

Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the Bahá'í Writings in order to discover the nature of the ontology they embody. However, in a single paper this project can only be an “initial reconnaissance,” a scouting of the territory in order to discover some of its most prominent features. The main value of this project lies in the fact that an ontology operates like a constitution: it is the philosophical frame of reference or context within which the ideas take on meaning. Any exposition of the Writings or any Bahá'í based philosophizing must be in harmony with this ontological constitution, or at least, be neutral and not offend against its general principles. Thus, like any other constitution, a Bahá'í ontology provides a particular philosophical identity that distinguishes the Writings from other sacred books. Knowing this identity lays the foundations for in-depth dialogue with all other belief systems both religious and secular.

Scouting the territory strongly suggests four general conclusions about Bahá'í ontology, though naturally, further studies are necessary to confirm them. First, there is a coherent, systematic ontology underlying the Bahá'í Writings. Directly and indirectly, the Sacred Texts deal with the major questions of ontological study, and do so in an organically related manner. The density and detail of the organic relationships among the ideas indicate that a system, a “grand narrative” is at work. The unorganized outer appearance – gleanings, selections, letters, talks, answered questions, tablets to individuals – does not necessarily mean that the ideas underlying the Writings are also a patch-work of unrelated or weakly related “little narratives.”

The second general conclusion is that Bahá'í ontology might best be characterized by the phrase “two-wings.” In other words, on many major issues, Bahá'í ontology seems to be constituted by complementary or balancing opposites that together create its unique ontological identity. For example, Bahá'í ontology seems to balance a variety of elements that are traditionally described as ‘Platonic’ and ‘Aristotelian.’ This ‘balancing act’ is also suggested by the number of times the concepts of ‘correlation’ and ‘qualification’ have to be invoked in exploring some rather technical ontological issues. All these characteristics suggest that Bahá'í ontology is a dynamic unity that seeks to do justice to the diversity of experience and being.

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

Finally, Notwithstanding its various unique features, we find it difficult to resist the conclusion that, philosophically speaking, Bahá'í ontology generally resembles the ontology found in the tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, moves through Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Aquinas, Scotus and Hegel and currently has its strongest proponents in neo-Thomism, the neo-Aristotelianism of Mortimer Adler and the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. This is not to say that Bahá'í ontology agrees with every one of these on every issue – for that is a clear impossibility. However, it shares with them three important factors. First and most important, Bahá'í ontology and this tradition share a similar conceptual framework for analysing reality; in other words, they understand reality and solve philosophical problems by means of similar concepts or categories. Second, Bahá'í ontology shares as commitment to a moderate rationalism, that is, a rationalism that recognises its own limits and – at least in the case of the Writings – knows the importance of the supra-rational and revelation. They all reject the irrational. Third, there is a commitment to including and doing justice to all aspects of human experience, both the natural and the supra-natural.

1. What is Ontology?

Ontology is the study of being and what it means to say that something ‘is’ or ‘exists’. As a branch of metaphysics, the study of the most general principles of reality, ontology specifically concerns itself with the most fundamental questions about the nature of existence. It focuses on questions related to being, such as “why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”; what exists?; is being an attribute?; does ‘to be’ mean to be a ‘substance’?; is true being one and unchanging?; are ‘being’ and ‘existence’ the same?; is possibility or potentiality a form of existence?; what is the relationship between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’?; is reality monist (one) or pluralist (many)?; is ‘being’ amenable to rational study and if so, how and to what extent?, and, is there ontological parity among all beings? While far

from complete, this list of questions provides at least a sense of the ontological enterprise and shows ontology's close relationship to metaphysics.

The list also demonstrates how ontology often operates at the very limits of rational discourse. Although this characteristic might raise doubts about the value of ontological endeavors, such doubts are misplaced for at least two reasons. In the first place, and most obviously, the difficulty of an activity is not necessarily an argument against it; we cannot simply abandon any field of study simply for posing serious challenges. Second, despite its difficulties, ontology is a useful part of the scientific study of the world. According to Dale Jaquette, ontology has two branches, "pure philosophical ontology", sometimes called "fundamental ontology", which deals with the most general, foundational concepts and "applied scientific ontology" which concerns itself with particular applications of ontology to "specific fields of thought and discourse." Each field or domain of study – history, physics, biology, literature or sociology – concerns itself with specific kinds of beings and with their own modes or ways of existing. Different fields of studies are distinguished by their varying ontologies or theories of being in regard to their own special objects of study. For example, fictional characters, self-help associations, frogs and atoms all exist in some way, but their mode, their manner of existence, their acts of being differ dramatically. (Their modes of being may also contain some surprising similarities.) Even the briefest reflection on these examples, shows that a full and clear understanding of any subject requires a full and clear understanding of its inherent ontology.

There is yet a third branch of ontology, which we might call existential ontology. This branch most famously represented by Heidegger and Sartre begins with philosophical ontology – the study of being and modes of being – and then proceeds to the analysis of how human beings in particular experience these principles at work in their daily lives. In other words, it studies how these principles affect our thoughts, emotions, actions, values, arts, sciences, social relations and societal structures and religions. How, for example, does the Bahá'í teaching that vis-à-vis God, all finite creations are unreal or non-being, affect us in terms of understanding our own existence? How does this affect our experience of our fellow human beings and other creatures, our self-valuation, our artistic experiences? If God is analogous to a painter,

then are we, perhaps, somehow like characters in a novel? These are some of the kinds of questions with which existential ontology concerns itself.

In this paper, which is only an initial reconnaissance of the territory, concerns itself primarily with philosophical ontology and touch on existential ontology where appropriate. It will not deal at all with what Jaquette calls "applied scientific ontology."

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

At this point an important question obtrudes in relationship to our subject. Do the Bahá'í Writings actually embody an ontology? Do they, in other words, contain a theory of being? As this paper will demonstrate, the answer is that like all other religions, philosophies or, for that matter, all areas of human endeavor, the Bahá'í Writings contain an ontology both explicitly and implicitly. The following quotation from 'Abdu'l-Bahá serves as an example of an explicitly ontological statement: "the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident--that is to say, the body--be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains." Without losing ourselves in details, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement represents a commitment to the existence – in some form – of spiritual substances such as the soul, and to material substances such as the body. Moreover, it has defined the body, and perhaps matter in general, as an "accident", as a particular kind of attribute or quality of a spiritual substance. Because the soul is the substance and the body the attribute or accident, they obviously have different ways or modes of existing. For starters, it is evident that the 'accidental' body is in a relationship of existential dependence upon the soul, which it needs to exist. This suggests that the soul does not depend on the body for its existence – though it may depend on the body for its appearance or presence in the world of matter. Consequently, we are not surprised to learn that the soul or substance survives the dissolution of the physical composite we call 'the body'. At this point, before we have even discussed what the Writings might mean by the term 'substance', the nature of accidents, and their relationship to time, it is clear that the Writings have supplied at least a partial answer to the basic ontological questions, 'What exists?', 'What does it mean to be a substance?' and 'Is there ontological parity among all things?'

A supplementary question arises. If the Bahá'í Writings exemplify an ontology, is it a system? At this stage in Bahá'í studies, it is not yet possible to give a definitive answer one way or the other though tentatively, we would answer in the affirmative because, as this paper shall demonstrate, it is already possible to discern the parameters of the system. We should not be misled by the fact that the system is not presented systematically throughout the Writings but rather in talks, tablets and letters given as need and opportunity occur. The system is admittedly presented in piece-meal fashion but this does not in itself prove that when all the pieces are seen as a whole, there is no system. As this essay will show, the inter-relationship among ideas is so tightly-knit that it is difficult to study only one idea at a time because each idea is attached to so many others. Such an organic unity is precisely one of the hallmarks of a system.

3.) The Language of Bahá'í Ontology.

One of the most serious issues in the study of Bahá'í ontology is the language used by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and most notably, through his use of quotations, Shoghi Effendi. Not only is it obvious to anyone familiar with the philosophical literature, but it has also been irrevocably shown both directly and indirectly that the philosophical terminology and many of the concepts used in the Writings are, to an overwhelming extent, the same as those used by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Thus we are left with the problem of how to interpret this fact. The central and absolutely crucial question on this issue is whether Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi use this terminology because they endorse the ontology implicitly contained therein or whether they use it simply as a means of communicating with people in the conceptual framework to which they are accustomed. Either alternative has profound philosophical implications since the choice made will determine the philosophical affinities or kinships of the Writings, and these kinships in turn will have an important influence on the future development of Bahá'í philosophy. They will encourage philosophical exploration of the Writings into one direction or another.

It is the contention of this author, that the first of these two alternatives is the strongest and most likely, though it is clear, of course, that in understanding the Writings, no person's views can claim absolute finality. There are three main reasons for taking this position. The first is the sheer pervasiveness of the use of Platonic, Aristotelian and Plotinian terminology and concepts. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to a lesser extent, Shoghi Effendi are thickly sown with terminology and concepts from this philosophical tradition. A brief overview of these would include as the most obvious, essence, substance; essential attribute; attribute; accident; potential; the prime mover argument; emanation; planes of existence; material, efficient, formal and final causes; the mineral, plant, animal, human kingdoms; contingent and necessary being; this world being an image of a higher world; the concept of the rational soul; an unknowable God, the institution of the Guardian; and change as the actualization of potentials. Not only are these terms and concepts used, but they are also used in a manner that is fully consistent with what we find in the original works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Moreover, the terms and concepts are used self-coherently throughout the Writings, that is, the range of meanings which are employed remains consistent. This is the case whether one studies the officially translated tablets or whether one looks at the provisionally translated tablets, a fact which indicates that the observation is not based on a chance sample among the officially translated tablets. In our view, it is extremely unlikely that such a far-reaching overlap of terminology and concepts is merely a matter of accident. The literary and philosophical sophistication of the Writings show that the authors were obviously in full and complete control of their diction and chose it because they always had a specific purposes in mind.

This brings us to the second reason for concluding that the choice of philosophical diction was intentional and meant as a guidance in the development of Bahá'í philosophy. Not only are these terms and concepts used consistently throughout the Writings, they are used consistently over a period spanning a full century of writing by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. In other words, this consistency of diction spans four generations of writers expounding their teachings in very different circumstances, to very different audiences at very different times. Again, our view is that this development is not merely coincidental, but is intended as guidance for future believers in the philosophical exploration of the Writings and in the development of Bahá'í philosophy.

In other words, the language of the Writings themselves guide our exploration and thinking into the illustrious philosophical tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, continues with Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Aquinas and Scotus, and continues into modern times through Hegel, Schopenhauer, neo-Thomism and Whitehead.

The third reason for concluding that a particular ontology lies in the inherent weakness of the counter-arguments, of which there are basically two. The first counter-argument is that the philosophical concepts and terms were chosen as a means of communicating with a specific audience in its own terms. This argument might possibly have some merit so far as Middle Eastern audiences are concerned but such is certainly not the case for western or other non-western audiences. The fact is that in the West, already since the time of Galileo and Descartes in the 17th Century, the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition was scientifically and philosophically discredited or at the very least, considered passé, most particularly in the areas of prime interest, metaphysics, epistemology and ontology. This was so much the case even in Catholic countries that in 1879 Pope Leo XIII initiated efforts to revive the tradition by starting what is now known as neo-Thomism. His efforts bore qualified success. On one had there is no question that neo-Thomism (and to a lesser extent, its off-shoot neo-Aristotelianism) became a vibrantly alive and multi-faceted philosophical tradition, on the other hand, the fact remains that it has never been significant part of the mainstream of modern philosophical pursuits.

In light of this situation, it is impossible to resist the conclusion that *if* Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi intended to use the language of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus to reach western audiences in the 19th and 20th centuries, They made a serious mistake. While a non-Bahá'í scholar may entertain such a possibility, for a Bahá'í scholar, it is impossible to accept the notion that a Manifestation of God and His authorized interpreters made such a momentous error of judgement about the philosophical climate in the West. Therefore, if the choice of philosophical

language and its concomitant concepts was neither a mere accident nor an error, it follows that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá intentionally chose this tradition to convey Their key concepts. Since They did so, it is most likely that They want us to continue our exploration and thinking along these philosophical lines and to read the Writings in the intellectual light provided by this tradition.

A similar argument can be used vis-à-vis reaching non-western audiences outside of the Middle East. Here too, the argument that this language was chosen to facilitate communication fails because these peoples were wholly unfamiliar with the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition.

Initially, at least, such language is bound to be a barrier, a barrier that could be overcome only by a careful study of this tradition as presented in the Writings. It makes no sense to put these non-western peoples to so much trouble if there were no special value in doing so. For this reason, we feel compelled to reject the notion that the choice of philosophic language in the Writings is simply a matter of circumstance without special meaning for us. Again, it seems most likely that we are being steered in this direction because Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá see particular value there for us.

It bears a small digression to point out that one of the side-effects of studying the Writings in depth is a growing familiarity with the terms and concepts of this tradition. In effect, on a world-wide scale and within its religious context, this philosophical tradition has already taken on new life outside of the Catholic neo-Thomist movement in all those Bahá'is who study the Writings in depth. Whether or not they consciously know that these concepts and terms overlap with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus is quite irrelevant to the fact that they are gaining an effective working knowledge of the key concepts and terms of this philosophical tradition.

Moreover, the fact that the Bahá'í Faith and its Writings have become a successful world-wide movement with adherents from virtually every part of the globe is decisive proof that the language and concepts of this philosophical tradition are not an insurmountable impediment to the growth of the Bahá'í Faith. That is because the conceptual framework of Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic line is enormously rich and flexible and can be re-thought and re-cast in many forms, as illustrated not only by the variety within Catholic neo-Thomism, but also by my own papers on the convergences between the Writings and such widely disparate thinkers as Heidegger and Marcel on one hand and de Chardin and Whitehead on the other. The rest of this paper will provide further evidence on this score.

In conclusion, we find the argument that the Writings use the terminology of the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition only to communicate with people in their own conceptual language does not withstand careful analysis.

3.1) Making the Tradition and Language New.

The second major argument against the belief that the Writings' use of the language and concepts of the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition is that in Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, "All things are now made new." For this reason, so it is argued, the Writings cannot belong to an old and venerable line that has had limited influence on the mainstream of modern philosophical thinking. Whatever the philosophical language used, it is somehow being used in an unprecedentedly new way and the failure to see this is a failure of vision. This argument has two decisive weaknesses.

For starters, it is patently demonstrable through careful textual analysis that the Bahá'í Writings use the terminology and concepts of this tradition in the way that confirms the original usages by Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. In secular historical terms, one would say that there is a linguistic and conceptual continuity between the Bahá'í Writings and the works of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. From a scholarly point of view, it is simply not credible to deny the similarities because the evidence for an overlap is too obvious and too abundant. From a Bahá'í point of view, one would say that Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi *confirm* some of the philosophic insights and terminological choices of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus.

Where, then does that leave us with Bahá'u'lláh's claim that God has "instilled into every word a fresh potency"? Clearly it would be in violation of this principle if our position were that the language and concepts used by the Writings must be limited to the original meanings as found in the work of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus. Such a stance would imprison our understanding in the work of philosophers who lived two millennia ago and would, for that reason, be unacceptable in a religion emphasizing progress. However, we do not accept such a narrow position. If God has "instilled into every word a fresh potency," then it follows that the words of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus – words that Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi have chosen to confirm – have also received this "fresh potency" and are thereby revitalized.

Having been revitalized, they are capable of further new development as we progress through the Bahá'í Dispensation. Their meanings must be re-thought and expanded as our intellectual and spiritual evolution unfolds, as

for example, Whitehead and Zubiri have done with Plato and Aristotle. The work of these two moderns clearly demonstrate that the Writings' confirmation of some key concepts and terms from the Platonic-Aristotelian-Plotinic tradition does not necessarily imprison our understanding of the revealed Word in the past. For this reason, we reject this argument against seeing the Sacred Texts as endorsing this philosophic tradition. Intellectual antiquarianism is, indeed, a danger to be avoided but is emphatically not a necessary consequence of recognizing and working with the Writings' confirmations of this tradition.

In light of the foregoing considerations, this paper maintains that the Bahá'í Writings in effect endorse the philosophic tradition beginning with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus and guide our philosophic thinking to develop this tradition in new directions over the course of the Bahá'í Dispensation.

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

It is the contention of this paper that the bedrock of Bahá'í ontology is the principle of ontological dualism between the Creator and the created. In other words, God and creation are so fundamentally different in the very nature of their respective modes of being that between them there exists an unbridgeable gulf which denies any possibility of a direct connection. As Bahá'u'lláh says, "there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute." 'Abdu'l-Bahá also emphasizes this when he writes,

For the Preexistent is different from the phenomenal, and the phenomenal is opposed to the Preexistent; that which we attribute to the creature--that is, the necessities of the contingent beings--we deny for God; for purification, or sanctification from imperfections, is one of His *necessary* properties.

