or merging them forcibly. Instead, his approach is to provide a comprehensive description of science and religion that inherently includes both aspects. Emphasizing this inherent unity is crucial because if we maintain a strict separation between the scientific method and the religious method, or if we isolate objective knowledge from the subjective esoteric understanding and treat the mystical as entirely distinct from scientific and philosophical, we will never achieve the fundamental principle of unity between science and religion and likewise synergy between physical, natural sciences and social sciences. Therefore, rather than keeping mysticism separate from reason and spiritual knowledge isolated from empirical observations, we should liberate them from their constraints and traditional definitions and reconcile them within the hierarchy and evolutionary stages of existence.

These limitations throughout history have driven the four criteria of comprehension towards chronic division and conflict. The consequences of this separation and conflict have manifested in three forms:

1. Comprehensive understanding has dwindled down to sensory experiences, prioritizing materialistic explanations, while thoughts, consciousness, feelings, and will have been relegated to a secondary role.
2. Comprehensive understanding has become overly introspective, distancing itself from practical experiences and actions, limiting reason to the realm of abstract concepts, leading to an increase in verbal disputes and sophistry.
3. Comprehensive perception has heavily relied on tradition and transmission, utilizing reason and experience merely as tools to bolster traditional beliefs at any cost. This has resulted in religious conflicts with science and reason, misrepresenting the concept of the Holy Spirit through dogmatic beliefs and lifeless rituals.

To be more precise, the essence of existence can be categorized into two domains: the apparent and material reality, and the inner and rational reality. For instance, in the realm of nature, material objects possess dimensions such as length, width, and height, exhibit specific forms, occupy space, and can undergo motion. However, the genuine nature of these objects, their inner essence, remains concealed from our understanding. Human beings have the capacity to discern the relationships and attributes governing these objects, and scientific theories strive to unveil these connections. Each new scientific theory broadens our understanding of these relationships, bringing us closer to the concealed essence of objects. Nevertheless, access to their fundamental nature remains within the domain of the unknown. As we delve deeper into the intricacies of nature and the interplay among its constituents, the overall reality eludes our comprehension even further. Modern physics also asserts that achieving absolute knowledge and a comprehensive grasp of the essence of existence is unattainable. Therefore, the assertion of materialistic philosophy, claiming predictability and controllability of all phenomena, faces challenges in light of modern physics. If the exploration of the tiniest particles within atoms leads us to the realm of uncertainty, how can we assert that science is competent in entirely elucidating human behavior within its intricate material, mental, emotional, ethical, sociocultural, and civilizational context?

Here, it is crucial to reiterate that discussing the limitations of science in understanding reality does not entail the rejection of science in favor of ancient forms of magic or a plea for supernatural interventions that defy the laws of nature. In recent years, certain dogmatic religious beliefs have seized the opportunity to criticize science and the principles of enlightenment by exploiting the crisis in materialistic philosophy. This undermines the remarkable scientific advancements and unparalleled progress that civilization has witnessed over the past two centuries. One of the shortcomings of traditional religions is their close association with miracles, myths, and supernatural elements that go beyond the realm of material experience. As a result, these religions often view themselves as independent of scientific evidence, which has at times hindered human curiosity and creativity, confining them within the boundaries of mythical traditions.

During the postmodern³¹ era, there has been a rise in an anti-scientific worldview, which can potentially encourage the proliferation of superstitions. It's essential to clarify that what deserves criticism is not the scientific method itself. When we contemplate science in its comprehensive and universal sense, it naturally aligns with the domains of meanings, values, and ethics. Science represents one facet of understanding, while religion represents another. Their unity is realized when both are integrated within the framework of a third factor: the parameters and the progressive movement of humanity toward an integral civilization. Therefore, critiquing materialism does not equate to rejecting science and the scientific method, nor does it entail disregarding empirical, quantitative, and statistical studies of natural and physical phenomena.

Materialist philosophy, much like religion, serves as a particular worldview and cultural perspective that shapes the direction of science and reason. In ancient times, traditional religious worldviews held sway over science and reason, and materialist philosophy has taken a similar path by supplanting religion and providing a materialistic interpretation of scientific discoveries and rational conclusions. This prompts the question: how did this situation come about? The answer can be traced to the dogmatism inherent in traditional religious beliefs, which failed to keep pace with evolving human thought.

The fundamental reality is singular, but the realms of science and reason are in a constant state of flux and evolution. The moon, sun, stars, and galaxies today are no different from what they were two thousand years ago. However, human perception of the world has undergone significant transformations. While Aristotle's philosophy may have explained the universe two millennia ago, today, quantum mechanics and relativity offer a vastly expanded perspective. In the past, traveling between countries took months, but the realm of communication has transformed the world into a unified political, economic, and cultural entity. Messages can traverse the globe with a simple gesture. The underlying reality has always remained constant, but the interpretations of science and reason about it are continually evolving. Both science and

³¹ Referring to the skepticism of postmodernism towards the credibility of objective truth, when taken to an extreme, it can pave the way for relativism and a loss of discernment.

reason serve as lenses through which we understand the world, harness the potential forces of nature for the betterment of civilization, and create new realities.

