

# Bahá'í Fundamentals for Bioethics

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## **Abstract**

*The recent unprecedented explosion of advances in the biological and medical sciences, especially in the arena of technology, has produced a plethora of new bioethical challenges with significant moral, economic, and public policy implications. Inherent in the Bahá'í Revelation is the claim that it contains a universal moral code. The rich field of Bahá'í bioethics has not been studied to date. This article attempts to establish a framework and to open a dialogue within which medical ethical dilemmas may be addressed and analyzed in light of the Bahá'í Faith. Bahá'í psychology (science of the soul) is examined, as it is a prelude to ethical questions. The authors suggest a possible Bahá'í scriptural understanding of suffering, theodicy, and the purpose of creation. The definitions of life and death, as well as the purpose of human life, are also explored. Finally, a number of principles from the Bahá'í writings are examined for use in formulating a Bahá'í approach to bioethical dilemmas. It must be noted that this article does not represent the definitive Bahá'í stance on any of the issues discussed; rather, these preliminary observations are only intended to serve as a prelude to a Bahá'í bioethical dialogue.*

## **Résumé**

*Le foisonnement récent et sans précédent que l'on constate dans les sciences biologiques et médicales, tout particulièrement dans le domaine technologique, a entraîné une pléthore de nouveaux défis bioéthiques ayant des répercussions morales, économiques et sociétales. Au cœur même de la révélation baha'ite, il y a l'affirmation qu'elle renferme un code moral universel. Le riche domaine de la bioéthique baha'ite n'a pas encore fait l'objet d'études. Cet article cherche donc à établir un cadre et à amorcer un dialogue où les dilemmes médicaux et éthiques peuvent être examinés et analysés à la lumière de la foi baha'ite. La psychologie baha'ite (ou science de l'âme) y est examinée, puisqu'elle est un prélude aux questions éthiques. Les auteurs proposent une compréhension scripturale baha'ite de la souffrance, de la théodicité et du but de la création. L'article explore également la définition de la vie et de la mort, de même que le but de l'existence humaine. Enfin, un certain nombre de principes tirés des écrits baha'is sont examinés en vue de formuler une approche baha'ite face aux dilemmes bioéthiques. Il faut noter que cet article ne représente pas la position baha'ite définitive au sujet des questions à l'étude. Plutôt, ces observations préliminaires se veulent un point de départ à un dialogue de la bioéthique baha'ite.*

### Resumen

*La reciente explosión sin precedentes en las ciencias médicas y biológicas, especialmente en el campo de la tecnología, ha resultado en una abundancia de retos nuevos bioéticos que insinúan significativamente ante la política pública, la moral, y la economía. Inherente en la Revelación Bahá'í está la afirmación de contener dentro de sí pautas universales sobre la moral. El campo abundante de la bioética bahá'í hasta la fecha no ha sido estudiado. Este artículo tratará de establecer un marco de referencia y comenzar un diálogo que permitirá analizar dilemas médicos tocantes en la ética a la luz de la Fe Bahá'í. La sicología bahá'í (la ciencia del alma) se investigará por ser preludeo a los asuntos éticos de actualidad. Los autores sugieren una comprensión en los escritos sagrados bahá'ís referente al sufrimiento, la teodicea, y el propósito de la creación. Se exploran las definiciones de la vida y la muerte, y también el propósito de la vida humana. Por último, se sondean algunos principios de los escritos bahá'ís que sirven para elaborar un enfoque bahá'í referente a los dilemas bioéticos. Vale anotar que este artículo está lejos de ser la máxima posición bahá'í sobre los temas que se presentan; mas bien, con estas observaciones preliminares se busca solamente adelantar un preludeo a un diálogo bioético bahá'í.*

**B**eginning in the 1950s and 1960s, a distinct new field emerged in relation to the ethical ramifications of medical advances. The first heart transplants, the first clinical use of kidney dialysis and respiratory support, the increased technological ability to prolong life, the capability to control human fertility and reproduction, and the new ability of genetics to orchestrate the creation of a "desirable" human being were among the many issues that prepared the way for a new set of discussions. Although the different fields of theology, philosophy, law, and sociology had independently confronted issues arising from medicine and the life sciences, rarely had this been done in terms of an interdisciplinary dialogue. By the 1970s, these dialogues gave rise to the field of bioethics (*Encyclopedia of Bioethics* xxi).