As these quotes show, to natural reason unaided by divine revelation, existence is divided in two, the Creator and the created. Because of the vast ontological gulf between the two – a difference of kind, not of degree – it is impossible for God to become man or for man to become God, as held by some mystics. Of the first view, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies with the Sufis but which is also applicable to Christian incarnationism, he says,

But the affirmation of the Sufís requires that the Independent Wealth should descend to the degree of poverty, that the Preexistent should confine itself to phenomenal forms, and that Pure Power should be restricted to the state of weakness, according to the limitations of contingent beings. *And this is an evident error.*

There is no conceivable way in which God incarnates Himself in the human form or in some way become ontologically one with man. As well, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects the view held by some mystics, that man may become God; he asks rhetorically, "[H]ow can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality?" The answer, of course, is that essentially limited phenomena can in no way take in or "embrace", God. Bahá'u'lláh makes the same point when He says,

no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every *mystic* knower hath wandered far *astray* in the valley of the knowledge of Him; every saint hath *lost* his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence.

He re-enforces this point by asking rhetorically, "How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?" It is, of course, we humans who are "utter nothingness" in comparison to God's absolute being, and mere shadows –contingent beings – compared to God's unconditioned existence. In other words, the ontological difference between the Creator and the created is too great to be overcome by the mere efforts of humankind. This difference between God and humankind is the very reason for the existence of Manifestations of God Who would not be needed if humans could somehow become ontologically 'one' with God Himself. From this it can be seen that ontological monism not only undermines the foundations of religion as revealed by Manifestations but also makes it possible to replace these religions with self-help groups whose members are completely sufficient to themselves in their quest for 'salvation.' This fact alone makes it clear that there is a fundamental conflict between ontological monism and Bahá'í Manifestationist theology.'

As we explore the Writings, we find that they are also full of images that have ontological implications supporting the principle of ontological dualism. Take for example, the references to the ocean of God's wisdom, the ocean of His presence, or the ocean of His mercy. Reflection suggests that here too we have a metaphorical indication of the enormous ontological difference between God and humankind, a difference that is not just a difference of degree but of kind, that is, God and humankind belong to two utterly different orders, or stations of existence. The converse notion that the Divine could contain itself a created being is, of course, explicitly forbidden by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "the Preexistent does not become the phenomenal; independent wealth does not become enchained poverty; pure

perfection does not become absolute imperfection.” Elsewhere he says that for Divinity “there is no ingress or egress; it is sanctified above all things and ever occupies its own holy station.”

The logic underlying Bahá’í ontological dualism is clear and irrefutable: the relationship of dependence on God can never be revoked or negated in any way. God is the perpetually indispensable ‘necessary and sufficient condition’ for the existence of anything other than Himself. That being the case, there can be no possible point of view, position or stance within creation where the distinction between Creator and created is overcome, where the primordial relationship of dependence on God is invalidated, or negated in some way. What point of view within creation could possibly make one independent of God? Any claim to ontological one-ness with God is untenable because that claim, in effect, denies the relationship of dependence if only for the duration of this union. In the Bahá’í context, such claims are simply unacceptable. This is not, of course, to say that people do not have mystical experiences but rather to say that some misinterpret their experience as an ontological union in which they and God become one and, thereby, equal. According to the Writings, this is unacceptable because God is He “with Whom no partners can be joined” and ignores Bahá’u’lláh’s warning,

Beware, beware, lest thou be led to join partners with the Lord, thy God. He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal . . . detached from all things, ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting. He hath assigned no associate unto Himself in His Kingdom . . .

These guiding statements from Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá make it clear that the Bahá’í ontology rigorously excludes the slightest suggestion that humankind and God can every be one in an ontological sense. They may, of course, be one in an ethical sense, insofar as the individual human will is completely harmonized with or submissive to the divine will. Such an ethical ‘union’ or harmonization is altogether different from the claim that one has become identical with God Himself. The Bahá’í Writings thus make it clear that within the realm of creation, there is no possible point of view or station that can undo this primordial relationship of ontological dependence on God. Indeed, the assumption of such a station involves the claimant in a logical self-contradiction. If he truly becomes one with God, the Creator of all other beings, then the claimant in effect becomes his own creator, which is to say, he exists before he exists because God logically precedes all other beings. In short, other, non-ontological interpretations of these mystical experiences must be found.

We must also bear in mind that on the very issue of ontological monism, the Bahá’í Writings provide extensive external, objective guidance to help us choose correctly among the possible views on this topic. Besides the evidence presented above to support ontological dualism, we also have Bahá’u’lláh’s statements about the importance of rank and stations.

To transgress the limits of one’s own rank and station is, in no wise, permissible. The integrity of every rank and station must needs be preserved. By this is meant that every created thing should be viewed in the light of the station it hath been ordained to occupy.

In other words, it is a principle of Bahá’í ontology that no created being, regardless of how perfect, can rise above its natural station, though it may, of course attain to various degrees *within* that station. Even in its evolution after death, the human soul remains human no matter how far it evolves: “it never leaves its own condition, in which it continues to develop.”

This principle is the reason for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insistence that regardless of its outward appearance, the human soul is – and always was – human throughout its entire evolutionary history. Therefore, this ontological principle denies the claim that there is, or even could be, a human condition from whose point of view the ontological distinction between man and God is overcome or negated. We never leave our human station under any circumstances.

An additional problem with the attempted reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is that the “*Commentary*” itself contains indirect but unmistakable guidance as to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s real position. The last section, “Knowing,” begins,

As for what is intended by Knowing, know thou, O wayfarer upon the path of guidance that the path to knowing the innermost Essence of the Absolute is *closed to all beings* and seeking and hoping for this station is not acceptable. Never will the spiders of vain imaginings weave their web upon the branches of the knowledge of the reality of the Almighty, Omniscient One; nor will the flea in the dust circle about the stars of the heavenly spheres. How can the reality of non-existence ever understand the ipseity of being?

In a nutshell, ontological monism violates the Bahá’í principle of the unknowability of God. To claim that we have ontologically become one with God is, in effect, to claim that we have known God since being one with something entails knowing it and its condition from ‘within.’ How could we be something and not have inner knowledge of it?

However, as the foregoing quotation from the “*Commentary*” makes crystal clear, such knowledge is impossible no matter what point of view is adopted. Since the knowledge of God is utterly impossible, then no one – regardless of spiritual condition – can attain the necessary and sufficient conditions for obtaining such knowledge of God, which is, in effect, to say that no one can attain unity with God.

Indeed, this becomes even clearer once we realize that according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, knowledge is comprehension and comprehension is limited by the ontological nature of our existence. He makes this very point in the “*Commentary*”, when he identifies “encompassment” as one criteria of knowledge: “until one thing *encompasses* another, it cannot understand its inner nature.” The theme of the necessity of “encompassment” or ‘surrounding’ as being necessary for knowledge is repeated elsewhere in the Writings. For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, we read

But the spirit and mind of man travel to all countries and regions--even through the limitless space of the heavens--*surround* all that exists, and make *discoveries* in the exalted spheres and infinite distances.

and also

Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, *surround* the essence and qualities of the creatures, *transcend* and *contain* existing realities and *understand* all things, therefore, Their *knowledge* is divine knowledge, and not acquired . . .

The problem for ontological monism is that according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the limited can never *comprehend*, *surround* nor *take in* the unlimited,” a statement that echoes our original quotation from the “*Commentary*.” This utterly categorical statement by itself is enough to completely negate any conclusion about the equal validity of ontological monism and dualism in Bahá’í ontology.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary*” also reinforces this reason for rejecting ontological monism as a correct viewpoint in Bahá’í ontology when he points out that “similarity and likeness” are necessary for knowledge. He points out that “Until one thing can be likened to something else its reality can never be imagined.” Since likeness is required for knowledge, then obviously knowledge of God is out of the question because “for the Essence of the Absolute, there is not nor ever has been any likeness or similarity.” Again, if we cannot understand God, then we cannot attain the necessary and sufficient conditions for such understanding – that is, we cannot attain to the being of God. Here too, the path to any kind of ontological monism is barred.

Finally, there is yet another reason to reject ontological monism. If ontological monism allows us to become one with God and, thereby, gain knowledge of God, then it implies that the created is somehow able to surround the Creator and to know His Essence. Simply put, this position wipes out the very *raison d’être* for the existence of revelation: if we can attain knowledge of God by becoming ontologically one with Him, then revelation and Manifestations are not needed. Indeed, they are obstacles on the path of attaining our true spiritual destiny and must be pushed aside lest we prematurely stop our quest with the Manifestations. However, such a view is entirely at odds with the Bahá’í belief in the central importance of the Manifestations and Their revelations.

Since ontological monism is not a tenable viewpoint in Bahá’í ontology, we are left with the question of how to interpret reports of such experiences. Of course, Parry’s thesis of ethical monism is available as a credible alternative; the ‘knower’ merges his will in God’s and – mistakenly – interprets this merging as an ontological unity with God because he is so overcome by the splendour of the Divine that he forgets himself. Of course, self-forgetfulness is not the same as self-annihilation, though experientially it may seem so to some. Ironically, it is precisely on this score that they need the guidance of a Manifestation in order to interpret their experience correctly and not overstep the bounds of their ontological station.

4.1) Apparently Monist Passages

It may be argued that the Bahá’í Writings Themselves contain passages suggesting ontological monism, as, for example, Bahá’u’lláh’s injunction, “Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.” However, this passage is not really monist. Because we can find God standing within us does not mean we have become God; indeed, the distinction between the individual finder and that which is found (God), indicates that this ontological distinction has not been negated. God and man remain ontologically distinct because God’s omnipresence – He can be found everywhere – does not mean God’s identity with His location in the created worlds. Furthermore, if we recall ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “human heart resembleth a mirror,” and the frequent identification of hearts and mirrors in the Writings, then it becomes obvious that it is not God in his ontological Being Who is found within the individual heart, but rather God’s reflected presence.

Another passage that is sometimes quoted to support a monist interpretation of the Writings is found in *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*.

Thus when the wayfarer gazeth only upon the place of appearance--that is, when he seeth only the many-colored globes --he beholdeth yellow and red and white; hence it is that conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world. And some do gaze upon the effulgence of the light; and some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself.

A careful reading of this passage shows that its concern is epistemological – visionary – and not ontological, it is about perceiving not about the being of that which is perceived. To be ontological monist, this passage would have to assert that “the place of appearance”, “the many-colored globes” and sun itself are actually one. To be ontologically monist, this passage would also have to claim that the person who gazes is one with what he gazes upon. However, this passage does preserve the distinction between the perceiver and the perceived and, therefore, cannot serve as an example of a monist tendency in the Writings.

The following is another passage quoted to support a monist tendency in the Writings:

Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend . . . This is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things (Kullu Shay') are destroyed in the traveler, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning of "All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord...." is made manifest.”

Again, we observe that this passage is epistemological, not ontological in nature. When the seeker reaches a certain stage in his quest, he sees nothing but the Friend or, as in the second sentence, nothing “but the face of thy Lord.” There is no suggestion here that the seeker becomes identical with the Friend or with the Lord. Even if we take a metaphysical interpretation of “nothing will remain” and “All the earth shall pass away,” we still do not come to ontological monism because the ‘passing away’ of the world or the self does not imply the identity of the world and the self with God. Nor does it suggest that there is a viewpoint or station where the ontological difference between Creator and created is overcome.

Finally, it needs to be denied that the Bahá’í belief that only God has absolute existence

and that human existence is contingent is “in essence a monist position.” That would, indeed, be the case if creation were the result of manifestation, not emanation. Using organic imagery, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that manifestation is like a plant growing from a seed: “for the *seed in its own essence* becomes branches and fruits, and its reality enters into the branches, the leaves and fruits.” Thus, the seed and the branches are identical in essence though different in outer form.

If that were the situation between the Creator and the created, if somehow Creator and created were one despite their differing forms, ontological monism would be the Bahá’í view. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically rejects this:

This appearance through manifestation would be for God, the Most High, simple imperfection; and this is quite impossible, for the implication would be that the Absolute Preexistent is qualified with phenomenal attributes.

In other words, in Bahá’í philosophy, God and creation are rigorously distinct and there is no way in which they can become ontologically one. The most that can happen is that the human seeker feels so overwhelmed by his feelings of nearness to God that he loses consciousness of his own distinct being – and then, in some cases, mistakenly interprets this loss of personal consciousness as an ontological union with God. In doing so, the seeker confuses an epistemological situation – his loss of personal consciousness – with an ontological situation, a supposed ‘union’ with God.

4.2) The Failure to Reconcile Monism and Dualism.

If it is true that the Writings reject ontological monism in favour of ontological dualism, we are faced with the challenge of Dr. Moojan Momen’s claim that the two positions are reconciled in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden treasure.’*” According to Dr. Momen’s article, “*Relativism: A Basis for Bahá’í Metaphysics,*” relativism can serve “as a reconciliation of the dichotomy” between an ontological dualism asserting that “There is a fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute” and an ontological monism stating that “There is no fundamental difference between the human soul and the Absolute.” Dr. Momen rejects Robert Parry’s view that any apparently monist passages in the Writings are to be interpreted as an “ethical monism,” as “‘an annihilation of one’s egotistical desires and a merging of one’s will with God’.” Rather,

according to Dr. Momen, the theme of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “*Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden treasure’*” is that

the differences in the viewpoints arise from differences in the fundamental (i.e. the attributes within the soul/psyche complex) of the observers. The fundamental nature of one individual inclines him to see Reality in a dualist mode, while another will see Reality in a monist mode.

Here are ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s exact words, at the conclusion of his exposition of both points of view:

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

Examination of this statement shows that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not actually endorsing a relativist thesis regarding the ontological equivalence of monism and dualism. Instead, he strictly confines his remarks to the *subjective* criteria for truth, saying that given their own presuppositions and criteria, the advocates of each viewpoint reason correctly and attain a conclusion that is consistent with their spiritual conditions as “knowers.” In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument is *subjectively* epistemological – concerned with the “knowers” and not with what is known, with the perceiver and not with the perceived. He is not talking about what actually is the case but rather about what the viewer thinks is the case because of his nature and spiritual condition. Once this distinction is noted, it becomes clear that his judgement about the two viewpoints has no ontological implications at all. It is, therefore, difficult to avoid the conclusion that seeing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words as a vindication for relativism or for a reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is to mistake a rather studiously neutral statement about two kinds of viewers as an endorsement of both their opinions. Such is patently not the case.

Another serious difficulty with the reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism is the fact that there is no conceivable station or point of view within creation in which created things can overcome and leave behind their dependence of God. From what possible point of view could a created being deny its utter contingency? What station or condition could allow a contingent being suddenly become non-contingent by unifying with God – and how could such unifying take place when “no tie of direct intercourse [binds] the one true God with His creation”? Bahá’u’lláh makes a similar point when He asks, rhetorically, “How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun?” We might also ask, What station or condition allows us to claim that we have become the source of our own being? –

for that, in effect, is what ontological monism claims. Due reflection on these questions rules out ontological monism as an objectively true belief, and this, by implication, negates any possibility of reconciliation with ontological dualism. There is nothing to reconcile with since what *appears* to be ontological monism is really something else.

There is an additional problem with Dr. Momen’s attempted reconciliation of ontological monism and dualism. If his reading of the “*Commentary*” is correct, then it would appear that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assumes that the spiritual condition, nature and understanding of the believer are by themselves sufficient to determine the *correctness* or *truthfulness* of a belief. However, the Writings do not espouse such a subjectivist theory of truth. As Bahá’u’lláh says, “Not every sea hath pearls; not every branch will flower, nor will the nightingale sing thereon.” Indeed, if the Writings upheld a subjectivist theory of truth, if they maintained that standpoint and spiritual condition were sufficient to establish objective truthfulness, then the Writings would not be able to dismiss some peoples’ beliefs as “vain imaginings,” “error,” and “the lowest depths of ignorance and foolishness.” Such rejections would be impossible because every belief is an expression of the condition of the person holding it and would, therefore, be valid. However, the Writings deny that a multiplicity of views means that all views are equally true. This rejection of a subjective theory of truth is illustrated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s denial of the geocentric theory of the solar system. He says, “The eye sees the sun and planets revolving around the earth, whereas *in reality* the sun is stationary, central, and the earth revolves upon its own axis.” He does not deny that the eye *subjectively* sees the sun and planets revolve around the earth, nor does he deny that from the standpoint of the earth this is what we observe. However, he clearly repudiates that this subjective perception is *objectively* true, or, put in another way, he denies that adopting the earth’s standpoint on this issue is adequate to understanding the objective truth of the matter. From this we may conclude that according to the Writings, there are many possible standpoints but not all of these are equally adequate to discovering the true state of affairs. Some will come closer to the actual truth than others.

5) Evolutionary Relativism.

Having rejected Dr. Momen's contention that ontological monism can be reconciled with dualism, our exploration of Bahá'í ontology must examine the second part of his thesis, namely, that relativism can be "a basis for Bahá'í metaphysics" or ontology. According to Dr. Momen, there can be no 'correct' or 'incorrect' interpretation of certain experiences and statements as monist or dualist because

we are unable to make any absolute statements about Reality or the structure of being (i.e. ontology) because any knowledge or understanding that we have of these is relative [to the speaker's standpoint] This may be termed a cognitive or epistemic relativism."

