

Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings

Part 1

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1. Preface: What This Paper Is and Is Not

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings bears numerous similarities to a group of philosophies generally referred to as 'Neoplatonism' which originated in the 3rd century CE with the *Enneads* of Plotinus. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to show that there are (a) foundational principles and ideas on which the Writings and the *Enneads* agree and (b) significant convergences between the Writings and Neoplatonic thought even when there is not always detailed agreement. We hasten to add that our focus is strictly on the ideas themselves and is not concerned with the history of how the *Enneads* entered into Muslim and Persian philosophy nor the vast extent of their influence.¹

It is, of course, not our intention to suggest that the Writings are simply a man-made philosophy, for as Shoghi Effendi tells us, Bahá'u'lláh "has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be."²

Therefore, it must be clearly stated that this paper studies the *philosophical aspects* of the Writings, just as other papers or books study the social, ethical, psychological or economic aspects. The Writings include all these aspects but transcend them all since they are inexhaustible divine revelation. Moreover, this paper follows Shoghi Effendi's suggestion about the importance of "correlating philosophy with Bahá'í

teachings.”³ Neoplatonism may be an ancient philosophy but it is currently undergoing an extraordinary revival not just at the scholastic but also at the popular level.⁴ Consequently, a study of the Writings and Neoplatonism may prove to be timely for engaging in dialogue with those who thinking is sympathetic to Neoplatonism.

It may be objected that Neoplatonism and the Writings has already been studied in Mark Foster’s “*Neo-Platonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Ontology*,” Nima Hazini’s “*Neoplatonism: Framework for a Bahá’í Metaphysics*” and to some extent in Juan Cole’s “*The Concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá’í Writings*.” Valuable as these contributions are, they do not, as we shall see, go nearly far enough in exploring the extent of the similarities between the Writings and the *Enneads*. For the most part, they focus on the theme of emanation which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions in *Some Answered Questions*⁵ as well in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.⁶ However, as we shall see, the similarities go far beyond the subject of emanations.

It is natural to wonder what benefits can be derived from “correlating philosophy with the Bahá’í teachings.”⁷ The first, and most obvious is that doing so builds bridges to other schools of philosophy and to religions that have strong philosophical traditions. Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and Hinduism are examples of such faiths. The better our philosophical understanding of the Bahá’í Faith, the better is our ability to engage in serious, in-depth dialogue on philosophical-theological subjects with these religions. Second, and more specifically, elucidating such correlations encourages bridge building to those religions and philosophies which, like Christianity were heavily influenced by Neoplatonism through the work of Origen, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas among others. Third, understanding the philosophic aspects of the Writings also facilitates apologetics because a philosophic understanding often helps in constructing strong explications for what the Writings say. For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers several proofs of God, one of them being the First Mover argument which requires the rejection of an actual infinite regress as “absurd.”⁸ A philosophic understanding of the problems inherent in the concept of an actual infinite regress

helps us explain why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says this concept is untenable.

2. Ontology

Broadly put, ontology studies the nature of reality, i.e. the nature, constitution and structure of reality as a whole. It concerns such questions as what is real; what are the kinds or categories of things (e.g. sensible realities, intelligible realities); what attributes must all existing things have; and the assumptions about reality underlying various philosophies, world-views and even the sciences.⁹ Ontology differs from the sciences insofar as the sciences focus on one special aspect of physical reality such as living organisms or stars, whereas ontology is concerned with the universal framework or context in which all specific beings are found. Thus, ontology deals with the broadest and most fundamental aspects of reality and for this reason, understanding any system of thought requires insight into its explicit or implicit ontological beliefs.

3. The One and Its Essential Attributes

In the philosophy of Plotinus, the foundational concept is that of the One, or, as it is often called, the Good, which is the source and sustainer of all that exists. For the Bahá'í Writings, the One or the Good, is, of course, known as God, Who is "*the Creator of all*,"¹⁰ from Whom "*all creation sprang into existence*"¹¹ and Who is "*the Sustainer*"¹² of the being of all things.

The One or God is fundamental to Neoplatonic and Bahá'í thought because most if not all subsequent ideas and teachings are directly and/or indirectly related to the existence and nature of the Divine.

One of the most important similar foundational premises concerns the relationship of God or the One – we shall use these terms interchangeably – to its essential attributes. It is important to note that the One or 'the Good' as Plotinus calls it does not have 'goodness' as an attribute but rather is goodness itself. If the One possessed goodness as an attribute,

it would already be divided into two – itself and the attribute it possesses¹³ – and would no longer be an absolute unity. *Some Answered Questions* makes the same point about God's unity with His attributes:

*the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension. If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist; and as Preexistence is necessary, therefore, the sequence of preexistences would become infinite. This is an evident error.*¹⁴

God's unity would be compromised by if there were a difference between His essential attributes and His Essence, and, of course God would be dependent on these attributes which are other than Himself, i.e. these attributes would be "preexistences" just as God is the "Preexistent"¹⁵ and the attributes must exist with Him. There must also be an infinite number of such attributes since God is without limits. However, there would have to be an infinite sequence of "preexistences", i.e. pre-existing attributes between God-in-Himself and His own attributes. Not only does such a division make God multiple, but it is also impossible because according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, there can be no actual infinite regress.¹⁶ (A theoretical infinite regress of abstract numbers is possible, but the number of actual things is always some definite number). Thus, in the Writings, God, like the One is an absolute unity. Plotinus also tells us that the One is one with its activity¹⁷ and its own will.¹⁸ Although the Bahá'í Writings contain no explicit statement on these points, they are logically implied by the teaching of the absolute unity and simplicity of God and the statement that God is identical with His "essential names and attributes."

As noted above, if God were not one with His essential attributes, i.e. if His essential attributes were separate from Him, then He would be dependent on them for His nature to be what it is. This is not feasible. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, "God is absolutely independent;"¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh states that the existence of all things is

*contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God ...*²⁰

The reason God cannot be dependent on anything else is that He is the reason why all other things exist, He is the cause of their being, and therefore, He cannot depend on them. In other words, God, or the One has ontological priority. If He were dependent on anything, this priority would be lost. Plotinus states, "There must be something simple that is before all things, and must be other than all the things which derive from it."²¹ If the One is first, it cannot be dependent on anything.

Another way of saying that the One is absolutely independent is say it is self-sufficient:

This self-sufficiency is the essence of its [the One's] unity. Something there must be Supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need ... Any manifold [phenomena], anything beneath the Unity is dependent.²²

Plotinus refers to the unity of the One because the One's condition of absolute unity requires it to be completely independent of anything else; if it were not, its unity would be a 'hostage' to other things, and, therefore, not absolute. Bahá'u'lláh states categorically that "God is Self-Sufficient, above any need of His creatures,"²³ an idea that is re-enforced by also referring to God as "Self-subsistent."²⁴ In other words, God's existence is completely independent of anything else. The One is absolutely self-sufficient, having no need of anything else and exists, so to speak, in and through itself.²⁵ Moreover, God, or the One, is His own good i.e. goodness Itself and has no higher good to which to aspire: He is "self-related and self-tending,"²⁶ i.e. tending toward Himself which is, in effect, an affirmation of self-unity. This accords with the Writings' reference to "the Oneness and unity of God."²⁷ This in turn leads us to be aware of the simplicity, i.e. non-composite nature of God, i.e. the simplicity of God which is one of the reasons God is eternal, not subject to decay: "compositions are destructible"²⁸ while simple things like God or the One or the

rational soul are not. By definition they have no parts into which they can decay.

The fact that the One is also beyond being²⁹ is another way of pointing to its unity and self-sufficiency. The One cannot be identified with 'being' because the One is the necessary precondition for all 'being,'³⁰ which requires a dyad of matter and form and the resulting multiplicity. Such multiplicity is incompatible with the One. 'Being' is what the One bestows upon its emanations; it is what humans experience but is not appropriate to the One. "It is precisely because there is nothing within the One that all things are from it; in order that Being may be brought about, the source must be no Being but Being's generator."³¹ 'Being' as we shall see later is established by the Nous which is the first hypostasis to emanate from the One.

4. The Uniqueness of the One

This unity of God makes God ontologically unique, since all things besides God are composites. This is especially evident in material creation in which all things are composites of atoms.³² Indeed, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

*all things are composites of four causes: the existence of everything depends upon four causes – the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause ... Therefore, this chair is essentially phenomenal, for It is preceded by a cause, and Its existence depends upon causes.*³³

This analysis cannot possibly apply to God or the One, Who has no causes at all; He is not the result of any process of any kind. More specifically, He has no efficient or final cause bringing Him into being for otherwise He would not be the "Preexistent" but secondary to His cause. Plotinus says that the One is its own cause³⁴ which, in effect, is to say, the One has no cause at all since a literal interpretation would mean that the One is divided into cause and effect – which violates its unity. Such a claim also violates logic for to bring itself into existence the One would have to exist before it exists!

Because it has no pre-existing cause, the One exists necessarily, i.e. is a being Who cannot not exist. Unlike phenomenal or contingent beings, God or “Essential pre-existence [God] is an existence which is not preceded by a cause,”³⁵ which is to say that God is not a contingent but a necessary being. The same idea is found in Plotinus’ statement that “There must be something simple before all things, and this must be other than all the things which come after it...”³⁶ Because the One’s existence is not dependent on a preceding cause, its existence is not a mere possibility but a necessity. To argue that God may simply be a ‘potential’ or ‘possible’ is, in effect, to argue that a cause precedes the One to bring it into being which both the Writings and the *Enneads* reject.