The field of philosophy consists of the four major branches of metaphysics, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Ethics is the study of moral conduct and leading a good life. The term *bioethics* is derived from the Greek words *bios* (life) and *éthiká* (ethics). It has hence been defined as :

... the systematic study of the moral dimensions—including moral vision, decisions, conduct, and policies—of life sciences and health care, employing a variety of ethical methodologies in an interdisciplinary setting. (*Encyclopedia* xxi)

Biomedical ethics has now emerged as a new field of human endeavor.<sup>1</sup> The general questions in the field of bioethics are those same questions raised in other ethical inquiries; however, bioethics asks more specific questions related to the ethics of the health sciences. The following questions are raised in the realm of bioethics: Should the lives of the terminally ill be indefinitely prolonged? Should fetal abnormalities in utero be diagnosed? To what extent should society provide and encourage alternative means of conception for those otherwise not capable? Should scientists engage in germ-line gene therapy, altering the genetic endowment of the human race? At what point, if ever, should abortion take place?

It is not the purpose of this article to address specific ethical problems. Therefore, those searching for a definitive Bahá'í response to controversial issues such as the ethical aspects of abortion, euthanasia, or the patenting of the human genome will be disappointed. For instance, rather than addressing euthanasia specifically, Bahá'í guidelines regarding death as a means of escaping suffering are examined. In our study of selected topics, the operative texts are extracted and presented. These texts allow for the development of a common ground towards initiating dialogues in Bahá'í bioethics. Such a study is long overdue and of interest for a variety of reasons. First, individual Bahá'ís from within or outside the medical field may face ethical dilemmas. This article establishes a framework that may be considered in management of such dilemmas. Second, it may prove of interest to scientists and healthcare providers who may be dealing with Bahá'í scientists or patients. Third, and most important, as in many fields of human endeavor, global dialogues may eventuate in an emerging global consensus on the issue of bioethics. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars of biomedical ethics have been heavily involved at the forefront of the global dialogue in the field. Buddhism and Hinduism have also made substantial contributions to the current scholarship in biomedical ethics (*Encyclopedia* xix-xx). The Bahá'í Faith is the only major religion that has not participated in these dialogues. The Bahá'í Faith, as the youngest and fastest-growing major religion in the world, has the right to contribute to the current dialogues in the field of biomedical ethics, alongside its sister religions.

## **Contemporary Approaches to Bioethical Decision-Making**

### *Deontology*

To familiarize the reader with the new field of bioethics, a cursory survey of some contemporary approaches to bioethical decision-making is necessary.

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1. Annually, more than 3,000 books and articles are published that contribute to this field. A large number of university centers have designed post-graduate degree programs in bioethics. Courses and electives are now offered by a large number of medical schools, and ethics questions are now standard on National Boards, Steps I, II, and III, as well as FLEX and specialty Board examinations (see La Puma and Scheidermayer, *Ethics Consultation* 58).

Deontological, or obligation-based theory, as developed by Immanuel Kant (1742–1804), is one of the earliest normative theories of ethics. It advances the notion that moral judgments must rest on reasons that can be generalized for others who are similarly situated. Kant maintained that human beings have a rational power to resist desire and possess the capacity to act according to rational considerations. He went on to argue that it is in reason, not tradition, intuition, conscience, emotions, or attitudes that morality is grounded. A natural extension of this theory lends itself to Kant's assertion that moral obligation depends on the rule that determines the individual's will. In other words, an action is only morally worthy if it is performed by an agent who has a good will.<sup>2</sup> Kant's categorical imperative followed: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim become a universal law" (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* 56–57).