This assertion has a number of problems the first of which lies in the claim that humans are "unable to make any absolute statements about Reality." Is this meant categorically, as an absolute statement? If so, then what are we to make of the assertion "God exists"? This statement is absolute because it is affirmed as true from all possible viewpoints and because there is nothing one could add to it to make it more true than it already is. Especially for a Bahá'í, this declaration cannot be anything less than absolute since 'Abdu'l-Bahá himself provided "proofs and evidences of the existence of God." Furthermore, from the mere fact of God's absolute existence, we can – contrary to Dr. Momen's claim – make indisputable ontological deductions. We must, for example, draw the conclusion that God's ineluctable existence puts Him at the head of a hierarchy of being whose other members are existentially dependent on Him. A similar problem arises with the assertion, "Bahá'u'lláh is the Manifestation of God for this age." Here, too, we have an absolute; for a Bahá'í there is no possible viewpoint from which this statement is not true and there is nothing we could say to make it 'more true' than it is. Denying this absolute, or relativising it, would irreparably undermine the theological foundations of the Bahá'í Faith. These two examples alone make it obvious that Dr. Momen's assertion that "we are unable to make absolute statements about Reality or the structure of being" cannot be taken literally, but must be qualified in some way.

The second problem is the inescapable self-refutation in the claim that there can be no "absolute statements about Reality." This problem – well understood among philosophers – undermines all assertions of absolute relativism. The statement that *all* knowledge about reality is relative is either (a) a self-contradiction because it asserts the existence of one absolute truth, namely, that knowledge is relative, or (b) is itself relative to a viewpoint and, therefore, no more or less true than its contrary. Thus, if relativism sets itself up as a new absolute, it has refuted itself and thus negates what it claims. If, on the other hand, relativism is no more or less true than its contrary, it has lost its point as a guiding principle in assessing all other truth claims, that is, it has lost its privileged status in epistemic matters. One could just as well adopt the opposite standpoint. Since the absolute relativist principle itself may just as well be set aside, it is not sufficient to become the "basis of Bahá'í metaphysics."

A third problem is the vagueness involved in denying "absolute statements about Reality." Does this mean that all views are equally true (or equally false) or does this leave room for the possibility that some views are 'closer' to the complete truth than, that is, more true others? The importance of this choice is not difficult to see. If all views are equally true (or false), then we face difficulties with the doctrine of "progressive revelation" which teaches that although human knowledge will never be complete or perfect, it is, in fact, expanding and improving through the process of intellectual and spiritual evolution. Throughout this evolutionary process guided by successive Manifestations, humankind acquires ever more accurate, more sophisticated understanding of the truth about itself, the universe and the realms of the spirit. Indeed, making progress, getting closer to the truth than before, improving the quantity and the quality of the knowledge we have inherited from our ancestors, is one of our divinely assigned duties. That is why Bahá'u'lláh informs us that "All men have been created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization." This injunction implicitly contains a view we may call "*evolutionary relativism*" which asserts that humankind acquires ever more accurate understandings of the truth. Progress is real, – even though we shall never possess absolutely complete and final truth.

However, if we categorically deny "absolute statements about Reality", then all views regardless of what stage of evolution they come from, are equally correct or false. None is more or less true than any other. From this it follows that there can be no such thing as progress or an "ever-advancing civilization" or even "progressive revelation" because no view, no knowledge can be more 'advanced' than any other view. All are equally valid inasmuch as all are dependent on a particular and inherently limited and incomplete point of view. Since all are limited, none can claim superiority or privilege. It is almost self-evident that such an unqualified relativism undermines one of the fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith.

A fourth difficulty besetting the "cognitive or epistemic relativism" apparently advocated by Dr. Momen concerns the matter of epistemic privilege. The fundamental principle of cognitive relativism is rejection of any viewpoint as privileged over any other. Inasmuch as all points of view are influenced and limited by the observer's personality, spiritual condition and historical and cultural situation, no viewpoint is inherently superior to any other or able to pass judgement on it. There is no absolute standard; no created thing can attain a station with an absolute 'God's

eye' view of 'things-as-they-are-in-themselves-under-all-conditions.' Given these premises, it becomes clear that an unqualified cognitive relativism, leaves no choice but to accept that ontological monism and dualism – indeed, all metaphysical statements – are equally true from their own points of view. It also makes it impossible to maintain that any metaphysical or ontological assertion is even more true, more advanced or “progressive” than any other.

An unqualified cognitive relativism is logically incompatible with the Bahá'í Writings because the Manifestation and His officially appointed interpreter do, in fact, have absolute cognitive privilege. None but the Manifestations can claim to be “the perfectly polished mirror[s]” Who reflect “the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.” For this reason only a non-Bahá'í can adopt an unqualified cognitive relativism vis-à-vis the Manifestations because only a non-Bahá'í can deny or even question the special epistemological status of what Manifestations say. While to a believer the Manifestation speaks the word of God, to an absolute cognitive relativist, He is merely another person expressing – without any special authority – yet another opinion. Such a view is logically irreconcilable with any form of revealed religion. If the statements of the Buddha, or Christ or Mohammed are not somehow special or privileged, there is no special rationale for following Them – a conclusion that demonstrates that revealed religion can only accept a qualified cognitive relativism.

The Manifestation's absolute cognitive privilege and authority are the reasons why we modify our personal and collective understandings to be in harmony with His pronouncements, or at least not to offend against them. We do so with the conviction that by adapting our views to those of the Manifestation, we achieve better correspondence with the truth than we do by relying on human intellect alone. Making such adaptations involves implicit acceptance of the notion that there exists an absolute truth that we can know with varying degrees of accuracy. In short, not all versions of the truth are equally accurate or truthful. Such a view is, of course, incompatible with absolute relativism which is bound by its own logic to deny that any intellectual or spiritual progress takes place and to assert that all statements are equally true – or false. This position is logically incompatible with Bahá'u'lláh's view that we are created to “carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization” since the question of who is 'advanced' has no objective answer.

It may be argued that while the statements of the Manifestations are privileged, human interpretations of these statements are not. In other words, relativism applies at the level of humans not Manifestations. Thus, all human understandings of what the Manifestation says are equally valid, true or accurate. Unfortunately, this position leads directly to the problem of vacuousness: if all readings are equally true, then – because some readings contradict others – none are. Consequently, it becomes impossible to teach the Writings or even to discuss them since – all interpretations being equally accurate – no one knows what the Writings actually say. The Writings could mean anything. In that case, what is the point of a person 'deepening' or engaging in scholarship? What could careful study of the Writings possibly contribute except another set of opinions no better or worse than any others? Indeed, what is the point of becoming a Bahá'í or offering the Faith's teachings as a solution to a wide variety of world problems if no one knows what the Writings 'really' mean? Obviously, the very *raison d'être* of the Bahá'í Faith is removed by an unqualified cognitive relativism.

The problem of vacuousness makes it necessary to find some means by which we can distinguish various degrees of truthfulness without infringing on every Bahá'í's right to interpret the Writings for him or herself and thereby violating the principle of “unity in diversity.” In other words, how can we balance the need for diversity with the need for a certain doctrinal unity or cohesion? It is my belief that the Bahá'í community has already discovered and adopted a simple but workable mechanism for achieving this aim: negative gate-keeping. Any understanding of the Writings is acceptable if it is not 'forbidden.' By 'forbidden' we mean factually or logically inconsistent with guidance from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice and with the letter and spirit of the Sacred Text. This standard allows maximum room for variant readings and thereby protects the individual investigation of truth. A person may hold any truth he or she finds spiritually satisfying, provided it is not 'forbidden.' The burden of proof always falls on those who disagree with an opinion to show how it violates the guidance provided by the Writings or the Administrative Order. By adopting negative gate-keeping, Bahá'ís have, in fact, adopted a *qualified relativism* inasmuch as negative gate-keeping stipulates that within the framework provided by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, all understandings that are not forbidden are equally valid or true.

The fifth problem vis-à-vis relativism is Dr. Momen's interpretation of Shoghi Effendi's statement that Bahá'í Faith's “teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final.” As illustrated by this quote, the context of these claims is progressive revelation. However, with this teaching it is important to remember that religious truth has two aspects, a “golden core” of eternal teachings that is continuous and absolute through many revelations – though expressed in different forms – and the time-adapted aspect that changes during humankind's evolution. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time.” The crucial point here is that it is the latter, “material ordinances” of religious truth that are relative to time and circumstance, not the inner unconditionally valid, “golden

core” which is “not subject to change.” Let us take an example. One teaching of this “golden core” is the “law of love” promulgated by all the prophets and Manifestations. The essential principle of this law is always the same no matter from what station we view it; moreover, it is true whether we have an early and very simple understanding of it, or whether our understanding has the sophistication necessary in the modern world. While we can find new applications of the “law of love”, there is in fact nothing we can add to this principle to make it ‘more true’ than before. A similar argument holds for the “Law Attraction, Harmony and Unity”: though it has many applications, it means the same from each point of view and nothing can be added to it to make it ‘more true’ than it already is. Because these “essential ordinances” of religion are not relative, it follows that only a qualified relativism can apply to the Bahá’í Writings.

6) The First Great Ontological Question

Because the Bahá’í Writings embody an explicit and implicit ontology, they are able to answer one of the most fundamental ontological questions: ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ In answering this basic question, the Writings also answer a host of supplementary questions and thereby lay out an entire ontological schema for future exploration and development.

The first great ontological question, “Why is there anything at all rather than nothing?”, grows out of a sense of the mysteriousness and contingency of existence, out of the feeling that not only do things not have to be the way they are, but that they do not have to be at all. Reflecting upon such feelings may lead to the conclusion that they simply develop from a sense of personal vulnerability and contingency, and that there is no genuine objective meaning to the question when applied to the universe as a whole: it just is and that’s all we can say. The problem with this response is that it violates our daily experience and scientific knowledge. Nothing we know simply is. Whatever we know, from frogs and rocking chairs to electrons, originates from something that is not itself and something pre-existent: nothing emerges into existence from absolute nothingness. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “absolute nothingness cannot find existence.”

6.1) ‘To Be’ Means ‘to be Caused’ (With One Exception).

Unlike God, the created universe lacks “essential preexistence . . . which is not preceded by a cause,” and, therefore lacks ontological self-sufficiency and independence. In the Aristotelian language used so often throughout the Writings, the universe cannot be its own material, efficient, formal and final cause. Lacking ontological independence, the created universe, like every one of its contents, requires a creator or pre-existing cause since according to Bahá’u’lláh, “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.”

Already at this point several far-reaching ontological and metaphysical issues come to light. First, the Writings have provided at least a partial answer to the question, ‘What does it mean ‘to be’?’ According to them, among other things, ‘to be’ means to be caused and to be contingent, that is, to require a pre-existent and external cause. Only God is existentially “Self-sufficient” and independent or “sanctified from” all other entities. From this it follows that ‘to be’ also means to be part of a causal chain or network, to be essentially connected to other entities or acts in a community of predecessors that extends through time, and, to varying degrees conditions, to its successors. This conclusion is confirmed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he says,

all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the *causes of the existence development and growth of created beings*. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association.

In light of these statements, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Bahá’í Writings are committed to a causal ontology. Indeed, Bahá’u’lláh removes any doubt on this issue in His declaration that “All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.” The categorical “all” leaves no room for exceptions. As if further clarification were needed, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that “*there could be no effect without a cause preceding it*” and that “an effect without a cause [is] . . . impossible; that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction.” The idea that every effect must have a cause is also used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to prove the existence of God:

Such process of causation goes on, and to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly absurd. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him who is the Ever-Living, the All-Powerful, who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause.

Since God is “Self-dependent”, only God can be said to be His own cause; all other beings need causes that are other than and prior to themselves. Here again we encounter what we have called the ‘bedrock principle’ of Bahá’í ontology – the absolute distinction between God Who has “essential preexistence” and the creation which does not

and therefore, requires a Creator or “Prime Mover” in order to be. This distinction reinforces the Bahá’í Writings’ commitment to some form of ontological dualism.

The causal ontology to which the Writings are committed has important consequences for the relationship between science and religion, most particularly for the relationship between religion and those interpretations of quantum physics which reject the classical notion of causality as presented by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá . Their statements indicate that despite the appearance of non-causality at the sub-atomic level, we will eventually find “hidden variables” or other factors that allow us to devise causal explanations of microcosmic events. At the very least, it seems clear that the causal ontology requires the Writings to agree with Einstein that the ‘Copenhagen Interpretation’ of quantum reality – despite its predictive successes – is inherently incomplete. Science awaits new developments before it can provide an accurate, that is, causal picture of events at the microcosmic level.

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

Let us now turn our attention to the question, ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ The Bahá’í Writings provide two, possibly three answers to this question. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides one answer when he says that,

a creator without a creature is impossible, a provider without those provided for cannot be conceived; for all the divine names and attributes *demand* the existence of beings. If we could imagine a time when no beings existed, this imagination would be the denial of the Divinity of God.

Elsewhere, he says,

The names the Powerful, the Living, the Provider, the Creator *require and necessitate* the existence of creatures. If there were no creatures, Creator would be meaningless. If there were none to provide for, we could not think of the Provider. If there were no life, the Living would be beyond the power of conception. Therefore, all the names and attributes of God *require* the existence of objects or creatures upon which they have been bestowed and in which they have become manifest.

These statements clearly affirm the idea that there is something rather than nothing because God’s perfection includes the title or name of ‘Creator’ which, in turn, “require[s]” or “demand[s]” a creation. Without a creation, God would lack the attribute of ‘Creator’, a deficiency that is not conceivable in “the Exalted, the Supreme”. This line of reasoning, which we might call the argument from divine perfection, basically states that creation or ‘something’ exists as a logical and, therefore, necessary consequence of God’s perfect nature. Creation exists because God is perfect; God’s own perfection makes creation unavoidable since, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, without creation, the term “Creator would be meaningless.”

7.1) God’s Free Will and Creation.

As is so often the case in ontology, this answer raises further questions of its own. If a “creator without a creature *is impossible*”, and if the name ‘Creator’ “require[s]” or “demands” a creation lest that name be “meaningless”, then we are faced with the question of how to understand the statement that God is “is powerful to do as He willeth.” Is God somehow constrained, and if so, by what? Could one argue that the word “impossible”, suggests that God is limited by the laws of logic, and if so, how are we to understand such a claim? Furthermore, how can anything be required or demanded of God?

One possible answer is that God’s unconstrained will is of such a nature as to preclude human beings from ever understanding this apparent contradiction, which believers must accept without resolution. Given the inherent limitations of understanding on the human plane, this is the best we can do and we must learn to live humbly with the situation. There is nothing necessarily irrational about this stance – known as moderate rationalism – since recognising the limits of logic is not in and of itself illogical. Another possible way of resolving the apparent contradiction is to say that God has committed Himself to follow the laws of reason that He has established or willed into being. Thus, if God is constrained, He is constrained only by Himself and His own commitments – which is, in effect, leaves God doing as He wills. The same holds true for us: when no one and nothing constrains us but ourselves and our chosen commitments, we are essentially exercising our freedom. Therefore, we may conclude that because God is free, He freely wills His own perfection and the creation that follows as a consequence. Creation is ‘required’ or ‘demanded’ of God only insofar as He freely instituted and committed Himself to the laws of reason which make creation ‘necessary’. In this way we may solve the question of how God’s creation can be both necessary and free at the same time: God wills the laws of reason into being and then commits Himself to them. In this approach, freedom and necessity have become one since God freely accepts the necessity He imposes upon, ‘demand’ or ‘requires’ of Himself.

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

A second reason why there is something rather than nothing is found in Bahá'u'lláh's approving use of the Islamic tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure. I *wished to be made known*, and thus I called creation into being in order *that I might be known*." In his commentary on the Islamic tradition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to "the purpose of creation, which is the *knowledge* of Him Who is the Eternal Truth." Allusions to this tradition are frequent in the Bahá'í Writings. For example, the Noonday Prayer presents the same idea from the human perspective, stating, "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to *know Thee* and to worship Thee." In a similar vein, Bahá'u'lláh declares, "Wishing to *reveal Thyself*, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds, and didst choose Man above all Thy creatures, and didst make Him a sign of both of these worlds."

What all of these passages have in common is that God "wishes to be known."

The fact that it is God's wish is worthy of special attention because it emphasises that if creation is necessary, it is a freely chosen necessity imposed upon God by Himself and no one or nothing else. This leaves us with the question, "Why is being known so important to God? If God is the "the Self-Sufficing," why does He wish to be known?" One possible reply is that we are unable to answer these questions because God's will is unknowable to us: "He hath been and will ever remain inscrutable unto all men." Moreover, the mere fact God wishes it so should be sufficient for us even if we remain necessarily ignorant of the motivation for this wish. Another possible answer relates to God's completion or perfection. Without beings to know Him, God exists purely as a subject and thus lacks being as an object. Since God cannot have any deficiency, He must – according to the logical rules He has willed and to which He has freely committed Himself – also exist as an object of knowledge in creations that are fundamentally different than He.