God is also not limited by form and matter. God is not matter because if He were, He would be divided (and composite) as matter is, and He is not form because form by definition requires exclusion or limitation³⁷ to be something identifiable, definite and definable. That clashes with His unlimited nature. As Plotinus says, “The Unity is without shape, even shape intellectual.”³⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that “God is unlimited,”³⁹ in any way, which implicitly contains the idea that God is not limited by ‘form.’ If God were material (a stoic concept rejected by Plotinus) He would also be subject to the limitations of time and space and this is impossible for the being whose existence is the necessary pre-condition for the very existence of space and time.

Another way in which God’s unity makes Him unique is that, in the words of Plotinus, “The First remains intact even when other entities spring from it.”⁴⁰ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says of God, “*The Real Speaker, the Essence of Unity, has always been in one condition, which neither changes nor alters, has neither transformation nor vicissitude.*”⁴¹ In other words, creation neither diminishes nor changes the Creator and is, therefore, eternal – which lays the ontological foundation for the belief that there has always been a creation of one kind or another: “*The Creator always had a creation; the rays have always shone and gleamed from the reality of the sun, for without the rays the sun would be opaque darkness.*”⁴² Furthermore, divine unity lays the foundations for the doctrine of emanation, which, as we shall see, both Plotinus and the Writings share. God or the

One cannot be diminished by creation since that would compromise His unity by being 'dissoluble' into separable parts, a method of creation which 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to as "manifestation." Such diminishment would also undermine the simplicity of the One which would scatter into parts. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly contrasts 'manifestation' with "emanation."⁴³ In the latter, the creator and the created are related like "*action from the actor, [or] the writing from the writer,*"⁴⁴ which is to say the writing is not a separable aspect of the writer. We shall discuss this in more detail later.

5. The Question of Creation

The unity of the One and the question of the One's diminishment in creation inevitably raises the issue of how the One can create without undergoing change itself. Any alteration in God introduces the idea of multiplicity – and that is not acceptable. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "*Changes and transformations are not applicable to that eternal reality [God]. Transformation from condition to condition is the attribute of contingent realities.*"⁴⁵ According to Plotinus, the One does not change.⁴⁶ That being the case, how can we explain the undiminished, i.e. unchanged condition of God? Plotinus' answer is that he distinguishes between (a) the act of a thing and (b) the act *from* a thing. As noted Plotinus scholar John Deck says,

There is heat *of* fire which is the same as the fire itself, and a heat that derives *from* fire. When the fire, by remaining just what It is, exercises the heat within Itself which is the Same as Itself, then the heat 'towards the external' ... has already necessarily come to be.⁴⁷

In other words, the fire itself is unchanged even though other things around it are heated. More technically, the One "exercises its own co-subsistent act which is itself."⁴⁸ In short, the act of the thing is the thing itself and the act *from* the thing is towards something else. The first refers to the One's unity, the latter to the One's creativity. The act emanating from the One is distinct from the act of being the One, and therefore, emanation does not change the One.

In keeping with this theme, we might also say that the One acts merely by being, by its presence in the same way that a magnet creates a magnetic field around itself simply by its presence. The field does not diminish the magnet in any way and, like creation, is a dependent correlate of the magnet. Thus, the One's existence is identical to its activity, a fact which yet again emphasises the absolute unity of the One.

Yet another consequence of God's unity and simplicity is that He has no external relations. Bahá'u'lláh says that

*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 ...*⁴⁹

Plotinus says the One is "unrelated to all"⁵⁰ and adds, "We cannot think of the First as moving towards any other; He holds his own manner of being before any other was; even Being we withhold and therefore all relation to beings."⁵¹ "[M]oving towards another" refers to entering relations which is made explicit in the second half of the quote. The reason the One or God has no external relations is that such relations would limit God's independence since the relation would 'tie' Him to something lesser than Himself; this would also compromise His freedom and ontological pre-eminence. Finally, it would also limit God, i.e. deny His essential ontological nature such as self-sufficiency: "This self-sufficing is the essence of its unity. Something there must be supremely adequate, autonomous, all-transcending, most utterly without need."⁵² God, or the One, is radically transcendent.

This lack of external relations is an important matter because it is the basis not only for Plotinus' philosophy of emanationism and intermediary hypostases of the One, but is also the basis for the Bahá'í teaching that an intermediary or Manifestation is necessary:

since 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, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure

*and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*⁵³

In other words, the existence of the Manifestation (or Plotinus' Nous and Soul) are not arbitrary, external impositions on philosophy and theology but are inner logical necessities mandated by the nature of God. For Bahá'ís it is the first indication that the Manifestation is more than a human being divinely elected and is, instead, a Being ontologically different from humanity in essential respects.

Another aspect of the One's radical transcendence is its complete freedom from external constraint. Plotinus tells us that the One (sometimes called the First) is only "determined by its uniqueness and not in any sense of being under compulsion; compulsion did not co-exist with the Supreme but has place only among secondaries..."⁵⁴ The "secondaries" are those things that God created, and, therefore, come after Him ontologically speaking. However, according to Plotinus and the Writings, the "secondaries" have no power over God. In Bahá'í terms, He is the "the One, the All-Powerful, the Almighty, the Unconstrained."⁵⁵ From God's absolute freedom, we may also deduce His omnipresence, since to be truly "All-Powerful" He must be present everywhere, i.e. unconstrained by limits of time and space. According to Plotinus, the One is "everywhere yet nowhere."⁵⁶ God, or the One is, of course, "nowhere" because He is unlike ordinary things which are definitely located in time and space. He is everywhere insofar as He is the necessary pre-condition for the existence of time and space and thus 'is' wherever time and space are found. It should be noted that being a necessary pre-condition for time and space means that the One cannot be identical to them.

6. God Contains All

One of the key features of God or The One is that God 'contains' everything. This, of course, explains why He 'is everywhere.' Plotinus writes,

Everything brought into being under some principle not itself is contained either within its maker or, if there is an intermediate, within that; having a prior

essential to its being it needs that prior always, otherwise it would not be contained at all.⁵⁷

In other words, a being is 'in' some other entity if it depends on that entity for its existence. It is virtually within its source, i.e. is present in its source *qua* the (emanative) action of that source just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the action is virtually present within the speaker, or the writing within the writer.⁵⁸ The idea of containment is also present in the Bahá'í Writings. Bahá'u'lláh writes, "*Likewise hath the eternal King spoken: "No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it."*"⁵⁹ This idea in turn serves to provide ontological foundations for God's omnipresence, for if God is before, after and in everything, then He is obviously present everywhere, i.e. omnipresent as we have noted previously.

At this point a clarification is necessary. Saying that God contains everything because of their dependence on Him does not introduce multiplicity into God Himself. This 'containment' is simply the result of God's ontological position as the apex, i.e. the most inclusive form of being and the source and foundation of all other beings. Moreover, He is the necessary and sufficient condition of their existence and in this sense 'contains' them simply by virtue of His being. We might also say that God contains through His powers or names such as "the Creator." Bahá'u'lláh says, "*His name, the Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant.*"⁶⁰ The virtual containment of things 'within' God or His names is the 'presupposition' of their existence in the name of 'Creator.'

However, because the One contains all things does not mean that Plotinus or the Writings advocate some form of pantheism which identifies God and His creation. Plotinus makes it clear that the One transcends all and though it contains all things it is not any of these things: "All in that region [of creation] is the One and not the One – nothing else because deriving thence, yet not that because the One is giving it forth is not merged into it."⁶¹ Things 'are' the One because they are the signs of its creative power, but they are not the One because the One cannot be limited by any of the

conditions to which created things are subject. This is precisely 'Abdu'l-Bahá's point:

*the superior reality does not descend nor abase itself to inferior states; then how could it be that the Universal Reality of God, which is freed from all descriptions and qualifications, notwithstanding its absolute sanctity and purity, should resolve itself into the forms of the realities of the creatures, which are the source of imperfections? This is a pure imagination which one cannot conceive.*⁶²

Supporting pantheism would, in effect, be an admission that God is not a simple, i.e. non-composite unity but rather is dispersed throughout creation – a belief that 'Abdu'l-Bahá associates with “manifestation.”⁶³ From this doctrine we can also deduce why the Writings reject the Christian concept of the incarnation: God cannot diminish Himself and descend into a phenomenal being. It violates His very nature to do so.

The One is omnipresent not only as an efficient cause bringing all things into being, it is also present as their final cause. As Plotinus says,

*The Good [the One] is that on which all else depends, towards which all Existences aspire as to their source and their need, while Itself is without need, sufficient to Itself, aspiring to no other, the measure and Term of all ...*⁶⁴

The One, God, is both the efficient and final cause of all existence, i.e. the source and ground of their being as well as the goal for which they strive, each in a manner appropriate to their nature.

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, “*The Creator of all is One God. From this same God all creation sprang into existence, and He is the one goal, towards which everything in nature yearns,*”⁶⁵ Bahá'u'lláh describes God as the “*Desire of all created things.*”⁶⁶ By being the ‘Great Attractor’ and drawing all things towards Him, God, the One is the final cause which will complete their being for in the process of evolving towards God, they will attain their own highest perfection. The precise nature of this perfection depends on the nature of the evolving being: for an

atom it may be motion, for an animal the life of instinct, for a human being, a life dedicated to the spirit.

The belief that God is the final cause of all things also indicates that creation, the universe, is teleological in its deepest nature, i.e. goal oriented. This, in turn, suggests that the development of nature is not purely a matter of chance, i.e. "is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement."⁶⁷ Consequently, any cosmological explanations that ignore teleology must be intrinsically incomplete, a viewpoint that obviously has enormous implications for the Bahá'í teachings about the harmony of science and religion. Science rejects teleological explanations and this position will be difficult to reconcile with the teleological views of the Writings.

7. The Knowledge of the One

One of Plotinus' most surprising statements is that the One does not have knowledge – at least not knowledge in the human sense which depends on a division between subject and object. If the One possess this kind of knowledge, then knowledge and the One are distinct, and this in turn implies a division in the One. Thus, it cannot have objects of knowledge.