### *Utilitarianism*

Utilitarianism, or consequence-based theory, determines the rightness or wrongness of an act based on the balance of its good and bad consequences. "The right act in any circumstance is the one that produces the best overall result, as determined from an impersonal perspective that gives equal weight to the interests of each affected party" (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles* 48). While the proponents of utilitarianism generally agree that moral actions are valued based on their production of maximal value, there is disagreement as to which values are most important. The agent-neutral utilitarian asserts that goods are valuable in themselves regardless of their further consequences. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73), two well-known utilitarians, envisioned utility in terms of happiness or pleasure (also known as hedonistic utilitarians). Some of the more recent philosophers have argued that values such as friendship, knowledge, health, beauty, autonomy, understanding, enjoyment, and success have intrinsic worth as well. Finally, there are utilitarians who would look more at the individual's preferences as the determining factor (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles* 48).

### *Feminine Ethics*

Noting a sense of alienation that many women have experienced in trying to work within the structures of contemporary moral theory, Carol Gilligan, in a detailed study, identified distinct masculine and feminine voices in ethical reasoning. She maintained that mainstream ethical theory has been carried on in a voice that is overwhelmingly masculine and that the voices of women have

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2. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 300–305.

been largely excluded or ignored.<sup>3</sup> Claiming that women speak with a different voice, Gilligan discovered "the voice of care." Not based on the universality of individual rights, but rather on the strong sense of responsibility, this ethics of care deals with emotional commitment to and willingness to act on behalf of persons with whom one has a relationship (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles* 85–87).

### ***Principle-based Common Morality Theory***

One of the most prevalent and contemporary approaches to ethics is the principle-based, common-morality theory. Developed in 1994 by Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, it is embedded in the common morality, and it uses principles as its structural basis. Although Beauchamp and Childress acknowledge that such a theory does not need to be principle-based, they treat the theories together to develop their tradition of ethics. For instance, a principle-based ethic argues that an ethical question or dilemma may be discovered by applying the correct ethical theory (e.g., utilitarianism) or principle (e.g., autonomy) to the case (*Encyclopedia* 406). The common-morality aspect of the theory takes its basic premises from the morality shared in common by the members of a society—what Beauchamp and Childress call unphilosophical common sense and tradition. Similar to utilitarianism and Kantian ethics, the principle-based theories have an emphasis on principles of obligation. However, it is important to note that common-morality theory is pluralistic.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it relies a great deal on ordinary shared moral beliefs for its content. This is in contrast to a heavy reliance on reason, natural law, or a special moral sense. Finally, the principles fundamental to the shared moral beliefs are usually accepted by rival ethical theories (*Principles* 100). Of particular interest to the Bahá'í tradition is the fact that "analogous to beliefs in the universality of basic human rights, the principles of the common morality are universal standards" (*Principles* 101). Beauchamp and Childress enumerate four: respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice.

### ***Respect for Autonomy***

Respect for autonomy, although embedded in common morality, carries with it different interpretations and strengths. To prevent any misunderstanding, Beauchamp and Childress define it as:

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3. Gilligan, cited in Sherwin, *No Longer Patient* 46. In her empirical study, Carol Gilligan found that when women are presented with moral conflicts, they are prone to focus on details about the relationships among the concerned parties. The solutions sought by women are usually those that protect the interests of all participants. In contrast, she maintained that men have a tendency to identify the relevant rules that govern the particular situation. Gilligan called the women's approach an "ethics of care." The men's approach she titled "ethics of justice." This study has been documented in Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982).

4. This term is defined on page 53 of this article, in footnote 9.

The autonomous individual freely acts in accordance with a self-chosen plan, analogous to the way an independent government manages its territories and sets its policies. A person of diminished autonomy, by contrast, is in at least some respect controlled by others or incapable of deliberating or acting on the basis of his or her desires and plans. (*Principles* 121)