9) The Ontological Principle of Perfection and Plenitude.

It might be argued that only the Manifestation and, perhaps, humankind are needed for God to be known and to "reveal [Himself]" but such a notion seems to violate the principle that God's creation is "perfect and comprehensive." This seemingly simple phrase conveys a very powerful idea, namely, that in Bahá'í ontology, the principles of perfection and plenitude are at work. In other words, in itself creation is not only perfect but also 'fills up' all possible niches of being. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

Know that the order and the *perfection* of the whole universe *require* that existence should appear in *numberless forms*. For existing beings could not be embodied in only one degree, one station, one kind, one species and one class; undoubtedly, the difference of degrees and distinction of forms, and the variety of genus and species, are necessary--that is to say, the degree of mineral, vegetable, animal substances, and of man, are inevitable; for the world could not be arranged, adorned, organized and perfected with man alone.

Stated succinctly, God has committed Himself to an ontological logic of perfection and plenitude within creation – and the reason for this is so that He might be 'known' or 'revealed' most completely, perfectly, without limit throughout all the degrees of being and in each being and kind of being according to its appropriate degree. According to Bahá'u'lláh,

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.

Each thing according to its nature knows God's revelation of Himself: "How resplendent the luminaries of *knowledge* that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop!" In a similar vein, Bahá'u'lláh notes that "Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the *knowledge* of God." Moreover, the Writings state that without the revelation of God through His attributes, existence is not even possible: "but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist."

From this, we may conclude that 'to be' is to be "expressive of the knowledge of God" to one degree or another. In other words, Bahá'í ontology correlates 'being' and 'knowledge', although it does not seem to correlate 'being and *conscious* knowledge; this latter knowledge is limited to humankind. This, as we shall see in the next section, gives Bahá'í ontology an idealist character.

10) The Qualified Idealist Tendency in Bahá'í Ontology.

Given that conscious or unconscious, knowledge of God is *the sine qua non* of existence, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology has a strong idealist tendency. To those familiar with the history of western philosophy, this idea is rather reminiscent of Bishop Berkeley's principle of "esse est percipi", 'to be is to be perceived', because here, too, being and perception or knowledge are correlated. The Writings, of course, vary Berkeley's principle, stating, in effect, that 'to be is to know or perceive God' in a manner appropriate to one's station. In this scheme, existence is not, as is the case in most metaphysics and ontologies, a pre-requisite for knowledge or perception, but rather, is coterminous or necessarily correlated with it. There can be no existence without such knowledge. We might be able to distinguish the two intellectually, but cannot separate them in actuality.

The belief that being requires knowledge of God leads to some rather interesting ontological questions. For example, in the case of human beings who are able to expand their knowledge of God through attention to the divine teachings, could one say that deeper knowledge of God means a more or higher degree of being? Is existence itself relative in some sense? Several statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggest that such might be the case; he says, for instance, "The second proposition is that existence and nonexistence are both relative." These words suggest there is a great deal more for us to explore on this issue.

Because knowledge of God and existence are necessarily correlated, it is virtually impossible to avoid the question, 'In what does this knowledge or perception of God's attribute consist?' >From previously quoted passages, we note that all things reflect "the names and attributes of God." In other words they exist as a unique repetition of God's qualities; they are, as the Writings, say, a "testimony", a reflection which returns to God what God originally bestowed: "all things, in their inmost reality, *testify* to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, *indicateth*, and is *expressive* of, the knowledge of God." In a sense, every entity not only illustrates the "return to God", but actually, in its very being, *is* the return to God. If it did not 'testify' to God's bounty, it would not actually exist. Another way of putting this is to say at every moment an entity's act of being is the "arc of descent" and the "arc of ascent" in a manner appropriate to the kind of being it is. Descent and ascent are really aspects of a single ontological process constituting at every instant an entity's complete act of being and were this process to stop, the entity would cease to exist. As we shall see again later, in Bahá'í ontology, to be is to become.

Another indicator of the idealist tendency in Bahá'í ontology may be seen in the following quotation:

Even ethereal matter, the forces of which are said in physics to be heat, light, electricity and magnetism, is an *intellectual reality*, and is not sensible. In the same way, nature, also, in its essence is an intellectual reality and is not sensible; the human spirit is an intellectual, not sensible reality. In explaining these intellectual realities, one is obliged to express them by sensible figures because *in exterior existence there is nothing that is not material*.

The import of this statement is that what we perceive physically or in nature is the outward expression of an inward "intellectual reality," an essence, or, in Platonic terms, an Idea. Like the Pillar of Fire in *Exodus*, every physical thing "is an intellectual reality which is expressed by a sensible image." This is strikingly similar to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that

the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye.

The common feature of these quotations is that the real world is a shadow, a reflection, an image, an outer expression of an original or originating "intellectual reality" that is, ontologically speaking, 'above' it. The existence of this ontologically higher reality is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá so often refers to the material world as the "nether" world, realm or life.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, we hasten to add that in Bahá'í ontology – unlike Platonic ontology – this does not imply an absolute devaluation of the "nether" realm. The "nether" world is devalued *therapeutically* not ontologically, that is, it is devalued to remind us that our ultimate destiny is not on the material plane, though our passage through this plane is a necessary part of the unfolding of our being. Thus, this "nether" world is ontologically derivative but nonetheless necessary and is only relatively not absolutely devalued. We shall touch on this subject again later in another context.

However, let us return to our subject of the idealist tendency in Bahá'í ontology. 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides yet another, highly philosophically dense passage. It shall be quoted in its entirety although only parts of it concern us here.

Instead of that this general existence is one of the accidents which penetrate the reality of beings, and the qualities of beings are the essence. This accidental existence, which is dependent on beings, is like other properties of things which depend on them. It is an accident among accidents, and certainly that which is the essence is superior to that which is the accident. For the essence is the origin, and the accident is the consequence; the essence is dependent on itself, and the accident is dependent on something else--that is to say, it needs an essence upon which to depend.

Using abstract philosophical concepts and language first employed by Plato and Aristotle, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains what the previous quotations in this section have already stated. Existence in this material, “nether” world is an accident, that is, a contingency that is ontologically “dependent on beings”, that is, on the “reality of beings” or essences. This existence depends on essences in the same way as all other properties, qualities or attributes of things depend on essences. The passage then makes clear that the essence is “the origin” and that “nether” worldly existence is the “consequence,” a result or derivative of the origin. Moreover, he says in a manner reminiscent of both Plato and Aristotle, that “the essence is dependent on itself,” – the Aristotelian definition of a ‘substance’ – meaning, in this context, that it does not require the “nether” worldly accident to exist. The “nether” worldly accident however, depends on the essence.

The fact that the Kingdom is described as the “real world” and the essences are described as the “origin” of this “nether” reality and as “superior,” to it shows that Bahá’í ontology has an idealist tendency, that is, a tendency towards the position that “reality is fundamentally mental in nature.” By “mental in nature” we should understand ‘non-material.’ We hasten to add at this point that this idealistic tendency is highly qualified. Just as the arcs of ascent or descent by themselves do not constitute the whole act of being, so the idealist tendency by itself does not define or constitute Bahá’í ontology.

10.1) The Arc of Descent and the Arc of Ascent.

This Platonic idealist tendency in which the “nether” world is somehow an image, shadow, or accident of the essences of the Kingdom, is the counterpart of the arc of descent, in which things proceed from the ideal to the lower, material realm. The corresponding arc of ascent is Aristotelian insofar as entities proceed towards, or ‘return’ to the original perfection by actualising their intrinsic potentials through real experience and thus becoming ‘all they can be.’ They lose an ideal, untested perfection – the inexperienced purity of childhood - a more practical perfection through their experience in the “nether” realm. This is the basic idea implicit in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that through bodily life in the “nether” world, the human spirit will “acquire perfection.” Thus, the descent is not entirely a loss since an entity’s act of being is augmented by this process. In a different context, these ideas will be encountered again later in this paper. At this point it suffices to conclude that Bahá’í ontology espouses a qualified idealism.

One might, of course, inquire as to why call it a ‘qualified idealism’ instead of a qualified ‘realism.’ There is a clear cut answer to this question. The fact is, the ontological process begins ultimately with God but more immediately in the Kingdom, with the essences which are the origins of the materially existing accidents. Moreover, the beginning – which ultimately is God – is also the end towards which entities strive in the ‘return’. Thus, the ideal has a certain ontological priority in Bahá’í ontology, that is, the beginning and sought after end are ideal. God is our ultimate source and is ultimately, what all things seek; in the language of Aristotle He is not just the source but also the universal “object of desire.”

11) The Two-Fold Structure of Being.

Further reflection shows that there is a significant difference between Berkeley’s “esse est percipi” and the Bahá’í position insofar as Berkeley’s view makes existence fundamentally passive: “to be is to be perceived” by someone else, that is, God. This is also true in Bahá’í ontology – how, after all could something exist without being known by the “All-Knowing”? – but this does not describe the situation completely. Being also requires an active response from that which is known; it must also actively express its knowledge of God in a manner appropriate to its nature and station. This expression is also a necessary correlate of its act of being. In other words, being has a correlative, two-fold structure: an entity *is* its particular reception *and* expression of the divine attributes. We might also say that a being is structured of a combination of receptivity – sometimes mistakenly thought of as ‘passivity’ – and activity or expression. Both are necessary for a thing ‘to be’; neither one by itself is sufficient to form ‘a being’. Though in the case of non-human entities, reception and mere reflection, that is, unconscious “testimony” is sufficient for the act of being, such is not the case for human kind. As the Noonday Prayer demonstrates, humans, endowed with consciousness and free will were created to “know Thee and to *worship* Thee.” In other words, the ontological structure of humankind is somewhat different because our very act of being lies in awareness or knowledge of the signs of God as well as reflecting them *consciously and freely* in an act of worship. The act of human being has the same structure as other acts of being but not the same content.

12) A Hierarchical Ontology: Degrees of Existence

Another conclusion we may draw is that Bahá'í ontology includes the concept of “degrees of existence” or “degrees of being.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “the differences in the degrees of existence of creatures is one of the necessities of existence, which unfolds itself in infinite forms.” Elsewhere he states that “although the degrees of being are various, yet all are good,” meaning that each being and each kind of being has its appropriate place (station) and properly performs its tasks as it “participateth in a coherent whole.”

The use of the word “degrees” – as opposed to ‘kinds’ – is significant because implicit in the concept of “degrees of being” is the concept of a hierarchy. Although vis-à-vis itself, everything is fully real, in relationship to other entities, some things are more or less real, that is, possess more or less existence or being. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explicitly indicates that a Bahá'í ontology is a hierarchical ontology in which an entity, though good and created perfect in its own degree, may be superior or inferior to beings in other degrees.

As the degrees of existence are different and various, *some beings are higher in the scale than others*. Therefore, it is by the will and wish of God that some creatures are chosen for the *highest degree*, as man, and some others are placed in the *middle degree*, as the vegetable, and some are left in the *lowest degree*, like the mineral.

In these words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá basically outlines a hierarchy or scale of being, with humankind at the top and the mineral at the bottom. This idea is emphasised when he says that “the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence.” In short, humankind has a greater degree of being than matter, though of course, in relationship to God Who not only has the supreme degree of being but also transcends being itself, any degree of being possessed by humankind “is an illusion.”

At this point, we are left with a rather obvious question: how one thing can be ‘more real’ or have ‘more being’ than another? One possible answer is that the degree of being is determined by the capacity to receive and express the divine attributes and names. As already noted, Bahá'u'lláh tells us that “[w]hatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God” and that “Each [entity] according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God.” Humankind possesses this receptive and reflective capacity “[t]o a supreme degree” because “in [humankind] are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed.” From the standpoint of their superior receptive and expressive capacity, humans are more real than other entities, which is why man is the noblest and most perfect of all created things” and why he “excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory.”

However, in the case of humankind, our degree of being or existence has two aspects. First, there is our natural degree or station as beings consciously able “to know and worship” the Divine, and as beings “at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light.” Second, there is our existential degree of being, the degree we attain by the free choices we make and our consequent “nearness to God” which seems to determine how much of the divine bounties or attributes we can receive and reflect. Above all, we must consciously choose to love God, for if we do not, we cannot receive and reflect God’s bounties: “O SON OF BEING! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee.”

These ideas leave little choice but to conclude that we are real, or, possess being to the degree that we make ourselves available to receive God’s attributes and to express or reflect them. Another way of stating this is to say that the degree of existence or reality possessed by human beings is variable and subject to our free choice. Spiritually, we can be as real as we choose to be. Indeed, even the next life reflects degrees or a hierarchy of being. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “in the next life, those deprived of God’s favour may “fall[] into the lowest degrees of existence. He who is deprived of these divine favors, although he continues after death, is considered as dead by the people of truth.” In other words, for the “people of truth”, those who lack the divine bounties are “dead”; to them, these ‘dead’ have no degree of being or reality at all.

13) A Qualified Relativist Ontology.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s foregoing statement about some beings as “higher in the scale than others” points to another important characteristic of Bahá'í ontology: in regards to being or existence, it is a relativist ontology with the degree of existence possessed by any entity being relative to its position in the hierarchy of being. At the top of the “scale” of being is God, Who alone is existentially independent or “Self-Subsistent.” Indeed, relative to or ‘in comparison’ to God, Who is the only absolutely real and independent ‘entity’, all other things are ‘unreal.’ Quite categorically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that “the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion.” Even more strongly, he says, “the existence of beings in comparison with the existence of God is but illusion and *nothingness*.”

A similar relationship holds between humankind and matter: “the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence.” It is, nevertheless, important to remember that relative to itself, or, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it, “in its own condition” the mineral possesses complete and adequate existence, though such is not the case vis-à-vis humankind: “in relation to man it is nothingness.” Similarly, as we have already seen, in the Abhá Kingdom, those who are “deprived of [God’s] divine favours” are “dead” in relationship to the “people of truth.” In other words, even spiritual states of ‘life’ and ‘death’ are relative to or ‘in comparison’ to other states of being. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá succinctly generalises the whole issue by saying, “existence and nonexistence are both relative.”

The relativity of existence and nonexistence has important consequences for Bahá’í ontology because it denies any form of *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of absolute nothing, which is a key doctrinal point for almost all Christians and Muslims. Indeed, on this very matter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness. For absolute nothingness cannot find existence, as it has not the capacity of existence.

Since things do not literally come into existence from nothing, we cannot take literally Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that we were “called into being” by God “out of utter nothingness.” Given ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s qualification, the latter phrase obviously intends the phrase “utter nothingness” relative or in comparison to God and does not introduce the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* into Bahá’í ontology. In light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements, Bahá’ís would have to qualify the Christian and Muslim belief by adding that this ‘nothing’ is a ‘nothing relative to God’ but – since there has always been a creation of some kind – it is not an absolute nothing which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dismisses as “inconceivable.”

At this point, a crucial observation must be made at this point. What we have here is an ontological relativism in which an entity’s degree of being, though absolute in regards to itself, is relative to its place on the hierarchy of being. However, it is a qualified not a radical or “totalistic” relativist ontology because it has an absolute reference point – God – Who is causally independent, Whose being is absolute and beyond degrees, and by Whom all other degrees of existence are determined. God gives the hierarchy or “chain” of beings an absolute foundation, just as in physics the absolute speed of light gives relativity an absolute foundation. His absolute presence prevents “totalistic” ontological relativism in which everything without exception depends on its relationships to everything else for its existence and degree of being. In short, the ontological relativism in the Bahá’í Writings is qualified by the presence of an absolute that is entirely beyond relative relationships.

14) A Substantialist Ontology.

In this discussion of the degrees of existence of things, it is important to understand that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not saying that things are unreal in any absolute sense for that would be falling into the very trap he wishes us to avoid. He categorically rejects as “erroneous” the teachings of

“[c]ertain sophists [who] think that existence is an illusion, that each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence. . . [and that] the existence of beings is like a mirage or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror, which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality.”

When we examine this statement philosophically, we must, to avoid confusion, distinguish between the mirage’s existence as a mirage – which is quite real as an atmospheric phenomenon, and the mirage’s appearance as something else which is not real at all. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the nature of real things refers to the mirage’s appearance as something else, as something deceptive and false such as a caravan travelling through the sky or a shadow on the ground. In this case, appearance and reality are in conflict; what we see is not what we get because, while the mirage in itself is real, the illusory caravan (or a shadow) “has no material existence, *no substance*.” Therefore, it is not real. This suggests that in Bahá’í ontology to be real means to have a substance of some kind.

In Bahá’í ontology there are many kinds of substance in addition to material substance. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the “living substance” from which humankind is created, and says that the rational soul and spirit are the substance whereas the body is the accident. Even God seems to have a substance of some kind, for according to Bahá’u’lláh, the spiritual nature of the Manifestation is “born of the substance of God Himself.” Thus we may conclude that in Bahá’í ontology, to be real, to exist means to have or be a substance of some kind. What illusions and mirages represent lacks substance and is, therefore, not real.