The One, as transcending Intellect [Nous, the "First Mind"] transcends knowing; above All need, it is above the need of knowing which pertains solely to the Secondary Nature [Nous] ... The Transcendent, thus, neither knows itself nor is known in itself.⁶⁸

If God or the One had objects of thought, He would no longer be independent since He would need these objects in order to know them. Knowledge, after all, requires a subject and an object.

This would also compromise the unity of God, since the act of thinking about things creates a division within the thinker, i.e. between the thinker himself and the object of thought. Insofar as God does not have knowledge or think as we do, God is beyond knowledge and thought, i.e. He includes and transcends them. Oddly enough, as Plotinus points out, this means that God does not know Himself as an object of

knowledge – although of course He may know Himself in ways that transcend the human mode of knowledge. The Good does not need self-consciousness.⁶⁹

Furthermore, God, the One, is not limited by ‘intellection’, i.e. rational discursive thought conditioned by the subject/object division and the matter/form distinction⁷⁰ which characterizes created beings. As Plotinus says, “intellection and the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] must be characteristics of beings coming later.”⁷¹ Elsewhere Plotinus says,

In sum this intellection of the Good is impossible: I do not mean that it is impossible to have intellection of the Good – we may admit that possibility – but there can be no intellection by the Good itself, for this would be to include the inferior with the good... Anyone making the Good at once Thinker and Thought identifies it with Being ...⁷²

According to Plotinus, “intellection seems to have been given as an aid to the diviner but weaker beings, an eye to the blind.”⁷³ Humans are among these “diviner” beings who possess intellection.

The Bahá'í Writings agree with Plotinus' basic teachings on this issue of the absolutely unique nature of God's knowledge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

The Prophets say, *The Knowledge of God has no need of the existence of beings, but the knowledge of the creature needs the existence of things known; if the Knowledge of God had need of any other thing, then it would be the knowledge of the creature, and not that of God. 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.... The phenomenal knowledge has need of things known; the Preexistent Knowledge is independent of their existence.*⁷⁴

In other words, God does not require objects of knowledge to know. While such knowing is inconceivable to human

beings, the necessity of this attribute can be logically deduced from God's unity and simplicity. The other characteristics of God's knowing as outlined by Plotinus – the lack of the subject/object and matter/form division, the absence of self-consciousness as we experience it and the lack of ratiō discursive intellection – all can be logically deduced from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's foregoing statement. To the best of my knowledge, the Writings do not contain explicit statements on these issues, but they are implicitly present in other teachings about God not requiring an object of knowledge.

This difference between human and divine knowledge brings us to a fundamental principle of ontology and epistemology in the *Enneads* and the Writings. In both of them, ontology and epistemology, i.e. the nature of reality and our position in it and what we can or cannot know are closely inter-related. What we are able to know depends on our ontological degree or condition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*Difference of condition is an obstacle to knowledge; the inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior degree. How then can the phenomenal reality comprehend the Preexistent Reality? Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality.*⁷⁵

In other words, beings which stand lower in the hierarchy of being cannot comprehend or understand the nature of those beings above them. “*The mineral cannot imagine the growing power of the plant. The tree cannot understand the power of movement in the animal,*”⁷⁶ says 'Abdu'l-Bahá and adds, “*All superior kingdoms are incomprehensible to the inferior; how therefore could It be possible that the creature, man, should understand the almighty Creator of all?*”⁷⁷

Humankind cannot adequately understand God because “*That which contains is superior to that which is contained.*”⁷⁸ We have already noted that ‘contained’ in this context means ‘dependent on.’ By being ‘dependent on’ the One, all things are inferior or secondary to it both in the order of being (ontology) and in the order of logic, i.e. the One is the logical pre-condition for the others. Because God occupies the supreme ontological position, “the essential knowledge of God

surrounds, in the same way, the realities of things.”⁷⁹ That is why God has perfect understanding of them. We, however, cannot form an adequate or complete conception of the One because it is not limited by any of the conditions of existence that limit us. We hasten to add that this does not necessarily mean that all our conceptions are false. Logically, incompleteness and falsity are not the same things since the latter refers to a defect in the content of a statement while the former does not.

It should be noted that in the Bahá'í Writings, the use of the word “comprehend” combines the meanings of ‘contain’ and ‘understand,’ i.e. combines the ontological and epistemological meanings of the word. For example, “*Minds are powerless to comprehend God*”⁸⁰ exhibits both meanings: minds cannot contain God, i.e. be independent of God, and therefore, they cannot understand Him more than their ontological position allows. “*For the phenomenal reality can comprehend the Preexistent attributes only to the extent of the human capacity.*”⁸¹ In a statement that explicitly shows both meanings simultaneously, He says,

*For comprehension is the result of encompassing – embracing must be, so that comprehension may be – and the Essence of Unity surrounds all and is not surrounded.*⁸²

Thus, we can see how in the Writings, ontology and epistemology are closely correlated and cannot be understood apart from each other. The same is true in the *Enneads*: the One which is the pre-condition for all existence and which transcends all particular existences cannot be adequately known by what it emanates.

8. Knowledge About God

This, of course, raises a serious issue: how can we learn about the One or God? The idea that God is completely unknowable in anyway whatsoever is untenable for, among other reasons, such a statement even refutes itself. To say that God is unknowable is already to say that we know at least one

thing about Him. The Writings, however, tell us more precisely what such phrases as 'knowing God' actually mean.

*Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality. This knowledge of the attributes is also proportioned to the capacity and power of man; it is not absolute. Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man.*⁸³

In other words, we know as much as human capacity allows about God's attributes or names but not about God-in-Himself. Moreover we do not learn directly about God but rather through the reliable instruction of the Manifestation.

Plotinus agrees that the One-in-itself is unknowable:

Certainly the Absolute is none of the things of which it is the source – its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it – not existence, not essence, not life – since it is that which transcends all these.⁸⁴

Elsewhere he says, "nothing can be affirmed of it [the One];"⁸⁵ the One is ineffable, it cannot be written or spoken.⁸⁶

We do not, it is true grasp it by knowledge, but that does not mean that we are utterly void of it ; we hold it not so as to state it, but so as to be able to speak *about* it. And *we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is*: we are, in fact, speaking of it in light of its sequels ...⁸⁷

Thus, we can deny imperfections to the One, and we can talk 'about' it in our limited human terms derived from our experience from created things, i.e. "its sequels." As Dominic O'Meara says,

When we speak 'about' the One, saying that it is the cause, we are in fact speaking about ourselves, saying that we are casually dependent and expressing what we experience in this condition of dependence ... In this way the One remains ineffable in itself, even though we speak about it.⁸⁸

We can only speak of the One in our terms, not its terms.

For Their part, the Bahá'í Writings also agree that God, the One, is unknowable in Himself and knowable only in our human terms. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "*it is certain that the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is known with regard to its attributes.*"⁸⁹ In other words, knowledge *about* (not *of*) God is available, but we must understand the term 'knowledge' correctly:

*Nevertheless, we speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections ... It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.*⁹⁰

Here, too, we observe that when we speak of God — as we cannot avoid doing — then our speech must be understood in a certain way, as a denial of imperfection rather than as an attribution of perfections. This is precisely what Plotinus says: "*we can and do state what it is not, while we are silent as to what it is.*"⁹¹ The one thing God or the One cannot be is imperfect. For Bahá'ís, however, reliable knowledge of God comes from the Manifestation of the age.

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.⁹²

Elsewhere 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

with reference to this plane of existence, every statement and elucidation is defective, all praise and all description are unworthy, every conception is vain,

*and every meditation is futile. But for this Essence of the essences, this Truth of truths, this Mystery of mysteries, there are reflections, auroras, appearances and resplendencies in the world of existence. The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God. All the perfections, the bounties, the splendors which come from God are visible and evident in the Reality of the Holy Manifestations.*⁹³

This means that for Bahá'ís, there is a reliable source of knowledge appropriately adapted to human capacity and that all discourse about God is not necessarily futile if guided by the Manifestations. Naturally, humans need to undergo spiritual exercises to prepare themselves to accept this knowledge (all receive this knowledge but not all choose to accept it) of God, but the fact remains it is available for those who choose to accept it. Nonetheless, in the Bahá'í view, our personal efforts while necessary are not sufficient to attain this knowledge: *“Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross.”*⁹⁴

*Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the Mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of heedlessness.*⁹⁵

Making an effort on our own is the necessary pre-condition for the completion of the quest for knowledge by the holy spirit or ‘Mystic Herald.’ With Plotinus, however, there is no

counterpart to the holy spirit or the “Mystic Herald” to fully actualize our quest for knowledge of the One. Nor is there in the *Enneads* any guarantor of the knowledge we receive by our own efforts, whereas in the case of the Writings, there is. In the *Enneads*, we are completely left to our own spiritual efforts in the quest for knowledge of the One.

9. The One and Emanation

Having found numerous and far-reaching agreements between Plotinus' and the Bahá'í Writings' concept of God or the One, we shall now turn our attention to the issue of how the One creates, i.e. to the issue of emanation. It should be noted that the issue some controversy. Dominic O'Meara for example, prefers the word “derivation”⁹⁶ since ‘emanation’ has too many problematical connotations. Lloyd P Gerson challenges the applicability of the very concept of ‘emanation’ as traditionally understood in studying Plotinus.⁹⁷ However, this paper shall retain the traditional term ‘emanation’ not only because it is used in the Bahá'í Writings but also because it is the term most commonly used terms in discussions of Neoplatonism.