Stated in a negative form, the principle of respect for autonomy is: "Autonomous actions should not be subjected to controlling constraints by others" (*Principles* 126).<sup>5</sup> The individual's right to self-determination, carrying with it other rights such as confidentiality and privacy, is also correlated to this obligation. While there is a wide disagreement as to the scope of an individual's confidentiality and privacy rights, there is little disagreement that this sacred right of autonomy can be legitimately curtailed by the rights of others. In summation, the principle of respect for autonomy has only prima facie standing and can be constrained by overriding moral obligations (*Principles* 126).<sup>6</sup>

### *Beneficence and Nonmaleficence*

Closely associated in medical ethics with the maxim *Primum non nocere* (Above all, do no harm), the principle of nonmaleficence puts forth an obligation not to inflict harm intentionally. The implications of this principle are many and cover the following range of ethical quandaries: distinctions between killing and letting die, intending and foreseeing harmful outcomes, withholding and withdrawing life-sustaining treatments, and extraordinary and ordinary treatments. Although there are many who would and do join nonmaleficence and beneficence as a single principle, Beauchamp and Childress make a significant distinction between the two. They indicate that while nonmaleficence means that "one ought not to inflict evil or harm" (*Principles* 192), beneficence dictates that "one ought to prevent evil or harm; one ought to remove evil or harm; and that one ought to do or promote good" (*Principles* 192). The main distinction between the two is that the three forms of beneficence require taking action by helping, whereas nonmaleficence only requires intentionally refraining from actions that cause harm (*Principles* 192).

### *Justice*

Justice is the final principle put forth in the dialogue of principles promoted by Beauchamp and Childress. It is a principle by which the inequalities in access to health care and health insurance are addressed. The diverse approaches to

5. The principle asserts a broad, abstract obligation that is free of exceptive clauses such as, "We must respect individuals' views and rights 'so long as their thoughts and actions do not seriously harm other persons'."

6. For example, if our choices endanger the public health, potentially harm innocent others, or require a scarce resource for which no funds are available, others can justifiably restrict our exercise of autonomy.

justice—egalitarian, communitarian, libertarian, and utilitarian theories—only partially capture the range and diversity of the moral life, emphasizing the need for a coherent and complete theory of justice. Beauchamp and Childress assert that in the absence of a social consensus about these competing theories of justice, public policies will shift, emphasizing different theories at different times. Nonetheless, one point which cannot be ignored is that reliance on a theory of justice is essential to addressing current ethical issues.

The above paragraphs outlined some of the contemporary approaches in ethics.<sup>7</sup> Bahá'í fundamentals of ethics, or moral theology, however, are based on ethical reflections in light of the Bahá'í Revelation. In moral theology, metaphysical and theological considerations provide the moral framework in which actions and policies are to be evaluated.<sup>8</sup> The authors maintain that the Bahá'í Revelation presents a distinct ethical theory.<sup>9</sup> However, this article will neither engage in discussions of ethical theory based on Bahá'í principles, nor

7. For an excellent survey of religion and morality and their implications for bioethics, see the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics* 758–64.

8. This has been the basic approach in the formulations of religious bioethics. For an introduction to Islamic bioethical thought, see *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, s.v. "Islam" by Abdulaziz Sachedina. The interesting study by 'Aṭṭār, *Islamic Medicine* (75–79 and 173–82) translates theological reflections into practice. For examples of Christian bioethical studies, see Hauerwas's *Suffering Presence and A Community of Character*.

9: The authors have hesitated to engage in outlining a Bahá'í moral philosophy. This choice will undoubtedly raise criticisms, and with some justification. However, this is a task clearly beyond the goals of this article and the intention of its authors. We maintain, however, that any ethical philosophy based on Bahá'í principles must be pluralistic along the lines suggested by Barukh Brody, as detailed in *Life and Death Decision Making* (9–11), where Brody advances the virtues of pluralistic theory. He acknowledges that there are weaknesses and strengths in each of the ethical formulations. He maintains that there is a need to recognize that each moral theory has failed because it has recognized only one of the many legitimate moral appeals. Instead of looking at the history of competing theories among which a choice must be made, Brody puts forth the proposal that it would be more beneficial to view it as a series of attempts to articulate different moral appeals, all of which will have to be combined to frame an adequate moral theory to help deal with difficult cases. Following Brody, Beauchamp and Childress (in *Principles of Biomedical Ethics*) assign to themselves the title of pluralists in that they accept as legitimate various aspects of several different theories advanced in the history of ethics. A parallel in pluralism may be the comparison and contrast that Shoghi Effendi provides between diverse political theories and the Bahá'í Administrative Order, where the Bahá'í Administrative Order is said to contain some features of existing political theories:

A word should now be said regarding the theory on which this Administrative Order is based and the principle that must govern the operation of its chief institution. . . .

