

ON HUMAN ORIGINS: A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

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While Craig Loehle's article "On Human Origins: A Bahá'í Perspective" was quite interesting and informative, much of the article's framework was based on a highly questionable claim: "'Abdu'l-Bahá states that events in the world may have three causes: natural law, chance, and divine Will" ("Origins" 50). What 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually states is:

For instance, we observe that the existence of beings is conditioned upon the coming together of various elements and their non-existence upon the decomposition of their constituent elements. For decomposition causes the dissociation of the various elements. Thus, as we observe the coming together of elements giveth rise to the existence of beings, and knowing that beings are infinite, they being the effect, how can the Cause be finite?

Now, formation is of three kinds and of three kinds only: accidental, necessary, and voluntary. The coming together of the various constituent elements of beings cannot be accidental, for unto every effect there must be a cause. It cannot be compulsory, for then the formation must be an inherent property of the constituent parts and the inherent property of a thing can in no wise be dissociated from it, such as light that is the revealer of things, heat that causeth the expansion of elements and the (solar) rays which are the essential property of the sun. Thus under such circumstances the decomposition of any formation is impossible, for the inherent properties of a thing cannot be separated from it. The third formation remaineth and that is the voluntary one, that is, an unseen force described as the Ancient Power, causeth these elements to come together, every formation giving rise to a distinct being. (*Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 2d ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, 342)

As I read the passage over and over again, I became increasingly certain that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was stating quite the opposite of what Loehle had concluded. 'Abdu'l-Bahá seemed to be examining the "existence of beings," made from the "coming together of elements." But what causes this "coming together," this "formation"? 'Abdu'l-Bahá hypothesizes three alternatives and proceeds to examine each. "The coming together of the various constituent elements of beings cannot be accidental." Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects the first hypothesis of chance, explaining that "unto every effect there must be a cause." This seems in sharp contrast to the recurring theme in "Origins" that "chance does play a major part" (55). Loehle had also written of what he termed "natural law." What did 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually write? "It cannot be compulsory." And what about that which is termed "divine Will"? 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to affirm this, ". . . as the Ancient Power, causeth these elements to come together. . . ."

Two points need to be addressed. First, I am not categorically denying that the Writings preclude the possibility of "chance" in the universe, as hypothesized by Quantum Theory, for example. However, I have never come across any

passage in support of the idea, and certainly this passage does not support it. It is important not to generalize 'Abdu'l-Bahá's rejection in this passage of accidental and necessary formations to be a statement on the role of accidents and necessity in "events in the world" as a whole, as Loehle does in the cited passage. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is considering the notion of the "coming together of elements," "formations," which give "rise to the existence of beings." Fortunately, in the paragraphs that follow, he gives the example of living creatures, plants and animals, as exactly such beings, which do *not* result from accidental or necessary formation, but, in the last analysis, from God's voluntary Will, the Ultimate Cause, the Universal Reality:

As we, however, reflect with broad minds upon this infinite universe, we observe that motion without a motive force, and an effect without a cause are both impossible; that every being hath come to exist under numerous influences and continually undergoeth reaction. These influences, too, are formed under the action of still other influences. For instance, plants grow and flourish through the outpourings of vernal showers, whilst the cloud itself is formed under various other agencies and these agencies in their turn are reacted upon by still other agencies. For example, plants and animals grow and develop under the influence of what the philosophers of our day designate as hydrogen and oxygen and are reacted upon by the effects of these two elements; and these in turn are formed under still other influences. The same can be said of other beings whether they affect other things or be affected. Such process of causation goes on, and to maintain that this process goes on indefinitely is manifestly [*sic*] absurd. Thus such a chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to Him who is the Ever-Living, the All-Powerful, who is Self-Dependent and the Ultimate Cause. This Universal Reality cannot be sensed, it cannot be seen. It must be so of necessity, for it is All-Embracing, not circumscribed, and such attributes qualify the effect and not the cause. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 343)

Second, it is crucial here to note that, if we accept Keven Brown's ("A Bahá'í Perspective on the Origin of Matter," *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 2.3 (1990): 15-44) thesis that the "Bahá'í Faith teaches that God is the Creator of all things but is not their Cause" (22)—i.e., the Primal Will, God's first emanation is the Cause—then "Ancient Power" and "Universal Reality" here would in fact be synonymous with the Primal Will, and not God in his Essence. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes evident that "universal reality" is the Primal Will in *Some Answered Questions* (trans. Laura Clifford Barney, rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981, 203).¹