Perhaps the best way to understand the concept of ‘emanation’ is to examine one of the most frequently used images of emanation both in Plotinus and in the Writings. Speaking of the One in relationship to its creations, Plotinus says,

The only reasonable explanation of [creative] act flowing from it lies in the analogy of light from the sun. The entire intellectual order [a lower level of creation] may be figured as *a kind of light with the One in repose at its summit* as its King: but this manifestation is *not cast out from it* [the sun] ... but the One *shines eternally*, resting upon the Intellectual Realm [Nous]; this [Intellectual Realm] *not identical with its source* ...⁹⁸

We observe important aspects of emanationism in this selection: creation as a ‘light’ or efflux from the sun; the unchanged and unchanging sun as the source of the light; the

source lasts eternally; the distinction between the light and the sun. (Readers must, of course, bear in mind that it was generally believed until relatively recent times that the sun was unchanged and undiminished by the process of giving light.) Noteworthy, too, is the ontological distinction between the Creator, “source” and what is created (the Nous).

Elsewhere, Plotinus writes that the relationship between the One and its creation

must be a circumradiation – produced from the Supreme but from the Supreme unaltering – and may be compared to the brilliant light encircling the sun and ceaselessly generated from that unchanging substance.⁹⁹

Here, too, we observe the sun image with its emphasis on the unchanging, and, by implication, undiminished being of the sun as well as the surrounding. The fact that the sun radiates “ceaselessly” also suggests another Neoplatonic and Bahá'í teaching, viz. the eternity of the created world, i.e. that there has always been a creation.

The Bahá'í Writings also compare God to the sun and creation to the ‘circumradiant’ light.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá informs us that “*Creation is like the sunlight; God is the sun. This light comes forth from the sun; that does not mean that the sun has become the light. The light emanates from the sun.*”¹⁰⁰ Here, too, we observe the ontological distinction between the sun (God) and the light (creation) and that sun itself is not dispersed into the light. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes such a dispersal as ‘manifestation’ which He clearly distinguishes from emanation:

But the appearance through manifestation is the manifestation of the branches, leaves, blossoms and fruit from the seed; for the seed in its own essence becomes branches and fruits, and its reality enters into the branches, the leaves and fruits. 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.

*But if this were so, pure independence would become mere poverty, and true existence would become nonexistence, and this is impossible.*¹⁰¹

God, the sun, does not manifest Himself because to do so would not only disperse God into phenomenal parts and, thereby, demote Him to the level of His creations, but also would diminish God Himself. The concept of emanation is intended precisely to avoid such suggestions. The importance of this point cannot be overstressed because it is the very fact of non-dispersal that distinguishes emanationism from all forms of pantheism. 'Abdu'l-Bahá categorically rejects pantheism when He says, "[T]he sun does not descend and does not abase itself,"¹⁰² a position with which Plotinus agrees.

It should be mentioned in passing that although Plotinus uses other images to illustrate the nature of the One and its emanations, the underlying implications are always those cited above. "Imagine a spring that has no source outside itself; it gives itself to all the rivers, yet is never exhausted by what they take, but remains always integrally as it was,"¹⁰³ he says, and then adds,

think of the Life coursing throughout some mighty tree while yet it is the *stationary Principle of the whole, in no sense scattered over all that extent* but, as it were, vested in the root: it is the giver of the entire and manifold life of the tree, but remains *unmoved itself*, not manifold but the Principle of that manifold life. And this surprises no one: though it is in fact astonishing *how all that varied vitality springs from the unvarying*, and how that very manifoldness [multiplicity] could not be *unless before the multiplicity there were something all singleness*; for, *the Principle is not broken into parts to make the total; on the contrary, such partition would destroy both*; nothing would come into being if its cause, thus broken up, changed character.¹⁰⁴

This passage also shows the Plotinian principle that multiplicity must be preceded by oneness, something emphasised when he writes, "Standing before all things, there must exist a Simplex [the One] differing from all its sequel, self-

gathered not interblended with the forms that rise from it.”¹⁰⁵ Dominic O’Meara calls this the “principle of Prior Simplicity.”¹⁰⁶ According to him, this idea is common both to Neoplatonism and science, which both seek to explain the present state of the universe by reference to a simpler state, i.e. deriving the complex from the simple, or, in the terms of ancient philosophy, the many from the one. “Something all singleness” must precede the creation of many. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms the same principle in various applications when He states,

it is necessary, therefore, that we should know what each of the important existences was in the beginning – *for there is no doubt that in the beginning the origin was one: the origin of all numbers is one and not two.* Then it is evident that in the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element ... This composition and arrangement, through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization ...¹⁰⁷

Applied to ontology or metaphysics, the “principle of Prior Simplicity,” inevitably leads to postulating a single source for the entire universe, a concept that in physics may be termed a ‘singularity’ while in ontology the same idea is expressed as ‘the One’ or ‘God.’ The significance of this principle is that it highlights an underlying similarity between science both in theory and practice and the philosophy inherent in Plotinus and the Bahá'í Writings.

10. Why Emanation?

If the One exists, why does it create? Trouble-free as it might appear, this question, as we shall see, can lead to some difficult considerations about necessity and free will. According to Plotinus, the One “is perfect and, in our metaphor has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new.”¹⁰⁸ In *Enneads* V, 4, Plotinus explicates the universal principle that underlies the concept of emanation:

If The First is perfect, utterly perfect above all, and is the beginning of all power, it must be the most

powerful of all that is, and all other powers must act in some partial imitation of it. Now other beings, coming to perfection, are observed to generate; they are unable to remain self-closed; they produce: and this is true not merely of beings endowed with will, but of growing things where there is no will; even lifeless objects impart something of themselves, as far as they may; fire warms ... How then could the most perfect remain self-set- the First Good, the Power towards all, how could it grudge or be powerless to give of itself, and how at that would it still be the Source?¹⁰⁹

The principle that 'perfection generates beyond itself' is modelled by the One and imitated by all other things, each in its own degree.¹¹⁰ The One sets this example, and to do otherwise, i.e. to be 'grudging' of its inexhaustible power would be less than perfect by the standard the One itself has set for itself. Such superabundant generosity is the only appropriate attribute to its infinite nature.

The Bahá'í Writings have a similar explanation for the principle underlying God's creation. The most succinct statement comes from *Gleanings*: "His name, the Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant."¹¹¹ In a more detailed explanation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

the reality of Divinity is characterized by certain names and attributes. Among these names are Creator, Resuscitator, Provider, the All-Present, Almighty, Omniscient and Giver. These names and attributes of Divinity are eternal and not accidental. This is a very subtle point which demands close attention. Their existence is proved and necessitated by the appearance of phenomena. For example, Creator presupposes creation, Resuscitator implies resuscitation, Provider necessitates provision; otherwise, these would be empty and impossible names. Merciful evidences an object upon which mercy is bestowed. If mercy were not manifest, this attribute of God would not be realized ...Therefore, the divine names and attributes

*presuppose the existence of phenomena implied by those names and attributes ...*¹¹²

First, we should note that these attributes are “not accidental,” they are essential, i.e. attributes identical with God’s Essence.¹¹³ This is how God wills Himself to be. Second, the name of “Provider” calls to mind Plotinus’ belief that the One must be generous, not grudging; must have an abundance from which to provide willingly. The same idea is implicit in the names “Giver,” “All-Mighty,” and “Creator.” In other words, the idea that God, the One, the “All-Possessing”¹¹⁴ creates out of generosity and inherent wealth. Third, the passage indicates that these creations are necessary because otherwise these “attribute[s] of God would not be realized.” This leads to a serious issue, namely, the freedom of God, or the One.

Plotinus asserts the One’s freedom, when he writes,

It [the One] is, therefore, in a sense determined – determined, I mean by its uniqueness and not in any sense being under compulsion; compulsion did not coexist with the Supreme but has place only among the secondaries this uniqueness [of the One] is not from outside.¹¹⁵

This means that freedom of will is established whenever we act without pressure from external compulsions that force us to do one thing or another. In the case of the One, which is free of all external relations – as is God in the Bahá'í view as we recall – there obviously cannot be any external compulsion acting on the One. Thus, the actions of the One are entirely its own; if it exercises will, it is pure self-will. The One’s generosity is free. The Bahá'í Writings lead us to the identical conclusion. God is the “All-Powerful,”¹¹⁶ which clearly tells that there is nothing external to God which can exercise compulsion on Him. That being the case, His actions are self-evidently free.

What about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that if there were no recipients of mercy, God’s name of the Merciful “*would not be realized?*”¹¹⁷ Does this not suggest compulsion, i.e. requirements being exercised on God insofar as there is a standard that He must meet? To answer this, we must distinguish between verbal and logical necessity. For example,

saying that God must create beings for His mercy to be revealed is an example of verbal necessity; the wording — “must” — appears to suggest that God is being externally compelled, but in actual fact, He is not so. God’s unique nature and will have willed the situation to be such that the revelation of His mercy includes the greatest number of beings. Logically, He cannot be compelled by external forces and so, any ‘compulsion’ must come from within Him — but that is the very definition of freedom. The only constraints on the One or God are ‘constraints’ of its own nature, which are not distinct from it but rather, identical with it.

11. Emanation and the Emanative Order

The concept of emanations is key to any comparison between the Writings and the *Enneads*. There is no doubt that the Bahá’í Writings advocate emanation as the means of creating and structuring reality. For this reason, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Chapter 53 of *Some Answered Questions* expends considerable effort in explaining the difference between emanation and manifestation. In manifestation

*the seed in its own essence becomes branches and fruits, and its reality enters into the branches, the leaves and fruits. 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.*¹¹⁸

The seed develops into the branches and leaves and is thus ontologically one with them. In contrast, light emanates from the sun; the sun is not changed or diminished and remains ontologically distinct from the sun. Therefore, “*Therefore, all creatures emanate from God.*”¹¹⁹

With this statement ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has already shown how Bahá’í cosmology shares an emanationist foundation with the *Enneads*. However, the similarities run further. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says,

all creatures emanate from God – that is to say, it is by God that all things are realized, and by Him that all beings have attained to existence. The first thing which emanated from God is that universal reality, which the ancient philosophers termed the “First Mind,” and which the people of Bahá call the “First Will.” This emanation, in that which concerns its action in the world of God, is not limited by time or place; it is without beginning or end – beginning and end in relation to God are one ...