We hasten to add at this juncture that a substantialist ontology is not necessarily static. After all, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “movement is necessary to existence, which is either growing or declining.” What the Writings call ‘substance’ may – except in the case of God – also be thought of as a process.

15) A Qualified Realist Ontology

If we ask ourselves what it means to have a substance and then reflect on the examples of substance given in the Writings, it becomes clear that the least possible meaning of substance is to exist independently of a perceiver. In other words, whatever has a substance exists whether or not it is perceived by anyone other than God; the converse is also true: whatever exists independently of perceivers has or is a substance. This is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example of the mirage is so important. Although the mirage-in-itself is real and has substance as an atmospheric phenomenon, what it portrays exists only in the mind of the perceiver and is completely dependent on the interpretation of the perceiver for its existence. Rather than a caravan, one might have seen a large many-winged bird, or a long ship flying through the sky and there would be way to ‘prove’ one viewpoint or another. The content or appearance, of the mirage exists only in the perceiver’s mind. It has no substance. And this brings us to the heart of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement: unlike the appearance of a mirage or an illusion, what is real, what exists, does not depend on the perceiver for its being. It exists independently of the observer; unlike the mirage or the illusion, it is not simply a product of the observer’s mind. This is why Bahá’í ontology is fundamentally a realist ontology. Whatever is, not only has or is substance, but is independently of observers. Because such is not the case with illusions, the Writings firmly reject the notion that “existence is an illusion.” Bahá’í ontology denies the idea that creation is or could be absolute *maya*, or illusion, or, as postulated by Descartes’ story of the demon, a deception, delusion or fantasy.

Another way of expressing this idea is to say that that Bahá’í ontology rejects phenomenalism, “the doctrine that physical objects are reducible to sensory experiences” or that empirical statements correspond only to “mental appearances.” Real things are more than superficial sensible or mental appearances; they possess an underlying reality, a substrate or substance as an emanation of the divine Will. Moreover, unlike ‘pure phenomena’ or mere “mental appearances, real things exist whether or not they are perceived.

Of course, as is sometimes the case, Bahá’í ontology preserves the kernel of truth in some of the doctrines it rejects. In the case of phenomenalism, it keeps the idea that things are known by their qualities or attributes. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes,

Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes, of objects, while the identity, or reality, of them remains hidden.

He elaborates by saying,

Its [a flower’s] external appearance and manifest attributes are knowable; but the inner being, the *underlying reality or intrinsic identity*, is still beyond the ken and perception of our human powers.

What is of vital importance in these quotes is that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not use the fact that things are known by their attributes to reject the concept of a hidden “underlying reality or intrinsic identity.” In fact, he affirms their existence and, thereby, rejects the complete reduction of things to their qualities. There is always more to an entity than appears to us.

It may be objected at this point that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directly refers to the world as a mirage:

“Know ye that the world is even as a mirage rising over the sands.” However, reading the subsequent sentences shows that he is speaking therapeutically because he wants to awaken us to the fact that this material world is neither the only nor the greatest world we shall inhabit. He denigrates this world so that we will raise our sight to God. In other words, these statements are ethical and therapeutical rather than ontological. They are not intended to deny the reality of the world as such but rather to show that we can find no final spiritual satisfaction in the world of matter.

The realist nature of Bahá’í ontology is, of course, also plainly evident in the doctrine that all things are created by God and therefore depend for their existence on Him and not on any human observer. Since real things are metaphysically grounded in the actuality of God’s creative act, whatever is real has an absolutely real substrate or substance of some kind. For this reason alone it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bahá’í ontology is a realist ontology which accepts the reality of the world because the metaphysical grounding of the world lies in the divine creative act and the ceaseless outpouring of God’s creative power. In other words, Bahá’í ontology is realist not only because each entity has in itself at least a minimal degree of reality as a divine emanation, but also because, as God’s creation, reality exists independently of human perception.

At this point it is vital to avoid a serious misunderstanding. The claim that Bahá'í ontology is fundamentally realist does not mean that human beings simply perceive reality without interpreting it. The fact that we do interpret reality encourages us to re-introduce a traditional distinction between first nature or reality as made by God and second nature, the personal, social and cultural superstructure which humans have developed from their various interpretations of and work with first nature. For example, a sculptor such as Michelangelo takes a piece of marble – first nature – and interprets it to be the unrealised form of “David” which – the second nature – he then reveals through his labour. This second nature is culturally developed over centuries during which “David” becomes one of the exemplary pieces of sculptural art. Second nature is indeed, man-made reality, and is, therefore, immediately dependent on humankind for its existence and proximately dependent on first nature. Thus, when we say that in Bahá'í ontology reality exists independently of human perception, we refer to first nature as created by God, and not to second nature. Naturally we can expect a certain amount of debate about where first nature ends and second nature begins, as for example, on the subject of ‘sex’ as given by first nature and ‘gender’ which is first nature sex as interpreted by humankind. The lines between the two may be subject to debate.

Having established the fundamentally realist nature of Bahá'í ontology, it is now necessary to qualify it in some respects. The most obvious reason for such qualification is that of all beings are only relatively real vis-à-vis God Who is the only absolutely real and non-contingent being. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Therefore, though the world of contingency exists, *in relation to the existence of God* it is nonexistent and nothingness.” In other words, the reality of anything except God is qualified by the fact that it is not fully real vis-à-vis God and not vis-à-vis entities that are higher in the “scale of existence.”

For example, the existence of the mineral *in comparison* with that of man is nonexistence, for when man is apparently annihilated, his body becomes mineral; but the *mineral has existence in the mineral world*. Therefore, it is evident that earth, in relation to the existence of man, is nonexistent, and its existence is illusory; but in relation to the mineral it exists.

This passage leads to several conclusions. First, we can deduce that a mineral is both real – in regards to itself – and relatively unreal in regards to humankind. It is also real insofar as it does not depend on anyone save God for its being since only God has the power to bestow being.

Second, it follows that the various kingdoms of God – the mineral, vegetable, animal and human – are not only real but have inherent essential differences that reflect the divinely decreed “degrees of existence.” These degrees are ontologically real in themselves and are not the product of human interpretation (second nature) and subsequently developed conventions or constructions. This reinforces the realist foundations of Bahá'í ontology. However, the realism is qualified inasmuch as the reality of things is limited in regards to God and higher beings.

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

As just above, the kingdoms and degrees of existence possess inherent or essential differences, so that the lower is incapable of comprehending the higher, which possesses all of the powers of the lower in addition to its own unique capacities. Since these differences are inherent, they are original and essential, and therefore, not second nature, that is, they are not the product of human interpretation or perception. They belong to first, divinely created nature.

If the various kingdoms and degrees of existence possess inherent or essential differences and if each entity has a hidden “reality,” then it is difficult to avoid the judgement that the Bahá'í Writings uphold a qualified essentialism, or conversely, reject the basic nominalist principle that entities possess no real essences other than humanly constructed ‘nominal essences’ of second nature. These latter, are, in effect, no more than names and labels we apply at our convenience to serve our purposes. A survey of the Writings shows that they repudiate this view.

In the first place, the Writings are so packed with references to the essences of things there is no reasonable doubt that the Writings accept their existence. For example, in *The Kitab-i-Iqan* Bahá'u'lláh tells us that “the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the *essence of all created things*, in such wise that in each and *every thing* [is] a door of knowledge.” In *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, we are informed that “it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God.” The Writings specifically mention that each of the following has an essence: God; the human soul; humankind; belief in Divine Unity; justice; “all created things” beauty; species of living things; truth; religion; “this new age”; “existence” and the spirit. These references to the essence are even more wide-spread once we realise that such phrases as “inmost reality”; “the realities of” ; the “inner reality”, and “inner realities” also refer to the essence of things. This connection is further emphasised by the parallel usage seen in the references to the “inmost essence” of things.

This highly diverse list, along with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s references to the real but hidden, “intrinsic identity,” or “essence” of things as well as to “the essential reality *underlying any given phenomenon*” makes it clear that in Bahá’í ontology, all things have an essence whose attributes appear in the world. There is no such thing as being without an essence, which is to say that at the very least, being and essence are absolutely correlated. It is impossible to discuss one without the other; the act of being can never be separated from the act of being something in particular both as an individual and as a member of a class or kind. This makes it impossible to avoid the conclusion that Bahá’í ontology is fundamentally essentialist.

Essentialism is reinforced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insistence that “the essence of things does not change,” an idea also reflected in his belief that the essence of humankind undergoes no change despite changes of outward appearance and that species do not change. The immutability of essences is, of course, one of the pillars of any form of essentialism since the ‘purpose’ of essences is to provide order, that is, continuity of identity through various transformations. An entity’s essence is the basis of its identity as the particular thing (and kind of thing) it is. Without such continuity, the world would degenerate from an orderly cosmos into a chaos of unrelated, random changes and would therefore, among other things, not be amenable to scientific study. It bears pointing out that the idea of immutable essences is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of evolution if we keep in mind – as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does – that essences, such as the human essence, need not reveal all of their attributes at the same time but may do so over thousands or even millions of years.

Essentialism should not rush us to the conclusion that Bahá’í ontology is static. Instead, it is important to bear in mind that the essence of an entity is only an aspect of its whole being. The other, equally necessary aspect is the ‘becoming’, that is to say, the manifestation of that particular essence in the external, contingent and “visible world” whereby it can display in ever-more adequate measure the bounties of God. Without this ‘becoming’ or actualization, the essence remains wholly on the “plane of the invisible” and, thereby, without effect and unknown. This would impoverish creation by violating the principle of plenitude and perfection. Nor does Bahá’í ontology – unlike Platonic ontology – espouse the idea that the external, “visible world” of change has a lesser ontological status than the “invisible world.” That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Praise be to Him Who hath made the world of being . . . and hath made the invisible world to appear on the plane of the visible.”

As this makes clear, the Writings have a positive – historically speaking, Aristotelian – view of existence in the material plane. If, at times, the Sacred Texts seem to disparage earthly existence, it is, as we have seen before, strictly for therapeutic purposes, to remind humankind that this particular existence is not its final destination. Even if we recall that the “contingent world is the source of imperfections” we must keep in mind that the possibility of imperfection arises only as a collateral, ‘side-effect’ of the development or actualization of an entity’s hidden potentials in the world. In other words, the imperfections are, like evil, not realities in themselves but rather the absence of a good; as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “Evil is non-existent; it is the absence of good.” They are ‘by-products’ in the quest for the greater good of self-actualization. We shall have more to say on this subject later.

16.1) Being and Essence

Given the number and kinds of things that are listed as having an essence, one may logically conclude that in Bahá’í ontology to be means to have an essence. This observation leads to one of the central questions of ontology and metaphysics: Is being or existence identical to essence? It appears that on this issue, the Writings side with Ibn Sina and St. Thomas Aquinas and distinguish existence from essence. This much is evident from the following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

all things are subject to transformation and change, save only *the essence of existence itself*--since it is constant and immutable, and upon it is founded the life of every species and kind, of every contingent reality throughout the whole of creation.

The key phrase in this passage – “the essence of existence itself” – is a philosophical description of God, Who, as the only non-contingent being, exists necessarily. It is His nature, His essence to exist; in Him existence and essence are one, and the kind of existence He has is the most perfect form of existence available. Consequently, all other existences are accidental inasmuch as their existence is not necessary: in them existence and essence are not one as they are in God and they do not share in God’s absolute perfect existence. These are additional ontological differences between God and all other beings.

In God, it is not even possible to distinguish intellectually between essence and existence for His essence and existence are not only one and the same but beyond all human comprehension. The two are one, as indicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he identifies God’s essence and existence: he speaks of “the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God)” indicating thereby that God’s essence and existence are one and the same. Unlike all other things, God is in essence an absolutely unqualified or unlimited act of existence. That is why God can be the ground

or source of all other contingent and qualified beings. With created things, however, such is patently not the case. Intellectually we can certainly distinguish between the essence, ‘what’ a thing is, and whether or not it actually exists, as for example in the cases of unicorns and moose. However, we must bear in mind that because essence and existence are distinguishable intellectually, they are not necessarily separable in the order of actuality or creation. For this reason we must conclude that whatever exists in creation has two correlated aspects: a divinely bestowed act of existence by which it negates absolute nothingness and an essence which makes it the particular kind of thing or negation it is.

It might be tempting to dismiss these considerations as matters that merely “begin and end in words”, but this is not really the case. This distinction allows us to understand, with greater philosophical precision the bedrock principle of Bahá’í ontology – the distinction between the Creator and the created and why this distinction cannot be undone, denied, ‘overcome’ or transcended from any possible point of view. There simply is no standpoint within creation from which the created can attain unity of essence and existence. To think that we have done so is literally to “join partners with God” and open ourselves to severe tests.

16.2) Knowledge and Essence

Another feature of Bahá’í ontology is the principle that human beings cannot know essences directly but can only know *about* them by means of their attributes. Thus, Bahá’í essentialism is an epistemically qualified essentialism. On this issue ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us, “Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes,” and that “the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities.” Even more precisely, he says,

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing, and the knowledge of its qualities. The *essence* of a thing is *known through* its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden. As our knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is *knowledge of their qualities and not of their essence*, how is it possible to comprehend in its essence the Divine Reality, which is unlimited?

Though there is no question that the Writings forbid knowledge of essences, it remains open to exploration as to what precisely that prohibition means. For example, is Bahá’í ontology akin to Kantianism in which all that we can know are phenomena or qualities of absolutely unknowable noumena or essences? Is the Bahá’í world-view irrevocably divided not only between Creator and created but also between essence and attribute? And if so, in the case of the latter division, how deep is the gulf between essence and quality? Moreover, if the gulf is absolute, does that mean all human knowledge is limited to surface phenomena and tell us only about the universe as it appears and not really how it is? These, and other far-reaching questions come to the fore as we consider what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá means with these statements about essences. Indeed, it is the opinion of the present writer that this is one of the ‘continental divides’ in the interpretation of the Writings: how we understand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s remarks will lead Bahá’í ontology into wholly two different directions with profoundly different implications for a number of important issues.

To understand the first of these two possible paths, let us examine the sentence, “The *essence* of a thing is *known through* its qualities, otherwise it is unknown and hidden.” Examining this statement carefully leads us to conclude that this statement does not deny knowledge of essence as such but rather requires that the knowledge be gotten in a specific way – through the qualities. The knowledge about essences may not be obtained by direct, immediate intuitive or ‘mystical’ knowledge of the essence itself but must be mediated by qualities. Knowledge about essences is indirect and ‘second-hand.’ Nor can we know from a study of the qualities alone whether or not we have complete knowledge about the essence: in that sense, all essences are bound to remain mysterious because of the “vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop!” Nonetheless, we can rest assured that whatever knowledge we do possess from the qualities, that knowledge is not just about the appearance of something but is connected to, corresponds to the inner nature of that particular thing. In other words, there is no ‘disconnect’ between the qualities and the essence; the information given by the qualities is real – though limited – information about the essence. It may also be described as external knowledge obtained from the appearance of an entity.

If there were a *complete ‘disconnect’* between the qualities and the essence, we would live in a *strongly ‘Kantian’ universe* in which we remain absolutely isolated from the noumenal or essential realm and enclosed in a world of qualitative phenomena or appearances. All human knowledge would – in the strictest philosophical sense – be superficial inasmuch as it is knowledge about appearances without any necessary connection to essences. Such a position is, in effect, a form of phenomenalism because it limits human knowledge and consciousness to the phenomenal appearances that the essences present or emanate. Knowledge is left completely out of ‘contact’ with the underlying reality.

17) Disconnected, Phenomenal ‘Knowledge’

The present author is one of those who finds this position problematical for three reasons. First is the fact that if there is no connection between phenomenal knowledge and reality, then we neither have nor can gain knowledge in any but the most superficial sense. Knowledge is limited to appearances, a limitation not only so severe as to cast severe doubts over the value of seeking knowledge, but it also, stands in contrast with the high place that knowledge holds in the Writings. It is out of harmony with such statements as the following: “Know that the reality of man embraces the realities of things, and discovers the verities, properties and secrets of things” and “For this reason we say that the spirit of man can penetrate and discover the realities of all things, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects.” This position is also out of harmony with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s claims that “The power of the rational soul can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and penetrate the mysteries of existence” and that “God has endowed us with faculties by which we may comprehend the realities of things, contemplate reality itself.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also says that God “has endowed us with a power to penetrate the realities of things.” These statements, with their references to knowing the “realities of things” and solving “secrets and mysteries” clearly indicate that human knowledge goes deeper than phenomena or appearances.

The second problem follows from the first. If there is a complete disconnect between our knowledge and “the realities of things”, then in fact, there is no knowledge of things at all. We would be in the position of having to satisfy our quest for knowledge and understanding by accepting at face value the appearance of a mirage without ever being able to know what the mirage really was. This is not only out of harmony with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements about understanding mirages for what they really are but also turns Bahá’í epistemology into a type of skepticism which denies all but the most superficial, phenomenal knowledge. This conflicts with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s rejection of phenomenalism and throws our understanding of the Faith into a skeptical light. For example, if there is a complete disconnect between phenomenal knowledge of Bahá’u’lláh and His reality, then how can Bahá’ís use this phenomenal knowledge of the history of Bahá’u’lláh to attain certainty about Him and His mission? Any efforts to know His phenomenal history would be pointless since such knowledge would not necessarily connect in any way to His reality. This kind of destructive skepticism ultimately undermines both the Faith’s fundamental teachings as well as any effort to understand reality in general.