It seems quite clear that in the above-cited passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is considering the cause of "motion," of "formation," and concludes that "the chain of

1. It is important to make the note that while the Primal Will, that first emanation of God's essence is the Ultimate Cause, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clarifies that it is not the knowledge of God which causes events: "Therefore, the knowledge of God in the realm of contingency does not produce the forms of the things. . . . It is identical with the reality of the things; it is not the cause of their occurrence" (*Questions* 138).

causation must of necessity lead eventually to . . . [the] Universal Reality," which is the Primal Will, which is the "Ultimate Cause." 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not, as Loehle asserts, stating that "events in the world may have three causes."

This is not to say that the Bahá'í writings deny the existence of laws of nature, such as "the law of gravity, laws of physics" cited in the article ("Origins" 50). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order . . ." (*Questions* 3).² The crucial point is, however, that natural law is not a separate and competing sphere of causation from the divine Will, as Loehle assumes; on the contrary, it is a *result* or an *effect* of it:

Now, when you behold in existence such organizations, arrangements and laws, can you say that all these are the effect of Nature, though Nature has neither intelligence nor perception? If not, it becomes evident that this Nature, . . . is in the grasp of Almighty God . . . ; whatever He wishes, He causes Nature to manifest. (*Questions* 4)

And Bahá'u'lláh confirms that nature and its laws are not in "competition" with the divine Will, but

Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name. . . . Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes³ . . . *Nature is God's Will* and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer. . . . (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al., rev. ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 142; italics added)

Loehle himself begins quite correctly with a similar answer, that "these laws are manifestations of God's purpose . . ." ("Origins" 50). The rest of the statement, however, seems to fall into the trap of actually believing the limitations of chronology and time that human linguistic descriptions impose on God and his Primal Will: "These laws are manifestations of God's purpose in that God *established* these laws, but they operate independently of *active* divine intervention" ("Origins" 50, italics added). Any such apparently deistic interpretation of the divine tends to assume that God is time-bound; that God "established" the laws (at a point in time) and is no longer actively intervening. The assertion of "independent operation" is also highly questionable in light of the Writings' numerous statements regarding the dependence of creation for its very existence and motion upon the Will of God, that the "dependence of the creatures upon God is a dependence of emanation . . ." (*Questions* 202), and that even "the inaction or the movement of man"—who is the sole possessor of free

2. The notions of absolute organization and complete order do not seem to entertain the notion of chaos or chance in nature. I wonder if, in fact, the idea of chaos in the universe, a law of chance, can be substantiated by any passage in the Writings.

3. As we saw, the "chain of causation" of which all these "varying causes" are a part ultimately leads to the "Ultimate Cause," the Primal Will.

will—"depend upon the assistance of God," (*Questions* 249) and that "Man is absolutely helpless and dependent, since might and power belong especially to God" (*Questions* 248-49).⁴

More specifically addressing the treatment of evolution, the article states that "God's role in human origins is one of a *periodic* intervenor in the natural process. . . ." ("Origins" 54, italics added) and that "there may have been direct intervention by God in the evolutionary process" ("Origins" 55). Periodic? To the contrary, the Bahá'í notion of God and divine Will is one that transcends time; "For God the end is the same thing as the beginning" (*Questions* 152) and his Will "pervadeth all created things" (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed., Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976, 336). If evolution is a process found in nature, then it is itself a process of the divine Will, or its "expression."

The confusion in the article regarding the divine Will arises chiefly from the misconception that divine Will is a mutually exclusive sphere from natural law or human free will. The best example of this occurs in the statement that

in earlier periods, divine Will was popularly assumed to be responsible for the fall of every leaf and drop of rain. In the Bahá'í view, such detailed manipulation of the natural world violates the existence of free will in humans. ("Origins" 50)

As we have seen from the passage cited from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the chain of causation must of necessity lead eventually to . . . the Ultimate Cause," (*Bahá'í World Faith* 343) which included the growth of plants and cloud formations, the Bahá'í Faith also assumes that divine Will "pervadeth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth" (*Gleanings* 5). But this implies neither a "manipulation" of nature,⁵ nor is it in contradiction with the notion of human free will.⁶ As such, the Writings seem to contradict another assertion in the article:

For Bahá'ís, although divine Will is a force that operates in the world today and can affect individual lives, not everything that happens can be called God's Will. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, there is a large component of chance and natural law in the world. . . . ("Origins" 51)

4. This apparent paradox between the existence of human free will within the context of an all-powerful divine Will upon which humans ultimately depend is analogous to the apparent paradox between the notion of such a divine Will and "laws of nature," already discussed. The resolution is also quite similar—human free will is, analogously, an expression or "instrument" of the divine Will.

5. The word *manipulation* betrays the tendency here to view divine Will as a separate and competing sphere of causation from "natural law"; in fact, divine Will does not "manipulate" nature, it seems to me, but, as Bahá'u'lláh states, "Nature is God's Will and is its expression."

6. As the Bahá'í writings confirm simultaneously both the existence of an all-powerful Primal Will that is the "Ultimate Cause" and the existence of free will (*Questions* 248-50), the task of Bahá'ís is to understand the explanation of how this is so, not to deny it.

Once again, the assumption is that natural law is mutually exclusive of divine Will and that chance does exist. Unfortunately, the article provides no further reference to substantiate this latter and often repeated statement. Contrary to the statement that "not everything that happens can be called God's Will," ("Origins" 51), the Báb tells us that "all abide by His bidding!" (*Bahá'í Prayers*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985, 28) and Bahá'u'lláh calls God's Will a "world-pervading Will" (*Gleanings* 318). To assert that human free will, chance, or natural law imply that divine Will does not ultimately cause everything which occurs is to see a separate sphere of causation from his Will, is to exclude some events from the operation of his Will, is to place a limitation on that which the Writings call "All-Powerful" and "All-Embracing."

The apparent paradox of an All-Powerful Ultimate Cause, the Primal Will of God juxtaposed against the idea of human free will and natural law may be stated as follows: How can you say that my action is a result of my own free will, that is, my free will was the autonomous cause of my action, while simultaneously claim that everything is ultimately caused by the "Primal Will," that "all abide by His bidding" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 28)? This paradox is, I believe, resolved in the Bahá'í writings not by creating separate spheres of "sovereignty," but by defining human free will and natural law as expressions and "instruments" of the Primal Will. Exactly how one can make a logical, consistent argument of this type is well beyond the scope of this commentary,⁷ but Bahá'u'lláh writes that "God rendereth His Cause victorious at one time through the aid of His enemies, and at another by virtue of the assistance of His chosen ones" (*Crisis and Victory*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 22). This seems to imply that everyone, including those who out of their free will choose to oppose the Cause of God, in the last analysis remain instruments of God. This is a logical implication of the assumption that human free will is an expression or instrument of divine Will, that "all are His servants and all abide by His bidding!" The difference between those who consciously choose to turn to God and those who oppose Him, it would seem, is simply that the latter consciously choose "the complete surrender of one's will to the Will of God" (*Gleanings* 338).⁸

7. For the interested reader, I would suggest that one of the most interesting insights into this dilemma comes from Charles Taylor's account of Hegel's philosophy in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Hegel attempts to resolve the question of an autonomous human subject in a world created by a self-positing Absolute *Geist*, or Spirit. He attempts to resolve the dilemma, interestingly, by hypothesizing the human subject as a "vehicle" of *Geist's* consciousness. Hegel's *Geist* is not akin to the Bahá'í notion of God the Absolute, but bears striking resemblance to the Primal Will. I am not suggesting that Hegel's account is entirely satisfactory, but that it is of great interest. Compare, for example, Taylor's *Hegel* with Brown's "Bahá'í Perspective."

8. It is important to note, conversely, that the Bahá'í notion of "surrender" to an all-powerful Will of God does not in any way imply an "otherworldliness" of passivity and resignation to events in the world of creation, citing that "it is the Will of God"—a prevalent characteristic of Augustinian Christianity and certain Islamic philosophies. In contrast, the Bahá'í is actively engaged in the world of creation precisely because the human being's free will is the "conscious" expression of divine Will, created in God's image: "Nature itself has no intelligence, no will" (*Questions* 2).