Though the “First Mind” is without beginning, it does not become a sharer in the preexistence of God, for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness, and it has not the power to become an associate of God and like unto Him in preexistence.¹²⁰

Here we observe agreement with Plotinus' statement that Nous or “Mind” or “First Mind” is the first level of emanation from the One, or God. The “philosophers” to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers are in all likelihood the Neoplatonists, i.e. followers of Plotinus or at least those influenced by Plotinus who have adopted his emanationist schema. Further, we note that Nous or “First Mind” is not constrained by time or space, just as it is not in Plotinus, according to whom, time and space are part of nature as an emanation of the Soul.¹²¹ In other words, Nous is ontologically superior to time and space. For Plotinus, as for the Writings, Nous has always existed but, unlike God, or the One, it is not its own precondition for existence, i.e. does not have “the preexistence of God.” Thus it remains ontologically inferior to the One, because in both systems, it is derived from the One and, therefore, dependent on it.

According to Plotinus, the order of emanations runs as follows:

THE ONE

NOUS

SOUL – higher Soul (receptive)

SOUL – lower Soul (active)

Contains NATURE

Briefly, the One emanates the Nous, which contemplates the One and becomes an image of it. It is important to bear in mind that in Plotinus, contemplation is itself a form of creation/emanation and, therefore, the Nous emanates the Soul which is itself an image of the Nous.¹²²

Here is how Plotinus describes the emanation of the Nous, sometimes translated as 'Spirit,'¹²³ the Intellect, "the Intellectual Principle" or "the Divine Mind."¹²⁴

Seeking nothing, possessing nothing, lacking nothing, the One is perfect and, in our metaphor, has *overflowed*, and *its exuberance has produced the new*; this product has turned again to its begetter and been filled and has become its contemplator and so an *Intellectual-Principle*.¹²⁵

The first product of the One's superabundance is the Nous or Mind, which represents a new, secondary and lower level of reality, insofar as the Nous depends on the One. Indeed, the Nous is the beginning of Being, for as Plotinus says, "the source [the One] must be no Being but Being's generator ... [the Nous] establishes Being."¹²⁶ In other words, the One, or God Himself is above Being because He is the necessary (and sufficient) pre-condition for Being itself, i.e. "Being's generator." If He were not, then He would, in a significant way, be of the same ontological kind as His creations and the Nous. This negates the absolute uniqueness of the One or God and is an impossible state of affairs for Plotinus and the Writings.

Plotinus also mentions that like all existing things, the Nous represents "in image the engendering archetype,"¹²⁷ i.e. the Nous reflects its archetype, the One. However, because "all that is fully achieved engenders"¹²⁸, i.e. 'creates' or emanates a subsequent, ontologically lower level of being, the Nous reflects the attributes of the One into the still lower, i.e. more dependent levels of being that emanate from Nous itself. In the Plotinian schema, this means that the Nous emanates the Soul

and with the Soul, we have nature. Of course the Nous can only do this because it is turned or oriented towards the One since the “offspring must seek and love the begetter.”¹²⁹

This latter point is worth exploring: the Nous fulfills its own being by turning towards the One, i.e. by reflecting the light of the One like a perfect mirror. This theme of turning towards the One runs through the *Enneads* and the Bahá'í Writings; in the latter, for example, the Manifestations are described as

*Primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty, and grace, are made manifest.*¹³⁰

The assertion that the “Primal Mirrors” are “expressions” of God, recalls ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “*The proceeding through emanation is like the coming forth of the action from the actor, of the writing from the writer.*”¹³¹ The “action” and the “writing” are expressions of the actor or writer; they come from the actor or writer but are not the same. In short, they emanate from their source. Thus, to say that the “Primal Mirrors” are an “expression” of God is to say that They are emanations but, of course, emanations with ontological priority over lower levels of reality.

*The dawning-place of these splendors, the place of these reflections, and the appearance of these manifestations are the Holy Dawning-places, the Universal Realities and the Divine Beings, Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God.*¹³²

Elsewhere the Writings say,

These Tabernacles of holiness, these primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these gems of divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion,

*mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty and grace, are made manifest.*¹³³

Unlike all other things which, in their own way and indirectly by way of the Manifestation, also reflect God's light, the "Universal Realities" reflect God's light or creative power directly; that is why They are "the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of God." The word "universal" also suggests that they affect all of reality and not only the aspects of reality known to us. The Writings also say, "*In the Manifestation of God, the perfectly polished mirror, appear the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.*"¹³⁴ In other words, the "Primal Mirrors," the Manifestations, make the "names and attributes of God" apparent or "manifest," in a form comprehensible to lower levels of creation. Here we observe how the Manifestations fulfill the major function of the Plotinian Nous.

Let us now turn our attention to the Plotinian Soul. The Soul reflects the Nous but not in a straight forward way since the Soul itself has two aspects. First, there is a higher or "pure"¹³⁵ aspect which reflects the Platonic Ideas, or, as we shall see, the names of God; this is the Soul-in-itself which is sometimes described as the "intelligible world."¹³⁶ Second, there is also an active 'lower aspect' of the Soul which emanates nature itself. As Plotinus says, "soul has a double efficacy, its act *within* itself and its act *from* within outwards towards the new production."¹³⁷ The act "within" itself is the unknowable inner essence of the higher Soul and its act "from itself" is the 'lower' Soul which directs action outward.

To explain why Soul creates the natural world, Plotinus asserts,

In the absence of body, soul could not have gone forth, since there is no other place to which its nature would allow it to descend. Since go forth it must, it will generate a place for itself; at once, body also exists.¹³⁸

The Soul sees the darkness beneath it – the light of God has reached its emanative limit or lowest level of ontologically possible being.¹³⁹ Then the Soul "by seeing [contemplating] brings to shape [form]"¹⁴⁰ creates the ordered universe we

know. Dominic O'Meara tells us that "nature is not a reality separate from soul in the same way that soul is a reality separate from intellect [Nous]." ¹⁴¹ Nature receives only the faintest signs of this forming activity, but it is enough to make an image of the One present in all things. Similarly, the Bahá'í Writings say,

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. Methinks, but for the potency of that revelation, no being could ever exist. ¹⁴²

Even the light imagery here is consistent with the *Enneads*. In the Plotinian sense of 'dependence' Soul contains nature; therefore, "The Soul bears it up, and it lies within, no fragment of it unsharing." ¹⁴³ No aspect of nature is outside of or beyond Soul which gives life to the natural world.

However, at this point we have reached an important difference between the Writings and the *Enneads*. Whereas Plotinus separates the functions of the Nous and the Soul, the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation includes the functions of the Plotinian Nous and Soul, i.e. the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation combines the functions of the first two emanations in the Plotinian system. Bahá'u'lláh says of the Manifestations,

all else besides these Manifestations, live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace. ¹⁴⁴

Here Bahá'u'lláh categorically asserts that "all besides these Manifestations" live by the "Will" of the Manifestations, Who, in this sense have the life-giving function of the Plotinian World Soul. It is by the Manifestations that all things "have their being," i.e. have their existence. This is exactly what the Soul does for everything in nature. Another similarity between the Manifestation and the Soul is that "the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing

realities.”¹⁴⁵ Nature, as Plotinus tells us, is contained by the Soul.

At this point a question arises. In the *Enneads* “Soul contemplates [Nous] and creates matter.”¹⁴⁶ Low as it is on the ontological scale of being, matter enables the One’s attributes to appear in the actual things in the world of nature. May we conclude that the Manifestation creates matter in a manner analogous to the Soul? It is certainly tempting to answer affirmatively especially in light of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement:

*And since 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, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.*¹⁴⁷

The fact that there is no “direct” tie between God and creation, might also suggest that the intermediary between the “transient and the Eternal” and the “contingent and the Absolute” could have been the agent of creation. This agent would also be responsible for the creation of matter. However, this only a logical possibility which cannot be supported by textual evidence from the Writings. Therefore, we must leave this question unanswered until such time as further research can clarify the issue.

Let us now examine a diagram comparing the emanative order in the Writings and in the *Enneads*.

THE ONE
NOUS

GOD
MANIFESTATION /
KINGDOM
“heavenly station”, “primal
Mirror”

SOUL – – higher Soul
(contemplative)

MANIFESTATION /
KINGDOM

– physical, rational
embodied station

SOUL – – lower Soul (active) WORLD OF CREATION
 Contains NATURE

Most obvious here is that in both the Writings and in the *Enneads* reality or existence is divided into three aspects. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, existence is 'divided; into three aspects, i.e. "*the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation.*"¹⁴⁸ The Manifestation is the intermediary between the "world of God" and the "world of creation."¹⁴⁹ In Plotinus, we have the One, the Nous and the Soul. In both cases we observe a tripartite division of existence. We have already noted the similarity of function in the three "hypostases" as Plotinus calls them.