The Bahá'í Commonwealth of the future, of which this vast Administrative Order is the sole framework, is, both in theory and practice, not only unique in the entire history of political institutions, but can find no parallel in the annals of any of the world's recognized religious systems. . . .

This new-born Administrative Order incorporates within its structure certain elements which are to be found in each of the three recognized forms of secular government, without being in any sense a mere replica of any one of them, and without introducing within its machinery any of the objectionable features which they inherently possess. It blends and harmonizes, as no government fashioned by mortal hands has as yet accomplished, the salutary truths which each of these systems undoubtedly contains without vitiating the integrity of those God-given verities on which it is ultimately founded. (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 152–53)

present a comparison and contrast with competing ethical theories.<sup>10</sup> As this article intends to open the bioethics dialogue within the Bahá'í religion, attention will be given primarily to the metaphysical and theological considerations that must precede such dialogue.

### **Bioethics and the Bahá'í Faith**

Religion serves a unique function in the Bahá'í worldview. 'Abdu'l-Bahá argues that humanity is in need of three distinct forms of education. He enumerates the three as material, human, and spiritual education—these covering the full spectrum of human activity (*Some Answered Questions* 7–11). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that all three can only be found in the universal Educators, who are divine teachers. He equates the universal Educators with holy Manifestations (*Some Answered Questions* 11). Divine revelation then becomes a unique and most excellent source of guidance for humanity in all aspects. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, religion is the pathway of the acquisition of perfections and attributes.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes the following regarding religion:

Religion, moreover, is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 52–53)

In this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reiterating the thesis regarding the purpose of religion that Bahá'u'lláh had already advanced in the first *Ishráq*:

They that are possessed of wealth and invested with authority and power must show the profoundest regard for religion. In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world. . . . Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 125)

In the second leaf of the *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Religion is verily the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquillity amongst its peoples. The weakening of the pillars of religion hath strengthened the foolish and emboldened them and made them more arrogant. Verily I say: The greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 63–64)

10. There are, however, a few instances where a comparison and contrast is pointed out, as in the section on truthfulness. These are enumerated to support the thesis that an ethical theory based on Bahá'í principles must be pluralistic.

11. Cf. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 179, 152.



Bahá'u'lláh is thus the divine physician, as the mouthpiece for the Creator, whose every diagnosis and remedy is critical to the well-being of humankind:

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 213)

Therefore, inherent to the Bahá'í Faith is the claim that it possesses solutions to the manifold problems facing humanity, including those in the realm of bioethics. On this ground, we hold that the developing field of biomedical ethics stands to benefit from the incorporation of Bahá'í teachings.

### Bahá'í Psychology and the Purpose of Creation

The chief endowment that distinguishes a human being from all else is the human spirit, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies with the rational soul (*Some Answered Questions* 208–9). It is not within the scope of this article to examine fully the concepts of *rúh* (spirit) and *nafs* (soul) in Bahá'í sacred texts. However, it is necessary to establish the nomenclature in order to generate a functional framework. Every human being is by definition endowed with the human spirit, as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Rúh* (usually translated as spirit) is divided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá into five categories, consisting of vegetable, animal, human, spirit of faith, and the Holy Spirit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the human spirit has proceeded from God through emanation and that it is a simple (*basít*) substance, i.e., not composed of parts (*Some Answered Questions* 241).<sup>12</sup> This spirit is not bound by time and place.<sup>13</sup> The consummate ontological attainment for a human being is to acquire the spirit of faith (*rúh-i-ímání*) through recognition of and obedience to the Manifestation of God.