Concerning evolution, the article introduces the Bahá'í relation with science with this statement: "The Bahá'í Faith emphatically and explicitly accepts scientific accounts of the creation of the universe, our planet, and life on Earth" ("Origins" 49). The statement is slightly misleading: what the Bahá'í Faith accepts is the scientific method (in fact, Shoghi Effendi refers to the Bahá'í Faith itself as "scientific in its method" [*World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1938, xi]), but not necessarily a particular scientific "account." William Hatcher's essays in "The Science of Religion" (*Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 2, Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1980) on the scientific method and the relativity of truth are particularly enlightening in this regard.

The article goes on to explore what the Bahá'í view on evolution is and concludes that "humanity is . . . linked to the animals by lineage and physical attributes" ("Origins" 56). I have trouble understanding how this assertion is consistent with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement about "the point of inquiring whether man's descent is from the animal," to which he replies, "This theory. . . is an evident error" (*Questions* 177), and that "from the beginning of man's existence he is a distinct species" (*Questions* 184). If it is in fact possible to make an argument based on the Writings for the conclusion drawn by Loehle—and it may very well be—it is not done in the article. If the author feels that it is possible, he must make a very explicit and clear argument on this crucial point. Reference here should be made to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's entire discussion of the matter in *Some Answered Questions* from pages 177 to 197.

The picture that begins to emerge from those pages is one that may at first appear to be contradictory, as Loehle attests. I would attribute the apparent "contradiction" not so much to the pedagogical process, as Loehle does, but to the shifting subject that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is treating at each point. A case in point: the perfection of the universe and humankind. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that

when he [humankind] sees the state, the organization and the perfection of the world, he will be convinced that in the possible world there is nothing more wonderful than that which already exists. . . . the universe has no imperfection. . . .

If, however, the creation in the past had not been adorned with utmost perfection, then existence would have been imperfect and meaningless, and in this case creation would have been incomplete. (*Questions* 177)

If man did not exist, the universe would be without result, for the object of existence is the appearance of the perfections of God.

Therefore, it cannot be said there was a time when man was not. (*Questions* 196)

Is the Bahá'í Faith postulating a static universe that has always remained the same, with humankind always existing as we are today? 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues:

All that we can say is that this terrestrial globe at one time did not exist, and at its beginning man did not appear upon it. (*Questions* 196, italics added)

. . . it is evident that this terrestrial globe, having once found existence, grew and

developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection. . . . (*Questions* 182–83)

How do we understand the apparent contradiction, between a universe that has always been created perfect, and one which dynamically attains perfection? Between a human race that always existed and one that gradually evolved? In the one instance, it seems to me, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is writing of potentiality, in the next, of actuality. To bring Aristotelian teleology to mind, the potential of the *telos* (end or purpose or ideal), which is perfection, exists in a sense in the (perhaps imperfect) actual. (Recall that for Plato, the Ideal Forms were in a sense more "real" than actuality). The dynamic relation between the actual and the *telos* is a gradual movement towards perfection, a perfection that always potentially existed. This teleological development is illustrated no better than by the development of the human embryo to its ideal form—the mature adult. It is then no surprise that 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly compares the evolution of the human race to that of the "evolution" of the embryo in the mother's womb (*Questions* 193–94). Even as the single-celled organism, the organism was always potentially human as we know it. Teleology traditionally assumes several points: first; that everything in the cosmos has a function and a purpose; second, that there is a dynamic relation of continual linear advancement towards the *telos* from the actual state. Hegel's teleological ontology postulates, in addition, a dialectical advancement. That Bahá'í cosmology is dialectical in outlook has been argued by Saiedi ("A Dialogue with Marxism," *Circle of Unity: Bahá'í Approaches to Current Social Issues*, ed. A.A. Lee, Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984). The Writings portray material existence to be an existence where becoming has primacy over being, where motion in the material world is fuelled by contradiction.⁹ That the Bahá'í view is in a certain sense teleological is evident from the Bahá'í assumption that everything in creation has a function and purpose, that the actual state of being is in a continual state of motion. But the Bahá'í view of material existence is not that of a simple unilinear, unidirectional teleological motion from imperfection to perfection. 'Abdu'l-Bahá postulates both regress and progress, both composition and decomposition.

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9. See *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911*. 11th ed. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969, 88–90.