12. The Principle of 'Turning Towards God'

Clearly, in the *Enneads* and the Bahá'í Writings, the principle of 'turning toward the source' is established at both the ontological and spiritual-ethical level. Indeed, the two levels are related insofar as the highest ontological 'being,' i.e. the One or God, is also the highest spiritual and ethical good. Ontology thus determines ethics; the actual structure of the universe determines the hierarchy of goods we are intended to pursue with God at the apex and matter at the nadir. The order or scale of being establishes the scale of values. The two order of being and value are therefore correlated. As William Inge writes,

the hierarchies of existence and of value must ultimately be found to correspond ... it follows that that order of phenomena which has the lowest degree of reality in the existential scale must have the lowest degree of value in the ethical or spiritual scale.¹⁵⁰

It is important to note that turning towards God is not limited to the Manifestations. All beings do, and for humankind this is particularly important because that is the only way to realise our unique spiritual potential as humans. In many places throughout the Writings, we are reminded to turn

our minds and hearts to God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that the Manifestations

*must so educate the human reality that it may become the center of the divine appearance, to such a degree that the attributes and the names of God shall be resplendent in the mirror of the reality of man, and the holy verse "We will make man in Our image and likeness" shall be realized.*¹⁵¹

In Plotinian terms, only if we turn to our "begetter" will we reflect the divine names and powers, and, thereby, make the most of our potentials and be 'most ourselves.' This theme is supported by the various exhortations to "*polish the mirrors of our hearts*"¹⁵² which implicitly contains the idea of turning towards God since otherwise, the mirror will not reflect God's light. Our spiritual task is to reflect God's image, as Soul and nature reflect the image of the Nous and the Nous reflects the image and light of the One.

The implications of this correlation between the ontological and ethical are profound. For example, it means that ethics have an objective basis and are not only matters of personal choice. The correlation between the ontological and ethical orders allows us to assert that at least some ethical choices are objectively right or wrong precisely because they agree or conflict with the scale of being. Such choices are 'unnatural' because they violate the order of nature as established by the One. The most obvious illustration of this is the categorical Bahá'í rejection of materialism, at the ontological, scientific and social/consumer levels. Making matter the foundation of ontological and/or scientific explanation and the highest goal of human aspiration is wrong because doing so literally turns the "hierarchy of existence" on its head by giving priority to that which is last. Such an inversion is, in the deepest sense, 'unnatural,' i.e. contradicts the divinely established scale of being or "hierarchy of existence."

Consequently, both the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* adhere to a concept of natural law – based on the scale of being – as binding on human beings. 'Natural law,' of course, does not mean that humans model themselves on nature as found on the material nature; rather, it means that we model ourselves on

our essential, spiritual nature as reflected in the “hierarchy of existence”: “*Man is, in reality, a spiritual being, and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy.*”¹⁵³ Many arguments against ‘natural law theory’ fail on this ground: they assume that ‘nature’ means ‘physical nature’ – and then point to animal behaviors in nature as a way of justifying similar behaviors in humans. “Natural law’ in the sense of the Writings or the *Enneads* does not agree with this. In their view, certain behaviors are rejected because they are inappropriate to humankind’s spiritual nature or essence based on its high place in the “hierarchy of existence.”¹⁵⁴ These behaviors are inappropriate because they show our lower animal aspects dominating our higher spiritual aspects,¹⁵⁵ which is ‘unnatural’ precisely because it gives the lower precedence over the higher. It inverts the “hierarchy of existence.”

The Plotinian and Bahá'í view of ethics may also be described as ‘essentialist’ insofar as right and wrong are based on a creature’s place in the scale of being. This should not be confused with ethical relativism since in the essentialist view, there are objective standards by which to evaluate our actions. Differences in standards arise from differences in place in the scale of being, not from our personal viewpoints or preferences. However, beings that share the same essence, e.g. humankind, are subject to the same standard.

Another similarity between the Writings and the *Enneads* is that the higher levels of reality have knowledge not available to the lower levels. For example, the Nous contains all lower levels of reality because they depend on it (and ultimately on the One). Therefore, the Nous is cognizant of all that pertains to these lower levels because it contains them virtually and knows them “self-reflexively”¹⁵⁶; it does not think discursively and inferentially on the basis of the subject/object distinction. In human terms, the Nous is infallible. Lloyd Gerson informs us that “Plotinus is among the philosophers who hold that knowing thus implies infallibility.”¹⁵⁷

A similar line of reasoning is seen in the Writings. If, as we have suggested, the Manifestation in His highest station combines the functions of Nous and the Soul, then the Manifestation virtually contains the lower levels of reality,

and, thereby has infallible knowledge of them. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us,

*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 – that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation.*¹⁵⁸

This knowledge is infallible because the Manifestations and Plotinus' Nous and Soul are not subject to time and place and not limited by restrictions such as 'future,' 'past,' 'here' or 'there.' Furthermore, they are not just beyond physical space, but also beyond phenomenological space such as 'within,' 'outside,' 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity.' Therefore, all possible knowledge is present to them. Hence, the Manifestation has "essential infallibility."¹⁵⁹

It is clear, therefore, that "essential infallibility" is not simply an arbitrary attribution to the Manifestation; nor is it merely a token of respect or exaggerated or even irrational religious veneration. Rather, it is a direct logical consequence of the Manifestation's place in the scale of being, i.e. a consequence of the emanationist world-view espoused by the Writings. There is no need to accept this teaching on 'blind faith' contrary to reason.¹⁶⁰

13. The 'Ideas' or 'Names of God'

There is yet another important issue to discuss regarding the Nous and the Bahá'í Writings, namely, the issue of intelligibles, or archetypes or as Plato called them, Ideas. According to J.M. Rist, "[Nous] however comprises the World of intelligible objects."¹⁶¹

if the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] is to be the maker of All, it cannot make by looking outside itself to what does not yet exist. The Authentic Beings [Ideas] must, then, exist before this All, no copies made on a model

but themselves archetypes, primals, and the essence of the Intellectual-Principle.¹⁶²

Elsewhere Plotinus says, “the Intellectual-Principle [Nous] is the *authentic existences and contains them all* – not as in a place but as possessing itself and being one thing with this content.”¹⁶³ The “intelligible objects” or the “Authentic Beings” are, in effect, Plato’s Ideas, i.e. models for nature, a lower level of reality, to aspire to and imitate in concrete individual examples. (They imitate these timeless models in the process of time to which nature is subject, a fact which allows Platonic theory and evolution to be combined. As Plato says, “Time [evolution] is the moving image of eternity.”¹⁶⁴) The Ideas exist in the Nous which reflects them into the Soul which in turn reflects them into the world of physical nature where they appear as the embodied physical forms of things. However, this still leaves us with the question of whether or not the Bahá'í Writings contain anything that confirms Plotinus’ teaching on this issue.

In our view, the Bahá'í Writings do, in fact, agree with Plotinus’ insight albeit from a new perspective. First, we should note ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “*the earth is the mirror of the Kingdom; the material world corresponds to the spiritual world.*”¹⁶⁵ In other words, what we observe on earth are the images of higher realities in the spiritual world. There is a correspondence between the lower and higher. A similar idea is expressed in the following statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

*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.*¹⁶⁶

Here, too, we observe the contrast between the “real world” of the Kingdom of which this material world is only an imitation, a mirror image, or a shadow. This clearly implies that the ‘models’ or ‘archetypes’ or, as Plato called them, the ‘Ideas’ are in the Kingdom, which as we shall see is the world of the Manifestation. The idea of a correspondence between the earth and the Kingdom is re-emphasized from an ethical perspective when he says that “the nether world [should] become the mirror

of the Kingdom,”¹⁶⁷ i.e. the earth should reflect what is already found in perfect form in the Kingdom. William Inge calls this view real-idealism in which the world is “an actual but imperfect copy of the perfect archetype.”¹⁶⁸ He adds, “The sensible world is a reflexion of the spiritual world in the mirror of Matter.”¹⁶⁹

The unavoidable implication of these and similar statements is that the Kingdom contains models — or Plato’s ‘Ideas’ — which the world should strive to emulate. Yet, strong as the implication may be, such models are nowhere mentioned in the Writings, at least, not by that name. However, it is our contention that the Platonic ‘Ideas’ or Plotinian “authentic existences” contained by the Nous is similar to the Bahá’í concept of the names of God. For example, the Writings assign the following names to God: “the Fashioner” “the Creator,” “the Almighty” and the “Omniscient.” In our view, these names virtually contain within them the archetypes or potentials of everything that can exist. For example, Bahá’u’lláh states,

*through the mere revelation of the word “Fashioner,” issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.*¹⁷⁰

God, the Speaker utters the word “Fashioner” and thereby sets into motion the generative, creative and energizing powers that culminate in the existence of new things in the ontologically lower levels of being. In other words, these processes realize the potentials they virtually contain. If there were no potential for order in the names of God, then the processes they unleash would be chaotic instead of creative, i.e. would not result in the creation of an ordered world. God reveals these names and attributes first through the Manifestation, Who then reflects them into the natural world in general and specifically, into the “reality of man”¹⁷¹ where they best develop under the education of the Manifestation.

Instead of thinking of the names of God as specific and static Platonic Ideas abiding in the “First Mind,” it is advantageous, in our view, to think of the names of God as dynamic, as actions from God into the lower levels of reality. To call God “the Creator” presupposes creative action in one form or another; to call Him “the Omnipotent” requires that He actually shows His power; to call Him “the Most Generous” or “the Sustainer” presupposes actions that demonstrate those traits; “*Resuscitator* implies resuscitation, *Provider* necessitates provision.”¹⁷² “The Merciful” presupposes the action of showing mercy, and “Lord” requires the exercise of power as well as subjects. A little reflection indicates that the existence of all the objects of these actions is presupposed within the actions themselves. In other words, the Platonic Ideas that exist as entities within Plotinus’ Nous, exist virtually as potentials within the actions that emanate from God.

This solution also has the advantage of avoiding conflict with the previously-discussed nature of God which does not require objects of knowledge, i.e. which is not subject to the subject/object dichotomy in knowing. If there are specific Platonic Ideas such as those of humans, roses or gold, it is difficult to see how they could exist without becoming objects of knowledge. However, if humans and roses are implicates of God’s essential name of Creator – which is identical with God Himself – then no subject/object dichotomy arises. This does not change even if we think of the names as dynamic actions. These are the actions *from* God.