The third reason for supporting the view that there is some kind of connection between an entity and its qualities is logical. If there were no intrinsic connections between the entities and its qualities, how could we know to associate a particular set of qualities with a particular entity?

Qualities with no intrinsic connection with entities are simply free-floating qualities not much different from the mirages and illusions mentioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. They have no intrinsic or necessary connection with any underlying reality, or substance and this – in Bahá’í ontology – deprives them of reality.

For these reasons the present author finds that it is logically consistent with the Writings to say that our knowledge of things is limited to qualities, must come by way of qualities and that these qualities provide us with some – but not complete – information about the entity in question. Though we can never have immediate and direct knowledge of the essence of “even created and limited things,” let alone God’s essence, we do in fact have *external*, indirect knowledge *about* these essences as revealed by their qualities. This introduces a *mild Kantianism* into Bahá’í ontology, a duality mildly reminiscent of Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal – though we must be careful not to press that similarity too far. Essences correspond to Kant’s noumena, the unknown ‘sources’ of what the categories of the mind turn into the specific phenomena we perceive. In Bahá’í ontology, there are the inherently mysterious essences and the emanated attributes perceived by us. These create an epistemic and ontological division in the world. The division is epistemic because it makes a clear distinction between the knowable and the unknowable and it is ontological because there is a difference in the mode of existence between the ‘noumenon’ and the ‘phenomenon’. However, we must go too far with these similarities to Kant, since, as we shall see below, Bahá’í ontology clearly rejects the notion that the human mind ‘constructs’ the attributes that it perceives. The attributes are actually emanated from the essence and provide accurate though limited knowledge about the entity.

In the case of God, matters stand somewhat differently, since “all these *attributes*, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation” rather than to God-in-Himself. However, here too as we shall see, this doctrine contains more nuances than meet the eye at first glance.

18) The Problem of Nominalism.

Another problem with positing a complete disconnection between attributes and essence is that it can lead to at least one form of nominalism. If essences are completely unknown, they can be discounted and, therefore, objects can be reduced to the qualities we select and bundle together – in whatever way suits us. This easily leads to the conclusion

that what we call particular things – ‘chairs’, for example – are only a conventional (and basically arbitrary) selection of attributes bundled together under one name or heading, ‘chair.’ The name does not refer to the absolutely unknown intrinsic reality in any of the specimens chosen.

One of the problems with nominalism is that to accept it would require us to set aside the Writings’ constant references to essences, “inner realities”, “essential realities” and “intrinsic identities.” Obviously we are expected to take them into account, as well as the fact that they are unchanging. Another problem is that nominalism leads to an undue restriction of, and even skepticism regarding human knowledge. How can we gain real knowledge and progress in knowledge about things when whatever entity we study is only a conventionalized bundle of arbitrarily selected qualities? What we call an entity – be it a chair or a mountain – is only a convention and whatever knowledge we gather is relevant to the convention rather than to the ‘thing itself.’ The problem is that this consequence in effect denies the concept that humans can increase their knowledge about actual things and undermines ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s hope that

knowledge and science may increase, and *the reality of things, the mysteries of beings and the properties of existence may be discovered*; that, day by day, instructions, inventions and institutions may be improved; and from things perceptible to the senses conclusions as to intellectual things may be deduced.

If our knowledge is only relevant to the conventionalized objects ‘constructed’ from selected attributes; if, in other words, we have no assurance that our ‘knowledge’ actually applies to “the reality of things” and not just to things as we have conventionalized them, then, we really have no assurance as to the validity of our knowledge of the world and “the properties of existence [that] may be discovered.” This leads to a profound skepticism about the very possibility of knowledge about things and undermines any notion of scientific and intellectual progress. It also confines the concept of knowledge. In effect, all knowledge is really human self-knowledge: we do not get to know objects as they are – rather we get to know objects as we have conventionalized them by a selection of attributes. Some philosophers may find these views palatable, but whatever their merits may be, they do not fit into the Bahá’í ontological framework in which, as we have seen above objects have real essences that are not merely products of human conventionalizing.

The Writings provide at least three additional reasons to reject nominalism. The first is the fact that the degrees of existence – mineral, plant, animal and human are the results of divine creation and not arbitrary human conventions. These are essential, intrinsic differences not merely arbitrary human designations; they are real insofar as they are inherent features of the phenomena themselves. The second is the three-fold division of reality provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, with God at the head, and the Manifestation as the medium between God and the rest of creation. Here, too, we are dealing with inherent, essential differences of kind that have nothing at all to do with human selection and conventions. We cannot, even if we wanted to, redefine these three stations in such a way as to alter their essential nature. We can change the words but we cannot change the facts to which the words refer. Finally, nominalism is implicitly rejected in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s acceptance of the concept of species and his emphatic denial of the modification of one species into another. Since the differences among species are inherent and real, the existence of species is not simply a matter of selecting attributes according to convenience or purpose.

19) God and the Problem of ‘Disconnected Knowledge.’

The reason for emphasizing the distinction between knowing essences directly and intuitively and knowing them via qualities is that – as we have seen above – there are serious philosophical consequences for interpreting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position to mean that the qualities tell us nothing whatever about the essence. In the present author’s view, these consequences can only be avoided by recognizing that the qualities are the qualities belonging to particular essence and, therefore, cannot be completely disconnected or disassociated from it. If the attributes were disconnected, they would not be the qualities of that specific thing; indeed, there would be no reason to associate them with any particular thing. We shall return to this theme again later under the discussion of nominalism.

However, it still remains to be clarified whether or not the foregoing line of reasoning also applies to God. It is the present author’s view that on this issue the Bahá’í Writings try to steer a middle course between absolutely denying any and all knowledge of God on one hand and the direct acquisition of immediate, comprehensive and adequate knowledge of God’s essence on the other. This is at times a difficult pathway.

According to the Writings,

The Reality of the Divinity is hidden from all comprehension, and concealed from the minds of all men. It is *absolutely impossible to ascend to that plane*. We see that everything which is lower is powerless to comprehend the reality of that which is higher . . . Minds are powerless to comprehend God, and the souls become bewildered in explaining Him.”

The “holy essence” or “Reality” of the Divinity cannot be known or comprehended by lesser beings. In other words, humankind cannot obtain knowledge of God directly or immediately by ‘ascending’ to the divine plane, or by ‘surrounding’ or intellectually ‘encompassing’ God in some way. No human concept will ever be epistemologically adequate or comprehensive in this regard. Indeed, we cannot even know God’s qualities or attributes directly because “the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.” Knowledge of God’s attributes can only be obtained indirectly from the attributes of the Manifestations. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the

knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendors and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God; and if he be neglectful of the knowledge of the Holy Manifestations, he will be bereft of the knowledge of God.

In other words, the Manifestations provide knowledge about God’s attributes and qualities in a manner that is indirect and mediated, and scaled down to human capacities. This knowledge, often given to us in the forms of the names of God, is inadequate or incomplete vis-à-vis the “Reality of Divinity”, but – and this is essential – according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, it is knowledge connected to God nonetheless. Even though the knowledge is scaled down, and, in absolute terms, wholly inadequate in regards to comprehending completely the divine nature, it is, nonetheless, knowledge of God that we can rely on as being true, though limited and obtained indirectly. We learn to expect mercy from God, for example, because He is “the All-Merciful.” Whatever the deficiencies of such knowledge, it still tells us something about God’s attributes albeit it in an indirect way. Just how indirect this can be is indicated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he writes,

We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections. When we look at the existing world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection; therefore, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is wisdom . . . It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension.”

Reflection upon this passage reveals that if God is incapable of specific imperfections such as ignorance, then He must have the corresponding perfection however inadequate our understanding of that perfection may be. Here too, the attribution is indirect and limited by the constraints of human nature, but nevertheless makes some kind of connection with God.

Finally, we must keep in mind Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that “no tie of *direct* intercourse” joins God to His creation for which reason a Manifestation is needed. This statement must not be misread to mean that no tie or connection of any kind can exist between humankind and God. As its context shows, this statement is about the Manifestation as the means by which we can attain some limited knowledge connected with God.

19.1) The Problem of Ethical Nihilism

At this point we may well ask why the Writings take such pains to find a path between the extremes of absolute ignorance about God and a ‘knowable’ God. Why is this such a major issue? If we take the view that there is a complete disconnect between the names and attributes and God Himself, we face two questions. First, if there is no connection between what the Manifestations reveal and God, what is the purpose and soteriological relevance of the Manifestation, Whose value is, after all, as a Manifestation of God? Without this connection to God, a Manifestation is no different than anyone else. Second, if such names as the “Most Merciful” have no real connection to God, what is the ethical relevance of God? We are, for example advised to be kind to all just as God “sendeth rain on the just and the unjust.” However, if this attribute is not really connected with God, what moral authority does this advice have? Without its source in God, it is just another moral opinion. If the attributes reflected by the Manifestations are not somehow connected with God, why should we value these attributes? Their special value comes only from their connection to their divine source. Thus, it becomes clear that the view of a God Whose attributes even as reflected by the Manifestation are completely disconnected from God leads to an ethical nihilism in which values have no divine grounding but are simply arbitrary selections or constructs.

19.2) An Alternative View

It must be noted that the concept of faith provides us with an alternative view of the issue of connection between the God and the attributes given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh . We might say that these descriptors provide no knowledge of God because knowledge implies a degree of rational and intellectual certainty – which in turn suggests surrounding the object of knowledge – whereas faith has no such implications. Faith is simply a positive

existential response that is not dependent on rational or external evidence. In other words, we take it on pure faith that the attributes of the Manifestation apply to God, but we make no actual knowledge claims on this issue. In other words, we have faith that God is merciful, self-sufficing and forgiving but do not claim that this faith represents actual knowledge inasmuch as we do not claim these attributes have any actual connection with God. Thus, we are left in the paradoxical position of being *certain* that God is good without actually *knowing* as much, which is to say, we have spiritual certainty without intellectual knowledge.

Although further research is needed to make a final determination whether the Writings favor the 'faith' and 'knowledge' approaches to God's nature, there seems little question that superficially at least, the 'knowledge' approach is favored. For example, the Writings seem to praise both equally, saying,

Regarding the "two wings" of the soul: These signify wings of ascent. One is the wing of knowledge, the other of faith, as this is the means of the ascent of the human soul to the lofty station of divine perfections.

Since two wings are needed for flight, this statement clearly indicates both reason and faith are required a fully spiritual life. However, we cannot ignore 'Abdu'l-Bahá's declaration that

Although a person of good deeds is acceptable at the Threshold of the Almighty, yet it is *first "to know,"* and then "to do" . . . By faith is meant, *first, conscious knowledge,* and second, the practice of good deeds.

These words seem to give knowledge a certain primacy, making it not superior but rather a *primus inter pares*, a first among equals since 'Abdu'l-Bahá even puts it ahead of good deeds. This idea seems in keeping with the affirmation that "for God, knowledge is the most glorious gift of man and the most noble of human perfections."

A potential problem associated with this alternative is that of the *deus absconditus*, the disappearing God. There is always the psychological danger that for those who cannot attain the sufficient degree of faith, an absolutely unknowable God will simply become irrelevant and, for practical purposes, be 'replaced' as an 'object' of worship by the Manifestation. This, of course, violates the very *raison d'être* and message of the Manifestation, but the danger is nonetheless present because it is hard, if not impossible for humans to maintain a sense of connection with something of which they have no knowledge whatever. In the end this can lead to people simply ignoring God and 'replacing' him with other, more accessible objects of worship to Whom they find it easier to relate.

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

Having touched on how the Bahá'í Writings answer the question, 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' and on some of the surrounding issues, we now turn our attention to another fundamental ontological question, 'What does it mean 'to be'?' What exactly does it mean to say that something 'is'? What criteria must that something meet for us to say that it 'is'? What attributes does it have? What kind of things 'are', or have 'being'?

Perhaps the best way to begin our exploration of Bahá'í ontology is to inquire about what kinds of things exist according to the Writings. Starting with this rather than with an abstract discussion of the complexities involved in the issue of 'being' will help ensure that our deliberations remain within the Bahá'í context. This kind of start, in effect, allows the Manifestation and His authorized interpreters to define the Bahá'í 'world-map' for us and thereby keep our inquiry clearly within the bounds of Bahá'í ontology.

According to the Writings, human beings inhabit a '*Lebenswelt*' or 'life-world' that is made up of the following kinds of 'things': "sensible realities" or physical phenomena; "intellectual realities" or ideational phenomena; spiritual realities such as the "Holy Spirit," "human spirit" and the "rational soul"; God, the Creator; Manifestations, the mediators between God and creation; the mineral, plant and animal kingdoms and their members; the human kingdom and its members; the Abhá Kingdom and its inhabitants; "spiritual beings" or entities who are the "angels of holiness . . . Thine invisible hosts" also called "the angels of Abha." In addition there are essences, and attributes or qualities, as well as potentials – also referred to as "capacities" or "potency" not to mention "powers" and substances. The

Writings also contain references to "material forces" as well as "spiritual forces" and recognizes the existence of four kinds of time, the reality of "limitless space" and the reality of cause and effect. Furthermore, they attribute reality to "the absolute order and perfection of existence," to "natural order" and to natural laws. Finally, the Bahá'í Writings also attribute reality to processes of growth, evolution, decline and constant regeneration.

By including all of these items in the Bahá'í *Lebenswelt*, the Writings indicate that in some manner, all of these things are not absolute non-existence, or, if we prefer a more Hegelian turn of language, they are negations of

nothingness. They exist but their modes of existence are different. Examination of this list suggests that we can classify all the items as existing in one of four ways: either as a substance (which includes processes), as an essential attribute, as an accidental attribute or as a form of a substance. At this point it is imperative not to join Locke and many of his successors in confusing the word Aristotelian term ‘substance’ with ‘matter’ because, as we shall see shortly, this will create needless confusion with the Writings. In Aristotelian usage – which is reflected in the Writings – a substance is anything that does not exist as an attribute (essential or accidental) of anything else or as a form. Finally, there are locations, be they physical, temporal or ontological. An essential attribute is something that a substance must possess to be the kind of substance it is; for example, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words, it is an “essential requirement”, or it is the “inherent nature” of fire to burn. Motion or change (growth) is also an essential attribute of all existences. Accidental attributes are those which a substance may have but are not necessary to be the kind of substance it is. In one of the most philosophically and theologically far-reaching passages in the Writings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the *accident*--that is to say, the *body*--be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains.” In other words, the soul is a substance and the body is an accidental attribute. The form of a substance is the structure, or organization of the parts, as in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assertion that “the sun is born of substance [matter] and form,” which is to say that the sun results from the forming or organization of particular materials. To illustrate how this works, let us take a car engine as an example. The whole engine is the substance; the pistons are essential attributes; the chrome pipes are accidental attributes; and the way the parts are put together is the form. Its ‘location’ is the time and place of existence and its ontological status as a material not intellectual or spiritual reality.

Each of these things has a different way or mode of existing. Substances, be they material or spiritual, exist independently; accidental attributes exist contingently and dependently in a substance; essential attributes exist dependently but necessarily with a substance and form also exists dependently and necessarily with a substance. The later two are correlates of substance, that is, they are not the same as substance but no substance is ever found without them.

When we examine the inventory of existing things or realities, we find that each of the items listed fits into one of the five categories that seem to define the minimal requirements of Bahá’í ontology. In the category of substance, we find first of all, God, Who is, strictly speaking, the only true substance because only God is completely independent of anything else. That God is a substance is confirmed by Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that the Manifestation is “‘born of the *substance* of God Himself’,” meaning not that God is material but that He is a totally independent being. Lest this statement be misinterpreted in an ‘incarnationist’ manner, we hasten to add that the Manifestation is emanated or “born of” God, and resembles God formally, though substantially in the way a mirror image resembles the original formally. The relationship is no different than the relationship between the original of a manuscript and a copy: the two share formal but not substantial identity and one is logically prior and is the final cause, *raison d’être*, of the other. All created entities are, therefore, substances only in a relative sense. As we have already seen, the rational soul is also a substance as are as are minerals, plants, animals, “spiritual beings,” “material forces,” “spiritual forces,” “sensible realities,” some “intellectual realities,” the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, various physical and non-physical processes and the members of the Abhá Kingdom.