The contemporary state of the world necessitates new approaches to address evolving circumstances and practical needs in order to advance social evolution. In modern times, traditional religious expressions have often remained stagnant in the face of the ever-changing landscape of science and reason. Not only have they remained static, but in some cases, they have resisted change vehemently. They asserted that change is unnecessary, as their doctrines provide timeless answers to all human needs. Innovation and free thinking were considered heretical and blasphemous. The vision was for religion and its institutions to govern all aspects of life.

The emergence of new materialist philosophies can be viewed as a reaction to this religious dogmatism. Materialism can be likened to a camera lens that interprets human sensory and rational experiences from a specific standpoint. It replaces religious objectives and motivations with material symbols, attempting to fulfill the need for spirituality with material content. Some materialist philosophers believed that by dismantling the foundations of religion, they would free science and reason from the constraints of religious dogma, leading humanity toward newfound freedom. However, the experiences of the past two centuries have shown that humans have created their own belief systems and personal religions. Science alone has failed to address the spiritual needs of humanity and nurture their conscience. Conscience serves as a guiding faculty that harmonizes sensory experiences and rational thought. It prioritizes values and becomes the compass for human actions.

The spiritual and metaphysical worldviews acknowledge goals and purposes beyond material needs, imparting a profound meaning to human life that transcends the material world. It imbues individuals with the pursuit of perfection, and existence devoid of this spiritual dimension lacks deep significance. Experience, reason, spirituality, and ethics all interact with and influence one another. They form an interconnected framework that shapes individual character and the culture of society. They cannot be separated, and one cannot be advanced while the others are neglected. Therefore, science, reason, and religion must align with one another and adapt to the dynamic flow of existence to progress harmoniously.

If religion abandons its responsibilities, becomes stagnant, clings to prejudice, resists change, and opposes renewal, it risks transforming into a form of thought control or ideological despotism. This can incite a reactionary upheaval in thought and society, ultimately weakening religious beliefs. The reality of existence hinges on a balance between material and spiritual dimensions. When this equilibrium is not achieved, thought oscillates between extremes.

The materialist movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries symbolized a revolt against the prevailing superstitious beliefs that impeded progress and societal advancement under the banner of religion. With the Renaissance and the progress of scientific knowledge, human consciousness expanded, rendering it increasingly incompatible with superstitious concepts. Consequently, some individuals advocated for the relegation of religion, the denial of God's existence, and the establishment of a materialistic foundation for the world. They argued that there is no higher power to assist humans; rather, humans must seek their own salvation and enlightenment in this worldly existence. The clash between tradition and materialism constituted a confrontation between two intellectual systems: one steeped in tradition, emphasizing supernatural dimensions, and the other firmly grounded in materialism, aligned with empirical observation, quantifiable data, and scientific experience.

What Abdul-Baha suggests is that we should reintroduce God and spirituality into the heart of civilization. It should be a universal spirituality that is pervasive and belongs to all human beings, without being imposed dictatorially or relying on mythical concepts and dogmatic beliefs. Its grace lies in the requirements of the unity of humankind and a comprehensive global civilization. Both the transcendental and the worldly realm must be acknowledged, and the balance of both should form the foundation of a new all-encompassing system based on unity of opposites.

In the figure next page, one can observe a general representation of the epistemology elements discussed in the works of Abdul-Baha.

Field (square) I can be considered a symbol of spiritual or values-based knowledge, while Field II represents scientific/empirical knowledge. The combination of these two knowledge realms results in insight or a worldview for an individual. Values and scientific knowledge are interrelated, and their relationship manifests as integral knowledge. The line between them signifies the importance of preserving the boundaries between value-based expressions, which have an internal and qualitative aspect and encompass a diverse spectrum, and the flow of scientific discovery and observation, which has an external, quantitative, and linear aspect. No preconceptions should be imposed on the course of scientific inquiry. Fields I and II are complementary and watchful of each other, forming a cycle of top-down and bottom-up approaches. This means that when scientific findings are combined with spiritual and ethical values, technology (the practical outcome of scientific knowledge) is directed toward human ideals. Conversely, scientific knowledge provides a tangible basis for further exploration of value-based, subjective concepts and social phenomena that essentially belong to the domain of meanings. The interaction between the two Fields helps them to remain grounded in their own settings.

Individuals and society can only reach perfection through education and training (Field III). Education and training fundamentally begin with the evolution of integral knowledge and then cultivate perception, emotions, and behavior. Consequently, knowledge becomes a useful reality when it is reflected in the flow of education and training, exerting influence on an individual's character and social environment. From Abdul-Baha's perspective, knowledge is related to social change and the requirements of the evolving civilization. Therefore, knowledge and insight must be nurtured through education and training and should bring about transformation in an individual's life and their social environment (Field IV). Field IV represents the fruition of the entire process where knowledge culminates in praxis.

Among the four fields of epistemology, there exist mutually reinforcing relationships. The concentric circles represent the necessary relations and dynamic interactions among the four fields of knowledge, which continuously traverse the four domains and, in each turn, expand the

dynamic nature of human cognition. The results and experiences of each field provide the groundwork for the expansion of the other fields, and the entirety of knowledge continuously converges in a more precise alignment with reality.

An Illustrated Overview of Abdul Baha's Epistemological System