14. Participation

The concept that the names of God correspond to the Ideas or “Intelligibles” in the *Enneads* points to yet another similarity – the theory of participation. According to Plotinus, all created things participate, i.e. reflect the image of the ontologically superior entity and through that reflection process imitate or participate in its being. Thus, the Nous participates in the One by reflecting its image like a mirror; the higher Soul reflects the Nous and the lower Soul and Nature reflect the higher Soul. Therefore,

[e]verything has something of the Good, by virtue of possessing a certain degree of unity and a certain degree of Existence and by participation in Ideal-Form: to the extent of the Unity, Being, and Form which are present, there is a sharing in an image, for the Unity and Existence in which there is participation are no more than images of the Ideal-Form.¹⁷³

In some way or another, all things reflect the One, and thus possess unity and “a certain degree of Existence;” the higher the degree of participation, the higher the degree of existence possessed; this process ends with the Nous or Manifestation in His station as “Primal Mirror” Who has more existence or reality than anything except God or the One. Belief in the relativity of degrees of existence is also reflected in the Bahá’í Writings: “*The second proposition is that existence and nonexistence are both relative.*”¹⁷⁴ Moreover in the Writings, just as in Plotinus, God, or the One sets the standard for measuring our existence: “*the existence of creation in relation to the existence of God is nonexistence.*”¹⁷⁵ The Manifestation, of course, enjoys a greater degree of existence because His ontological station as “Primal Mirror” is closer to God.

That said, it remains to note that in the Bahá’í Writings, created things reflect the names of God, and, thus become participants in the actions that these names refer to.

*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 ... How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! To a supreme degree is this true of man ... For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: “Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.”*¹⁷⁶

Through the revelation of God’s names, all beings, and especially humankind, become participants in the divine

emanative process. Individual human beings, of course, are free to choose the extent and way in which they will reflect or participate in the divine names or actions. That is why it is so important to cleanse the mirrors of our hearts: “*May the mirrors of hearts be cleansed from dust in order that the Sun of Truth may be reflected therein.*”¹⁷⁷ The more we polish our mirrors, the more they will participate in the light of the divine truth, i.e. names. Humankind’s special measure of bounty in the regard constitutes its unique position in the order of creation.

15. Matter and Evil

Any study of the philosophy of Plotinus and the Bahá'í Writings is bound to consider the issue of matter and its relationship to evil. Before discussing this issue it is essential to draw attention to two important points. First, when Plotinus discusses matter he does not mean matter as we ordinarily think of it, for example, minerals, elements or compounds. According to the *Enneads*, this matter has already received form to be a particular kind of matter, e.g. gold, roses or granite.¹⁷⁸ Matter “lives on the farther side of all these categories [that identify particular forms of matter] and so has no title to the Name of Being.”¹⁷⁹ For Plotinus, matter is the “substratum”¹⁸⁰ on which all the particular forms of matter are imposed. It may also be described as ‘perfect receptivity’¹⁸¹ waiting for form and for this reason Plotinus compares it to a mirror and what it reflects to “phantasms.”¹⁸² Because matter is formless, it is also unbounded, unlimited, shapeless and without qualities and therefore has no particular form or being. Matter, says Plotinus, is “utter destitution,”¹⁸³ or, to use the more common term, it is ‘privation’¹⁸⁴ or lack of attribute. It is like a shadow. It should be noted that matter is the last stage or degree of the emanative process. As pure receptivity or potential, matter cannot emanate anything because in itself, it has nothing to give and can only receive. However, at the same time, Plotinus states that matter aspires to substance, i.e. real existence,¹⁸⁵ although this aspiration can never be met but must remain an aspiration. The One, or God, is, of course, the most real of all existents and for that reason,

matter also aspires towards the One. We shall deal with this topic below.

The second major point about matter and evil is that for Plotinus, there are two kinds of evil which must not be confused with each other.¹⁸⁶ Moral evil is committed by human beings as a result of free will while ontological evil is the result of matter being the lowest level of the emanative process. Because there are degrees of perfection in the stages of emanation, there must be a point where there no more perfections are possessed and there is only a perpetual receptivity to perfections from higher levels of the emanative process. Thus, when we say that matter is inherently evil in Plotinus, we mean that it is 'metaphysical evil,' i.e. a lack of attributes that can have any form imposed on it.

Evil is not in any and every lack; it is absolute lack. What falls in some degree short of the Good is not Evil; considered in its own kind it might even be perfect, but where there is utter dearth, there we have Essential Evil, void of all share in Good; this is the case with matter.¹⁸⁷

Plotinus explains why this lack makes matter evil:

[I]t corrupts and destroys the incomer, it substitutes its own opposite character and kind not in the sense of opposing , for, example, concrete cold to concrete warmth, but by setting its own formlessness against the Form of heat, shapelessness to shape, excess and defect to the duly ordered. Thus, in sum, what enters into Matter ceases to belong to itself, comes to belong to matter ...¹⁸⁸

In other words, matter brings about a lack of moderation, i.e. a lack of limitation, of order, measure, shape or constraint. Here we have not only an explanation for the ontological nature of evil – or absolute disorder – but also the ontological foundation for the Bahá'í emphasis on moderation,¹⁸⁹ and constraint as seen for example, in the emphasis on "true liberty"¹⁹⁰ which "*consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it.*"¹⁹¹

In these teachings, we observe that in the Bahá'í Writings, as in the *Enneads*, ethics are grounded in and correlated with ontology. The higher we rise above matter in the emanative order, i.e. the closer we approach the One or God, the closer we approach to form, 'Ideas,' or the names of God, and thereby, the closer we approach to own real nature or true 'selves.' Matter, of course, undermines form, order, measure and the spiritual which means that the more we fall into the power of matter, the less we shall be our 'true selves.' Applying this principle to human ethics, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint ... Saints are men who have freed themselves from the world of matter and who have overcome sin. They live in the world but are not of it, their thoughts being continually in the world of the spirit.*¹⁹²

Elsewhere, He says that in receiving God's bounty "the reality of man becomes purified and sanctified from the impurities of the world of nature."¹⁹³ In other words, moral goodness requires that there be appropriate order in the soul. 'Appropriate' in the case of humankind means that the higher, i.e. spiritual control the lower, i.e. material nature. When this does not happen, when the soul turns away from the One and to itself, it descends into non-being, in which the lower is in control.¹⁹⁴ Because the higher should control the lower it is proper that man controls or masters nature (in a non-destructive way) for man represents the spiritual principle in the material world.¹⁹⁵ In both Plotinus and the Writings, the spiritual takes ontological and ethical precedence over the material.

At this point a note of caution is necessary. For the Writings, nature and matter are not necessarily morally evil in themselves. That is why 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "it is evident that in creation and nature evil does not exist at all; but when the natural qualities of man are used in an unlawful way, they are blameworthy."¹⁹⁶ An "unlawful way" is taken when we

choose to submit the spiritual to our animal nature. Consequently, Adam's physical nature is the "source of all imperfection"¹⁹⁷ and his spiritual nature is the "source of all perfection." Furthermore, in nature, all existences are good in themselves although they may not be good in relationship to each other:

*Are they [scorpions] good or evil, for they are existing beings? Yes, a scorpion is evil in relation to man; a serpent is evil in relation to man; but in relation to themselves they are not evil, for their poison is their weapon, and by their sting they defend themselves. But as the elements of their poison do not agree with our elements – that is to say, as there is antagonism between these different elements, therefore, this antagonism is evil; but in reality as regards themselves they are good.*¹⁹⁸

Thus, evil is relational insofar as a thing or an act can only be evil in relationship to something else. The *Enneads* reflect a similar view. Matter, i.e. utter privation or pure potentiality is not evil in itself but in relationship to form; its effects are evil because it undermines form with its formlessness and immoderation. Matter may be evil in relationship to the soul because the soul becomes fixated on the body and thus turns away from the One. For that reason matter, bodies, nature can drag humans into moral evil if humans choose to be dominated by them. This happens when the soul focuses only on itself and cuts itself off from the influence of higher emanations, and, ultimately, the One.¹⁹⁹ Cutting itself off from the One or the Manifestation of God from Whom all gifts and powers are obtained, causes the self to suffer deficiencies. This idea is apparent in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement,

*the sensible realities are absolutely good, and evil is due to their nonexistence – that is to say, blindness is the want of sight, deafness is the want of hearing, poverty is the want of wealth, illness is the want of health, death is the want of life, and weakness is the want of strength.*²⁰⁰

Here, too, evil is being defined as a privation or lack of that which is good, just as in Plotinus it is defined as that which

lacks form, order, or other positive attributes.²⁰¹ Thus, it is non-being,²⁰² i.e. not nothing but rather the difference that contradicts Being or the One.²⁰³ Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reference is to moral evil but we observe that the same principle of ontological evil as privation is being applied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts,

*the intellectual realities, such as all the qualities and admirable perfections of man, are purely good, and exist. Evil is simply their nonexistence. So ignorance is the want of knowledge; error is the want of guidance; forgetfulness is the want of memory; stupidity is the want of good sense. All these things have no real existence.*²⁰⁴

By "no real existence," 'Abdu'l-Bahá means that evil has no substance, i.e. has no independent existence in itself but is simply the lack of certain attributes and/or virtues. It has 'presence' insofar as we can detect, feel, recognise these deficiencies ; however, this presence makes itself felt only by way of a negative contrast, a deficiency of something that should be there.