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

From the foregoing discussion we may conclude that in Bahá’í ontology, to be is to fit into one of these categories: everything that is a negation of absolute non-existence, everything that is in some way a ‘reality’ finds a place somewhere in this schema. It is important to note that this schema was not externally imposed from another source, but is based on a list of ‘realities’ drawn from the Writings Themselves. Refinements or even changes may eventually be required, but it is difficult to imagine how any list of categories based on the Writings could fail to include these in some way or another. In other words, with these categories, Bahá’í ontology provides us with a basic map of reality that allows us to understand (within certain limits) the kinds of things we encounter. Thus, the foregoing discussion also supports the conclusion that there exists some kind of underlying order in the vision of reality provided by the Writings. If, at times, the Writings superficially seem like a loose, even unorganized patchwork, then the existence of categorical schemas such as the one mentioned here should assure us that there is “method in this madness,” that beneath the confusing appearances, a deep order is actually at work.

At this stage on our study of Bahá’í ontology, this schema may not seem very useful but such is not actually the case if we are interested in understanding what the Writings have to say about reality, and, if we are interested in further philosophical development of ideas found in the Writings. It is simply impossible to discuss the world philosophically unless one knows – explicitly best of all – what kinds of items constitute ‘the world’. This in turn will have an enormous impact on philosophical exchanges with other religions because it will help move the exchange to a more philosophically profound level and improve the precision and accuracy of the dialogue. For

example, knowing that Bahá'í ontology includes the category of 'substances' and that this category includes processes, will help us develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between Bahá'í and some Buddhist ontologies.

21) First and Second Nature

Reflection on this list leads us to three more important and far-reaching conclusions.

First, we note that, with the exception of God, these constituents of the Bahá'í *Lebenswelt* are divine creations each possessing its own essential nature and attributes and playing its own role in the unfolding of the divine order. This simple fact leads us back to the vital distinction between this first nature grounded directly in God's creative actions and our human interpretations of and creations with this first nature which constitutes a second nature of personal and societal culture. Second nature is, so to speak, a superstructure built upon the first nature of God's creation; it might also be described as a lens through which we view first nature. Like all lenses, it may contain inherent distortions that subsequently distort our understanding of first nature. Clearly, the two natures are not entirely disconnected but this fact must not lead us to make the mistake of conflating the two. The differences between them are obvious and vital: God's creation precedes man's creation and man's creation depends on God's creation for its foundation.

How, it may be asked, do the Bahá'í Writings show the existence of second nature? The term itself does not occur in them – yet the concept is implicitly present in a number of ways. The concept is analogous to the distinction the Writings make between natural or innate and “acquired capacity” as well as between innate and “acquired character . . . which is gained by education.” Innate capacity and character are divine creations and, therefore, “purely good” because “in creation there is no evil; all is good.” According to the analogy posited by this paper, innate capacity and character correspond to first nature whereas acquired capacity, character and education correspond to second nature. In effect, the distinction between first and second nature simply applies at the larger, collective level a distinction clearly made by the Writings at the individual level. This distinction is also present wherever the Writings point to a difference between the goodness and perfection of God's creation and the flaws and evils inherent in what human's have made of God's work. For example, Bahá'u'lláh says, “If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.” In this statement, civilization, the second nature humans have built on the basis of God's innately good creation, can distort this original goodness and become a source of evil. The distinction between first and second nature has a positive presence in the Writings as well. When ‘Abdu'l-Bahá contrasts nature having “no will, no intelligence” with humans who have both, who can “command[] the forces of nature”, and whose “discovery of the constitution of things” leads to various inventions and developments, he is positing the existence of a first and second nature, this time to our advantage. Through the use of intelligence humankind controls nature, “takes the sword from nature's hand” and builds a new world that is in distinct contrast to the natural order.

The importance of the distinction between first and second nature is not to be underestimated. It means, among other things, that the Writings distinguish between ontology per se, that is, the study of being vis-à-vis the first divinely created nature and *cultural ontology*, that is, the study of being vis-à-vis human interpretations of and constructs based on this first nature. (Indeed, in some of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about innate, inherited and acquired character there is even the foundation for a study of personal or existential ontology – a third nature – as pursued by the Swiss psycho-therapist Ludwig Binswanger.) This distinction completely undermines the radical constructionist or relativist view that there can be no knowledge of nature as it is because whatever we call ‘nature’ is already a human cultural construct. From the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings, such *may* be the case – as proven by the existence of errors – but it is *not necessarily* so. As ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says, in a view frequently repeated in various form throughout the Writings, “the spirit of man can *penetrate and discover the realities of all things*, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects.” It is difficult – but nonetheless possible – to know nature as it is. The outward form of this knowledge may be a construct, that is, culturally shaped, but the content may accurately reflect one or correspond to one or more aspects of first nature. If this were not the case, progress in science would not be possible because such progress depends on the gradual reduction of error in the quest for closer approximations of the truth. Thus, we conclude that Bahá'í ontology does not support the view that our understanding of first nature is entirely a human construct.

22) A Non-Kantian, Realist Ontology

Our original list of the constituents of the Bahai *Lebenswelt* reinforces this conclusion from yet another side. Reflection on the list makes it clear that Bahá'í ontology is not a Kantian ontology inasmuch as the Writings recognize the independent reality of time, space, “natural order” as well as cause and effect in the universe. According to Kant, time, space, causality and other categorical attributes are imposed upon the unformed external data – Kant's noumena – by the human mind and, thereby shaped into the phenomena we experience. The cosmic order as we know it is an invention, a construction or, collectively, a convention of the human mind and, in effect,

truth is something that we have made rather than found. The Bahá'í Writings reject this view. Time, space, causality, the categorical attributes – in short, the cosmic order – are inherent in the phenomena themselves and are not human constructs. We are not trapped in Kant's mind-constructed 'bubble' denying us access to the 'real', noumenal world lying somehow 'out there.' The fact is, we know the real world, though we do not know it perfectly. Furthermore, the knowledge we gain is valid knowledge of the real world, not merely knowledge of our own constructions.

These observations further reinforce the earlier conclusion that the Writings, promulgate a realist ontology insofar as the divinely created first nature exists as a result of God's action and, therefore, exists independently of human perception or thought. However, this statement should not be interpreted to mean that a Bahá'í ontology espouses a completely 'naïve' realism in which the world is necessarily always as it appears to superficial inspection. On the contrary, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is perfectly aware that the senses and the rational mind can be deceived as, for example, with images in a mirror or in a mirage. He does, however, agree that it is possible to penetrate these illusions, to cut through the appearances and illusions we have constructed to get to the underlying reality. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "we say that the spirit of man can *penetrate and discover the realities of all things*, can solve the secrets and mysteries of all created objects." The underlying presupposition of the statement that "the rational soul can *discover the realities of things*" is that these realities exist independently of the knower and await his or her exploration. We are not struggling to discover what we have made.

23) The Rejection of Classical Empiricism and Positivism

The second major conclusion we can draw from the contents of the Bahá'í *Lebenswelt* as presented in the Writings, is that Bahá'í ontology rejects positivism and "classical empiricism," that is, "any view which bases our knowledge, or the materials from which it is constructed, on experience through the traditional five senses." This is not to say that the Writings altogether reject sense knowledge – for they do not – but rather that they present reality as made of intellectual and spiritual as well as "sensible realities." Consequently, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology is fundamentally incompatible with any philosophical system or epistemic methodology that confines valid knowledge to knowledge gathered and verified by the five senses. The problem is not just the unreliability of the senses – the major reason why 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects sense knowledge as uncertain – but also that it is not adequate for the pursuit of knowledge in a world also containing intellectual and spiritual realities for which no empirical verification can be devised.

24) The Equivocal Application of 'Being'

The third major conclusion we can draw from the constituents of the Bahá'í *Lebenswelt* is that the term 'being' is applied equivocally rather than univocally in relationship to various kinds of being and to God. If 'being' is used univocally, then it applies in the same way to all things be they substances, attributes or processes. If 'being' is used equivocally, then it has both a similar and a different meaning for various kinds of beings. For example, when we use the word 'bright' referring to the sun and a one thousand watt lamp we are using the word univocally in reference to illuminatory power; however, when we describe a person as 'bright', we are using the word equivocally. In the second case, we are making a metaphorical connection involving similarity and difference between physical brightness and intelligence as permitting insight or understanding. In examining the application of these two concepts, there are at least two major questions to take into consideration.

Is 'being' used univocally or equivocally in relationship to created things and God? Little reflection is needed to see that at least in relationship to God, 'being' is attributed in an equivocal way. How can we say that being applies to God and his creations, in the same way when He is the one and only uncreated, "Self-subsisting," existentially independent, entity we know? Nothing else is "the uncreated," lacking a predecessor, or an external cause; nothing else is "the Eternal", beyond time; nothing else has no specific location in space, and nothing else is beyond motion or growth or is "powerful over all things." Nor is anything else omniscient, or "apprised of all" Even this cursory account of differences between God and creation shows that 'being' does not apply in the same way to both.

Indeed, the distinctions between the being of God and the being of His creations are so momentous that some might question whether the term 'being' can be applied to God at all. One could, for example, argue that the being of God is different from other being; it "cannot be understood as the existence of a being alongside others or above other." God is not simply "a being" subject to any of the Aristotelian categories of existence. Therefore, God does not possess being and, therefore, while He may be the ground or source of all being, the term being is not applicable to Him, especially since He is unknowable. Its self-evident virtues notwithstanding, this argument is rejected by the Bahá'í Writings which on a regular basis refer to God in terms such as "the Divine Being," "the unchangeable Being," "the Ancient Being," and "the sacred Being." (It must immediately be noted that these descriptors for God should not be confused with the references to the Manifestation as the "Great Being.") Given these descriptions of God, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Writings intend us to associate God with being in some way. However, in light of the overwhelming differences between God and creation, it is clear that 'being' can only be

attributed to God in an equivocal or analogous way. Like all other things, God has being insofar as He is not absolute nonexistence but, because it is His essence to exist as the only self-subsisting or necessary being, that is as far as the similarities of being go. The being or 'not non-existence' of other entities is relative to God's. Finally, we should recall that the ascription of being to God is line with God's self-description in the *Bible* when He tells Moses His name is "I AM THAT I AM" and instructs Moses to tell the children of Israel that "I AM" has spoken to him. Indeed, God says that this - "I AM THAT I AM" - is "[His] name forever and this is my memorial unto all generations."

It needs to be borne in mind that our knowledge of God's being is entirely negative - He is 'not absolute non-existence' - and thus lacks any genuine positive content. Knowing what a thing is not tells us nothing about what it actually is. Thus, we are not ascribing any predicate to God beyond what the Writings Themselves do by referring to Him as the "Divine Being." This is simply a positive way of saying that God is not absolute non-existence. Of course it bears emphasizing that although these predications indicate a truth about God - His being or existence - this does not mean that humankind understands this truth to its fullest measure. Our knowledge is correct but far from complete. It is like the knowledge of a man at the mouth of a river; he can accurately describe the small section of river in his sight but he has no knowledge whatever of the river's other attributes. His knowledge is correct but incomplete.

25) The Tension of Being and Nothingness.

The foregoing discussion highlights the paradoxical nature of all beings except God, Who, for the reasons given above, can only be identified as 'a being' in the equivocal sense. God, "Divine Being", is the only absolute being, that is, He is non-contingent since it is His essence or nature to exist as indicated as indicated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when he equates "the Essence of Unity" with "the existence of God." He is the one being Who is absolutely necessary in His particularity. However, relative to God, created things do not exist:

the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence. Thus it is evident and clear that although the beings exist, in relation to God and to the Word of God they are nonexistent.

Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá even refers to "this world of non-existence." This relative reality of creation must be borne in mind even when he informs us

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its *shadow* stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a *fantasy*, and nothing more; it is but *images reflected in water*, and seeming as *pictures* to the eye.

Again, we see the notion that our world is - vis-à-vis the Kingdom and God - unreal, a shadow. Of course, we must bear in mind that the Kingdom itself is a creation and, therefore, itself unreal in relation to God though, like the world, it has existence "in its own condition." What is essential to our discussion, however, is that all created things find themselves in a highly paradoxical or contradictory situation: they both are and are not at the same time. Their very existence is constituted by a tension between being and non-being, a tension that cannot be escaped or resolved in favor of one side or the other. Were it resolved in favor of being, the created thing, would in effect become an absolute being like God; were it resolved in favor of non-being, it would become absolute non-existence, and that, as we know from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is impossible. Thus, all created, finite things are situated so to speak, in the middle, between being and nothingness, a situation manifesting itself most obviously in the inescapable anxiety that accompanies all life and especially the lives of human beings.

The Bahá'í Noonday Prayer recognizes the paradoxical situation in which human beings consciously find themselves, and to which they must respond in one way or another. This prayer notes the paradoxical tension of our existence by affirming our being on one hand in its reminder of why we have been created, and, on the other by recalling our non-being in its references to our "powerlessness" and our "poverty." At the same time it recognizes God's "wealth" and "might", thereby focusing our hearts and minds on the transcendent entity that allows us to live creatively with this inevitable tension. This living creatively with the tension, with the thesis and antithesis of being and non-being, structurally constitutes our being; we are not here to escape the tension by various means but to use it for our individual and collective growth. Moreover, this thesis and antithesis constituting the situation of all finite being highlights our need for God and the Manifestation and thus becomes the basis of a positive relationship between the believer and God. As demonstrated by some schools of existential philosophy - Sartre's for example - not all interpretations of our nothingness are positive. Indeed, some responses are not philosophical at all, but are rather mere flight into the various forms of forgetfulness, or, in the case of nihilism, resentment and/or despair.

A somewhat technical question obtrudes at the point. Is it our situation or our being that is characterized by the thesis and antithesis of being and non-being, or nothingness? After all, an entity is in a situation, and is not identical

to the situation. The Writings seem to recognize this when they say that although a thing does not exist in respect to God, it does exist “in its own condition.” Yet, at the same time, it is inescapable that no entity exists only “in its own condition” but exists rather in relationship to all other entities and above all, in relation to God. Indeed, forgetting this, especially vis-à-vis God, is the first step in our going astray in our relations to other things and God Himself. It is the first step towards “the perdition of idolatry,” that is, towards having another god before God; it is the first step towards establishing self rather than God as the centre of one’s existence. Thus, it would appear that from the point of view of the Writings, our being is inseparable from our whole ontological situation. The two are distinguishable only by intellect and not in actuality where they are completely correlated so that in discussing one, we are also discussing the other. Thus, it would seem to be the case that in effect a thing is its ontological situation, both as a kind of thing – such as a human being or a sea urchin – and as an individual entity occupying a historically unique existential niche.

26) Non-Being and Being-not-Yet.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements that “nonexistence is only relative and absolute nonexistence inconceivable” and that “no sign can come from a nonexisting thing” lead to the conclusion that in Bahá’í ontology there is another kind of non-being – ‘being-not-yet.’ If “[a] thing which does not exist, can . . . give no sign of its existence,” then it follows that everything which has come into existence must have existed as a potential, as a ‘being-not-yet’ before it is actualized. Otherwise it would have come from nothing. The classical name for such incipient being-not-yet is ‘potentials’, which we have noted earlier as part of the *Lebenswelt* in Bahá’í ontology. Of course, from the point of view of actually existing things, such potentials do not exist and are, therefore, a kind of non-being but they are a relative non-being with a capacity for actualization. As such, like all other finite entities, potentials have a paradoxical existence: depending on viewpoint they both are and are not.

The Writings support the existence of potentials or being-not-yet in various of ways. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says “absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. If the beings were absolutely nonexistent, existence would not have come into being.” This obviously implies that if something has come into being, it has come into existence from something. He also says that whatever appears, whatever comes into existence, is simply coming into our view or the “plane of the visible” from what is – relative to us – a previous state or being-not-yet or potentiality. As a potential awaiting actualization by the proper necessary and sufficient conditions, it is as real “in its own condition” as any other degree of being – though to us, it is unreal and non-existent. The Writings also suggest that such is the case, when, for example, They speak of the virtues “potential in the seed,” of the sun awakening “all that is potential in the earth,” of the “virtues potential in mankind”, of the inventions “potential in the world of nature” and of the embryo progressing until “that which was potential in it--namely, the human image—appears.” Of similar import are the passages referring to the “mysteries latent in nature” which are actualized by humankind, the “latent talents” hidden in human beings, the “divine perfections latent in the heart of man,” the “latent realities within the bosom of the earth,” and the “the greater world, the macrocosm [] latent and miniature in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man.” The same idea is implicit in Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that we are to “[r]egard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,” which is to say that humankind possesses invaluable potentials that must be actualized through education. Perhaps most fascinating in this regard are the following words by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

Before we were born into this world did we not pray, "O God! Give me a mother; give me two fountains of bright milk; purify the air for my breathing; grant me rest and comfort; prepare food for my sustenance and living"? Did we not pray potentially for these needed blessings before we were created?

Combined with the previous quotes, this passage makes it logically difficult to avoid the conclusion that in some way we had a degree of existence or being as potentials before we actualised to appear in the “visible plane.” Such a conclusion is also strengthened by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s affirmation that nothing, “no sign,” can come from absolute nothingness. If we were absolute nothingness instead of possessing a degree of existence as potentials, we could never have been “called into being.”

27) Platonic and Aristotelian Elements in Bahá’í Ontology.