16. The Return to God

The final subject we shall refer to briefly in this outline of the similarities and convergences between the Bahá'í Writings and the *Enneads* concerns the return to God. Such a return is the deepest desire of all souls, whether they are aware of it or not because all souls are attracted to beauty. As Plotinus says,

Therefore, we must ascend again towards the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This [Good or Beauty], knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain to it is for those that will take the upward path ... divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent ...²⁰⁵

This statement is in complete harmony with Bahá'u'lláh's prayer, in which He addresses God as

*my Desire and the Desire of all things, my Strength and the Strength of all things, my King and the King of all things, my Possessor and the Possessor of all things, my Aim and the Aim of all things, my Mover and the Mover of all things! Suffer me not, I implore Thee, to be kept back from the ocean of Thy tender mercies, nor to be far removed from the shores of nearness to Thee.*²⁰⁶

What is striking about this prayer is that Bahá’u’lláh mentions not just His desire but “*the Desire of all things*” (emphasis added) and the “*Aim of all things*” (emphasis added). In other words, He expresses not only His own desire for God but universalizes His desire to include “all things” without any qualification. He also refers to God as His “Aim” and then again universalizes this claim to “all things;” He does not limit it to Himself or human beings or even sentient beings. From this perspective it appears that matter, since it is included in the category of “all things” aspires to something greater though how that aspiration makes itself known to us cannot be said at this point.

17. Conclusion

Even on the basis of an outline such as this, it is clear that the Bahá’í Writings and the philosophy of Plotinus share numerous similarities. There are, as we have noted, some important differences between the Writings and the *Enneads* but these are greatly outnumbered by the similarities we have encountered. These correspondences make this subject worth further in-depth study.

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NOTES

¹ The best known study of the origin and scope of Neoplatonic influence in Islamic culture is Peter Adamson's *The Arabic Plotinus*.

² Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 19.

³ Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445.

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- ⁴ At the scholarly level we have the lengthy series *Studies in Neoplatonism, Ancient and Modern* published by SUNY along with *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*; at the popular level there are the multiple volumes by Ken Wilber.
- ⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, throughout Chapter 54.
- ⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49, 229, 315.
- ⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 445.
- ⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18.
- ⁹ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. by Robert Audi p. 563, which subsumes ontology under metaphysics; Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 255; see also *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* ed. by Ted Honderich and *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* ed. by Simon Blackburn.
- ¹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 169.
- ¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 51.
- ¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 5.
- ¹³ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 24.
- ¹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148
- ¹⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 18
- ¹⁷ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 7.
- ¹⁸ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 13.
- ¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 231.
- ²⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXXI, p. 157.
- ²¹ *Enneads*, V, 4,1.
- ²² *Enneads*, VI, 9, 6.
- ²³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXX, p. 136.
- ²⁴ *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 318.
- ²⁵ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 14.
- ²⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 17.
- ²⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- ²⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 260.
- ²⁹ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1; also V 2, 1.
- ³⁰ *Enneads* VI, 9, 3.
- ³¹ *Enneads*, V, 2, 1.
- ³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 207.
- ³³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.
- ³⁴ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 13; VI, 8, 14; VI 8, 16.
- ³⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.

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- ³⁶ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1.
- ³⁷ *Enneads*, V, 5, 6.
- ³⁸ *Enneads*, VI, 9, 7.
- ³⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 390.
- ⁴⁰ *Enneads*, V, 5, 5.
- ⁴¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206.
- ⁴² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ⁴³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206.
- ⁴⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ⁴⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 173
- ⁴⁶ *Enneads*, III, 8, 8.
- ⁴⁷ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 28; original emphasis.
- ⁴⁸ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 28.
- ⁴⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁰ *Enneads*, VI 8, 8;
- ⁵¹ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 8.
- ⁵² *Enneads*, VI, 9, 6.
- ⁵³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ⁵⁴ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 9.
- ⁵⁵ *Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 80.
- ⁵⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 16; III, 9, 4.
- ⁵⁷ *Enneads*, V, 5, 9.
- ⁵⁸ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ⁵⁹ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XC, p. 178.
- ⁶⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, LXXVII, p. 150; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272, 377, 462.
- ⁶¹ *Enneads*, V 2, 2.
- ⁶² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295 – 296.
- ⁶³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ⁶⁴ *Enneads*, I, 8, 2.
- ⁶⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 51; emphasis added.
- ⁶⁶ *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 177.
- ⁶⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- ⁶⁸ *Enneads*, V, 3, 12.
- ⁶⁹ *Enneads*, III, 9, 9.
- ⁷⁰ *Enneads*, III, 8, 11.
- ⁷¹ *Enneads*, V, 6, 3.

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- ⁷² *Enneads*, VI, 7, 40.
- ⁷³ *Enneads*, VI, 7, 41.
- ⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 293 – 294; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 24.
- ⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 24.
- ⁷⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 23 – 24; emphasis added.
- ⁷⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 138.
- ⁸⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- ⁸¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.
- ⁸⁴ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10.
- ⁸⁵ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10; V 3, 13, 14.
- ⁸⁶ *Enneads*, VI, 9,4.
- ⁸⁷ *Enneads*, V,3, 14; emphasis added.
- ⁸⁸ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 56.
- ⁸⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220 – 221.
- ⁹⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- ⁹¹ *Enneads*, V, 3, 14; emphasis added.
- ⁹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222; emphasis added.
- ⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147.
- ⁹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 65
- ⁹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 266.
- ⁹⁶ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 60.
- ⁹⁷ Lloyd P. Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 29-30.
- ⁹⁸ *Enneads*, V, 3, 12; emphasis added; see also I, 7, 1.
- ⁹⁹ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹⁰⁰ Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 108.
- ¹⁰¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203; emphasis added.
- ¹⁰² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 296.
- ¹⁰³ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Enneads*, III, 8, 10; emphasis added.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1.
- ¹⁰⁶ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 44.
- ¹⁰⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181; emphasis added.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Enneads*, V, 2, 1.

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- ¹⁰⁹ *Enneads*, V, 4, 1.
- ¹¹⁰ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXVIII, p. 150.
- ¹¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272; emphasis added.
- ¹¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.
- ¹¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVI, p. 60.
- ¹¹⁵ *Enneads*, VI, 8, 9.
- ¹¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXIX, p. 284.
- ¹¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272.
- ¹¹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203
- ¹¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹²⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 203.
- ¹²¹ *Enneads*, III, 7, 11-13.
- ¹²² *Enneads*, V, 1, 3.
- ¹²³ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*.
- ¹²⁴ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹²⁵ *Enneads*, V, 2, 1; emphasis added.
- ¹²⁶ *Enneads*, V, 2, 1.
- ¹²⁷ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹²⁸ *Enneads*, V, I, 6.
- ¹²⁹ *Enneads*, V, 1, 6.
- ¹³⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, p. 48; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 66; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 206;
- ¹³¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 205.
- ¹³² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 147; emphasis added.
- ¹³³ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, p. 179; emphasis added.
- ¹³⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 26.
- ¹³⁵ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 49.
- ¹³⁶ John Deck, *Nature, Contemplation and the One*, p. 49.
- ¹³⁷ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 10; emphasis added.
- ¹³⁸ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹³⁹ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴¹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 77.
- ¹⁴² *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.

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- ¹⁴³ *Enneads*, IV, 3, 9.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* XC, p.179; emphasis added; see also XLIX, p. 102.
- ¹⁴⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157 – 158.
- ¹⁴⁶ J.M. Rist, *Plotinus The Road to Reality*, p. 90.
- ¹⁴⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVII, p. 66.
- ¹⁴⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- ¹⁴⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 295.
- ¹⁵⁰ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol. 1, p. 132.
- ¹⁵¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.9.
- ¹⁵² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 14.
- ¹⁵³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 72.
- ¹⁵⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 130.
- ¹⁵⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 119.
- ¹⁵⁶ Lloyd P Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 55.
- ¹⁵⁷ Lloyd P Gerson, *Plotinus*, p. 55.
- ¹⁵⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157 – 158.
- ¹⁵⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 171.
- ¹⁶⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181.
- ¹⁶¹ J.M. Rist, *Plotinus, The Road to Reality*, p. 88.
- ¹⁶² *Enneads*, V, 9, 5.
- ¹⁶³ *Enneads*, V, 9, 6; emphasis added.
- ¹⁶⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*.
- ¹⁶⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 283.
- ¹⁶⁶ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 178; emphasis added.
- ¹⁶⁷ Bahá'í World Faith, p. 400.
- ¹⁶⁸ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol, I, p. 151.
- ¹⁶⁹ William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, Vol, I, p. 152.
- ¹⁷⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, p. 141 – 142.
- ¹⁷¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.9.
- ¹⁷² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 272.
- ¹⁷³ *Enneads*, I, 7, 2.
- ¹⁷⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ¹⁷⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 281.
- ¹⁷⁶ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XC, p. 177; emphasis added.
- ¹⁷⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 244.
- ¹⁷⁸ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁷⁹ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.

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- ¹⁸⁰ *Enneads*, II, 5, 5.
- ¹⁸¹ *Enneads*, II, 4, 4.
- ¹⁸² *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁸³ *Enneads*, II, 4, 16.
- ¹⁸⁴ *Enneads*, III, 9, 3; II, 4, 1.
- ¹⁸⁵ *Enneads*, III, 6, 7.
- ¹⁸⁶ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 86.
- ¹⁸⁷ *Enneads*, I, 8, 5.
- ¹⁸⁸ *Enneads*, I, 8, 8.
- ¹⁸⁹ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 69.
- ¹⁹⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336.
- ¹⁹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, p. 336
- ¹⁹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.- 61; emphasis added.
- ¹⁹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 92.
- ¹⁹⁴ *Enneads*, III, 9, 3.
- ¹⁹⁵ *Tablet to August Forel*, p. 11.
- ¹⁹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 215.
- ¹⁹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.
- ¹⁹⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263 – 264; emphasis added.
- ¹⁹⁹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 83.
- ²⁰⁰ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263.
- ²⁰¹ Dominic O'Meara, *Plotinus, An Introduction to the Enneads*, p. 82.
- ²⁰² *Enneads*, I, 8, 6.
- ²⁰³ *Enneads*, II, 4, 16.
- ²⁰⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 263
- ²⁰⁵ *Enneads*, I, 6, 7; emphasis added.
- ²⁰⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 59.