Do these statements mean that according to Bahá’í ontology, there are at least two planes of being in the material world: the invisible plane of potentials and the visible plane of things that are actualized? One might certainly think so, given such declarations as the following: “through an ideal inner power man brings these realities forth from the invisible plane to the visible.” Such quotations leave a strong impression Bahá’í ontology has a Platonic slant, an impression reinforced by passages such as the following:

The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven.

And

For physical things are signs and imprints of spiritual things; every *lower* thing is an *image* and *counterpart* of a higher thing.

As well as

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye.

This latter quotation especially strikes a tone strongly reminiscent of Plato inasmuch as it expresses a de-valuation of the material world or “nether place” vis-à-vis the Kingdom which is regarded as “real.” Elsewhere throughout the Writings we have numerous suggestions that “the Kingdom” is a more perfect world, much as the world of Ideas was the real and perfect world for Plato who saw the ordinary world as unreal – shadow or image like – and imperfect.

In light of this evidence, it is impossible to resist the judgement that Bahá’í ontology has aspects that can be described as Platonic. How can one avoid such a conclusion when we read that the spiritual world and the phenomenal world “are the exact counterpart of each other” and that “the Kingdom” is more real than the “nether world”? Though it is not stated explicitly, it is obvious that the counterparts in the spiritual world or Kingdom are more perfect than their images or shadows in the material world. Though the Kingdom is not explicitly identified as providing models for entities in “the nether world”, the language of “shadows,” “images” and “pictures” strongly suggests that, in fact, it does. There is clearly a Platonic feature in Bahá’í ontology.

We are still left, however, with two questions about the visible and invisible planes of actualized and not-yet being. Just where do they fit into ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s three-fold division of reality – the world of God, the world of the Kingdom and the world of creation? The most straightforward interpretation of these planes is that they are correlated aspects of the world of creation that are distinguishable by the intellect though not actually separable. Such a view preserves their distinction without compromising the unity of reality. It is also possible to understand the two planes as two correlated conditions that constitute or define the being of all things in the world of creation: everything that is visible is both in the condition of being and being-not-yet, of being actualized, and not yet actualized, of being present and being not yet present. The answer to our second question about the planes of being supports this reading. Where, we may ask, is the plane of the invisible? The answer seems to be that it lies so to speak enfolded within the particular things. For example, the Writings speak of the “latent realities *within* the bosom of the earth,” “the potential *in* the seed,” the “virtues potential *in* mankind” and the “virtues latent *within* the realities of the phenomenal world.” This leads to the conclusion that the invisible plane is not a physical place but rather the unactualized and, therefore, to us, invisible, condition inherent in all things.

28) Implications for Existential Ontology.

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

The second implication of the double visible and invisible aspect of things relates to humankind’s role in the universe. According to the Writings, humankind has a clearly defined role in cosmic evolution, namely, to transfer phenomena from the plane of the invisible to the visible. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us,

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.

Thus, humankind plays a role in the unfolding of creation's otherwise hidden potentials and, thereby, makes its contribution to the evolution of the cosmos at large which is to say, human and cosmic evolution are inter-related as aspects of a unified whole. Without the intervention of humankind, many of the potentials hidden in the plane of the invisible would remain there and never achieve actualisation, a failure that would, in effect, leave the being of the cosmos in an ontologically diminished state. Thus, humankind is a necessity – not, as modern evolutionary theory teaches, an accidental development – for the ontological completeness of cosmos, which, without man, would not only be incomplete but also lack value. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the world of nature is incomplete and imperfect. The mind of man remedied and removed this imperfect condition." Similarly, he states that "This world is also in the condition of a fruit tree, and man is like the fruit; without fruit the tree would be useless." Quantitatively insignificant though humankind is at the cosmic scale, we are qualitatively important for the development of all creation. This is because "God has endowed [us] with a power whereby [we] can even overcome the laws and phenomena of nature, wrest the sword from nature's hand and use it against nature itself."

In surveying the foregoing discussion, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that Bahá'í ontology has a double aspect. In regards to the structure of reality as a whole, it has strongly Platonic elements – in which our "nether" world is a "shadow" or "image" of the world of the Kingdom – while in regards to the location of invisible potentials being within actual things, it takes an Aristotelian turn. The latter becomes especially clear when we recall that a thing's potentials are, in effect, its essence, since each kind of thing and each particular thing is distinguished from all others by the potentials it possesses or lacks. It was, of course, Aristotle who rejected Plato's world of Ideas or pure essences and assigned essence to individual things. Thus, Bahá'í ontology seems to balance Platonic and Aristotelian elements on this particular issue.

29) An Ontological Fall?

This balance of Platonic and Aristotelian elements leads to a further question in regards to Bahá'í existential ontology. Does the transition from the invisible to the visible, from the potential to the actual or, from the essential to the existential constitute a 'fall'? The question arises for two reasons. First, the potential or essential has a certain perfection insofar as it is not determined or limited by the conditions of actual existence with its various vicissitudes. Second, this question is also encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's characterisation of the world of creation as being as "shadow[s]", "fantas[ies]", "images" and "pictures" in contrast to "the real world" of the Kingdom. The answer to the question is, paradoxically, both negative and positive. In one sense, the world of creation is a fallen, diminished world vis-à-vis the Kingdom, and, correspondingly, the transition from essence or potential to actual existence involves a certain limitation and diminution. Ontologically, to be in the world of creation is to be limited. This is both part of the pain and the challenge of existence.

However, from another point of view, the 'fall' into actual being in the world of creation, on the plane of the visible, is an opportunity for real growth and development in contrast to the maintenance of a static perfection. The 'fall' in other words, is the test by which a phenomenon becomes most fully itself by meeting the challenges of real existence. Thus, what is a 'fall' in one sense is the beginning of progress in another. One recalls in this connection, Bahá'u'lláh's prayer, "O Thou Whose tests are a healing medicine." Without the tests of existence, there can be no progress, no actualization and making visible. The situation is analogous to what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about the innocence of children: their "purity is on account of weakness and innocence, not on account of any strength and testing, for as this is the early period of their childhood, their hearts and minds are unsullied by the world." In that sense, the 'fall', which is also a rise to manifest, visible reality and to progressive evolution by meeting challenges is a fortunate event, a "felix culpa" or 'fortunate fall'. On this issue Bahá'í existential ontology would seem to disagree with Plato who did not see any real, lasting or eternal value originating in the "nether world" of images and shadows.

30) To Be and Becoming.

Taken together, the preceding discussion makes it hard to avoid the conclusion that in Bahá'í ontology what we normally call 'reality' is only 'actualized' or manifested reality. In fact, every entity actually has two aspects: its apparent, actualised aspect and its potential aspect, that is, its being and its being-not-yet, which, from the perspective of manifested, visible being, is non-being. Here again, we observe a two-fold being/non-being nature in all beings, whose existence is, in that view, contradictory: "the world of mortality is a world of contradictions, of opposites," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá though elsewhere he qualifies this statement to say, "this world is full of *seeming* contradictions." In light of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, it seems clear that the contradiction between the being and non-being of an entity can be resolved by taking varying perspectives into account. From the viewpoint of manifested being, potentials, or being-not-yet are non-existent, though from the viewpoint of its own condition, being-not-yet is being of its own terms. The qualification of the word "seeming" is necessary because if the world suffered from real and unresolvable contradictions, the unity or oneness of creation or reality would be compromised, if not destroyed. God, of course, is the exception to all this insofar as there is no possible perspective from which God could be said to be non-being, or being-not-yet since God in His perfection is complete and has no

potentials to actualise. Moreover, as the “Divine Unity” He cannot be subject to the being/not-being distinction in any form.

If, ontologically speaking, all things are a combination of being and non-being in the form of being-not-yet, it follows that all things are in a constant condition of change as various potentials struggle to actualise themselves throughout the existence of an entity. This conclusion is supported by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when he says,

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose--that is to say, all things are in motion. Everything is either *growing* or *declining*; all things are either *coming from nonexistence into being*, or going from existence into nonexistence.

And,

Divine and all encompassing Wisdom hath ordained that motion be an inseparable concomitant of existence, whether inherently or accidentally, spiritually or materially.

Decline and growth, coming “into being” from relative non-existence and moving from existence into relative non-existence requires the actualisation of various potentials possessed by an entity – including the potential for decline and decomposition. (In that sense, we carry our relative non-being within us.) Without such potentials, these developments would literally come from absolute nothing and that, as we have seen, is forbidden in Bahá’í ontology. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “it is impossible that from absolute nonexistence signs should appear--for the signs are the consequence of an existence.” Elsewhere he states, “One can bring nothing forth from nothing.” From this it follows that all actualizations necessarily originate from potentials possessing their own degree of being.

The notion of growth and decline is not an accidental feature of an entity, that is, it is not something without which the entity could exist. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes it as an “inseparable concomitant of existence,” that is, as something that existence cannot be without. He also tells us, “This state of motion is said to be *essential*--that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their *essential requirement*” to which he adds, “this movement is *necessary to existence*, which is either growing or declining.” Since motion and change are essential attributes of all entities, then it follows that in Bahá’í ontology to be is to be in the condition of becoming.

31) The Correlation of Being and Becoming.

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

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “This state of motion is said to be *essential*--that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement, as it is the essential requirement of fire to burn.” In this statement, ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ are absolutely correlated with one another, that is, they are mutually interdependent, complementary and reciprocal relationship. In his words, they are “inseparable concomitants of existence.” Like the two sides of a coin, the two are distinguishable by intellectual abstraction but are not separable in actual fact which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms when he says, “an essential requirement cannot be separated from the thing itself.” Wherever we find one, we find the other. This means that becoming is an essential attribute that identifies all being except the being of God and the Manifestations in their station of “pure abstraction and essential unity.” In his discussion, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the analogy of fire – significantly enough the very analogy for existence used by Heraclitus – to illustrate how close the correlation between being and becoming actually is. He says that “we cannot conceive of fire without its burning.” Indeed, some would argue that in the case of fire, there is a complete identification of the two, that the being of fire is the very process of becoming or burning that fire has no being but becoming. Be that as it may, we must be careful not to put too much emphasis on the illustration. Since the fire analogy is used only as an illustration of a previously made point about the close correlation or concomitancy of being and becoming, it would, in our view, be a misreading to interpret ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as claiming the identity – as opposed to the correlation – of being and becoming. Bahá’í ontology does not claim that being is becoming but only that becoming is an essential correlate of all being other than God and the Manifestations in the station of unity. According to the Writings, this is true even after death when the human spirit has moved beyond the material realm, on which issue ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that “as the spirit continues to exist after death, it *necessarily* progresses or declines.” For humans, the only material entities with an immortal soul, change continues to be an “essential requirement” of existence at all times.

31.1) What is “Becoming”?

At this point, however, we still face the question of how Bahá’í ontology defines becoming or change. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,

There are different degrees of motion. There is motion of transit, that is from place to place . . . Another kind is the motion of inherent growth . . . The third kind is the motion of condition – the sick man passes from the stage of sickness to the state of health. The fourth kind is that of spirit. For instance, the child while in the mother’s womb has all the potential qualities of the spirit, but those qualities begin to unfold little by little, as the child is born and grows and develops and finally manifests all the attributes and qualities of the spirit. The fifth is the motion of the intellect, whereby the ignorant become wise . . . the carnally minded spiritual . . . the sixth is that of the eternal essence. That is to say, all phenomena either step from the arena of non-existence into the court of objectivity, or from existence to non-existence. Just as being in motion is the test of life, so being stationary is the test of death . . .

Reflecting on this passage, we see the nature of change as being from one thing to its contrary or contradictory, that is, from one place or condition to its opposite. Next, we see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explicitly adopted Aristotle’s definition of change as the motion from potentiality to actuality, which is to say that in motion or change qualities and attributes that were potential but not overtly present or active become actualized, that is, explicitly present and active. It is evident that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has confirmed Aristotle’s concept of motion as self-actualization in one or more of three areas: quantity, quality and place. Like Aristotle, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá identifies growth as a kind of motion, being a positive change in quantity and quality which is more complex than what Aristotle calls “locomotion” or “transit . . . from place to place.” Change of quality is evident in the change from sickness to health, from a baby’s unactualized potentials to their actualization and in the change from ignorance to wisdom and carnality to spirituality. Aristotle’s view that change includes coming into existence is evident in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sixth form of motion, the movement from non-existence to existence.

When we keep in mind ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oft-given assertion that nothing derives from absolute nothing, it becomes obvious that at the most fundamental level, change involves the actualization of a potential inherent in a particular entity. In other words, change is the outward realization or manifestation of inner potentials. From this, two conclusions follow. First, no thing can be subject to change for which it has no potential, or, to paraphrase Lewis Carroll, a raven cannot actually become a writing desk even though it shares some of the desk’s attributes such as materiality. There are limits to transformation and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has indicated vis-à-vis organic life, these limits fall along the lines of kingdoms and species. These limits help keep the world an orderly cosmos instead of mere uncontrolled chaos. Second, from this principle enunciated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we can deduce that the essence of every entity must include, so to speak, a bundle of potentials awaiting actualization as the necessary and sufficient conditions arise. This bundle or complex of potentials is at least part of the enduring aspect that identifies a thing as the kind of thing it is and as a particular example of that kind. We hasten to add that in making these statements, we are not violating the Bahá’í epistemological principle that essences cannot be known. These statements do not involve particular claims about particular essences, nor do they constitute anything but external knowledge based on an appreciation of emanated, and therefore, available, attributes.

Given the emphasis on change or the actualization of potentials – and further – evolution, progressive revelation and human progress after death, it seems clear that Bahá’í ontology has a strong affinity for process ontologies, though it does not fit neatly into the Heraclitean mode. That would require an identification of being and becoming. Nor would the belief – describable as Aristotelian – in change as the actualization of potentials fit easily into the philosophy of Heraclitus since the inherent potentials of a thing do not change in themselves but rather help form a thing’s essence which is manifested over time. Furthermore, because Bahá’í ontology also has Platonic elements – the “nether world” as the shadow of the Kingdom – it would appear that Bahá’í ontology bears likeness to the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead which, in the concept of “eternal objects,” also combines Platonic and Aristotelian elements with a process ontology. Of course, this is not to suggest that Bahá’í ontology is completely assimilable to Whiteheadian philosophy, but the fact remains that, despite some important differences, they share a number of essential features.

From the foregoing discussion, it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that Bahá’í ontology is neither a pure ontology of being as best illustrated by Parmenides and Plato, nor a pure ontology of becoming as illustrated by Heraclitus, but rather a hybrid of the two as represented by Aristotle and Whitehead. It does not claim that only static being is real and valuable, nor does it claim that only becoming has reality. Instead, both are real and essential features of the universe. Because neither can be without the other, neither is to be derogated for that reason. As already noted, the apparent derogation of this world in the Writing is there only for spiritually therapeutic reasons, that is, to remind us that this world is not the only world we shall ever inhabit and to use that fact to keep our earthly

actions in perspective. This is required to balance the human tendency to over-value this world as if it were the only world we shall ever inhabit.

32) To Be Continued . . . an Unconclusion.

This brings us to an end of our initial reconnaissance of the ontology explicitly or implicitly present in the Bahá'í Writings. Although our scouting the territory was necessarily cursory and leaves many questions unanswered and others answered only in outline, it is possible to see the general 'landscape' or nature of Bahá'í ontology. Notwithstanding its various unique features, we find it difficult to resist the conclusion that, philosophically speaking, Bahá'í ontology generally resembles the ontology found in the tradition that begins with Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, moves through Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, Aquinas, Scotus and Hegel and currently has its strongest proponents in neo-Thomism, the neo-Aristotelianism of Mortimer Adler and the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. This is not to say that Bahá'í ontology agrees with every one of these on every issue – for that is a clear impossibility. However, it shares with them three important factors.

First and most important, Bahá'í ontology and this tradition share a similar conceptual framework for analysing reality; in other words, they understand reality and solve philosophical problems by means of similar concepts or categories. Even in the existentialist aspects of Bahá'í philosophy, it bears its strongest affinities to Heidegger and Marcel, two existentialist most heavily influenced by this tradition. In regards to contemporary process thought, Bahá'í ontology bears striking resemblance to the work of Whitehead and de Chardin, two philosophers and scientists on whom the tradition exerted enormous influence. Only with great difficulty could one imagine an argument by which these pervasive and far-reaching similarities could be explained away as mere coincidences and denied as signs of a deep underlying intellectual resemblance.

Second, with this tradition, Bahá'í ontology shares as commitment to a moderate rationalism, that is, a rationalism that recognises its own limits and – at least in the case of the Writings – knows the importance of revelation. However, recognising the limits of rationality does not open the door to irrationality and the rejection of reason but rather to a recognition of the supra-rational, to that which is rational and more not to that which is less than rational. Nowhere in the Writings are irrationality, unreasonableness and illogicality given any positive associations.

Third, there is a commitment to including and doing justice to all aspects of human experience, both the natural and the supra-natural, without rejecting the latter out of hand or necessarily reducing them to physiological – often pathological – human states. In this sense, the tradition with which Bahá'í ontology has such strong affinities is inclusionary.

This finishes our initial reconnaissance of Bahá'í ontology.

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