*Nafs* (generally translated as soul) represents a related but different entity in psychology. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions*, identifies the rational soul (*nafs-i-náfiqah*) with the human spirit (*rúh-i-insání*). However, when these collective works are considered, the classic distinction between *rúh* and *nafs* is maintained. In *Paris Talks*, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "There are in the world of humanity three degrees; those of the body, the soul, and spirit" (96).<sup>14</sup> According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in that same talk, the soul "is the intermediary between [the] body and [the] spirit" (96). A particular soul may or may not acquire the life of spirit (*rúh-i-ímání*).<sup>15</sup> The degree of acquisition of the *rúh-i-ímání* is described in terms of stations of *nafs*.<sup>16</sup> For example, the Qur'án

12. Also see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 91.

13. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 241.

14. Cf. the Persian record of that same talk, *Khiṭábát-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 174.

15. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 97.

16. For example, see *Khiṭábát-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 174–75.

classifies *nafs* along a spectrum from *amárah* (concupiscence) to *maḍiáh* (one that has attained divine good-pleasure). The stages of *nafs* between the two above includes *lavvámah* (irascibility), *muṭma'inah* (confirmed), and *rádíah* (content) as mentioned in the Qur'án.<sup>17</sup> Islamic mysticism and theosophy have built upon the quranic terminology and developed a rather complicated science of the soul.<sup>18</sup> The qualities of the soul change as it increasingly gains and is influenced by the *rúh-i-ímání* and traverses through stages towards perfection. Bahá'u'lláh has acknowledged these diverse stations of the *nafs* in numerous tablets.<sup>19</sup> He has also considerably simplified Bahá'í fundamentals for psychology:

Much hath been written in the books of old concerning the various stages in the development of the soul, such as concupiscence, irascibility, inspiration, benevolence, contentment, Divine good-pleasure, and the like; the Pen of the Most High, however, is disinclined to dwell upon them. Every soul that walketh humbly with its God, in this Day, and cleaveth unto Him, shall find itself invested with the honor and glory of all goodly names and stations. (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 159)

The human spirit is a divine "trust" according to Bahá'í writings ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 200). In a tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh for recitation at the bedside of a dying person, the spirit (*rúh*) is acknowledged as both a trust (*amánah*) and the agent that manifested life to the world (*Isḥrāq Khávarí, Tasbīḥ va Tahlíl* 238). This divine trust (human spirit or rational soul) is located at an ontological crossroads. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the physical realm ends the "arc of descent" and that humankind is the beginning of the "arc of ascent," which initiates spirituality. This ascent involves the acquiring of the *rúh-i-ímání* (spirit of faith), the best form of acquisition of virtues and perfections ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 285–86).

The Bahá'í writings teach that the mystical purpose underlying the creation of human beings is twofold: That humankind should know and worship God. An example occurs in the Short Obligatory Prayer, "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and worship Thee" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 4). Another cogent example is the following, where Bahá'u'lláh establishes a link between this purpose of creation and human ontological self-understanding:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying

17. See the following quranic references: 12:53, 89:27, and 75:2.

18. For a brief synopsis, see Nasr, *Islamic Spirituality* 1:294–307.

19. For example, see *Majmú'iy-*Alwah-i-Mubárakiy-i-Hadrat-i-Bahá'u'lláh** 97.

the whole of creation. . . . Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 65)

According to the Bahá'í writings, all divine attributes are fully manifested in the Primal Will or First Intellect.<sup>20</sup> These same attributes are also latent in every human being. The purpose of physical reality is that humankind should traverse this plane of existence, and actualize these potential virtues (*Some Answered Questions* 200). 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that these perfections are at once limited and without limit (*Some Answered Questions* 230). They are limitless in themselves, yet they are limited with respect to the ontological sphere within which humans exist. Bahá'í theology holds that the virtues and perfections that one acquires in the physical realm are essential and needed for an ontologically happy existence after the dissociation of the human spirit from the body, just as limbs and organs developed by an embryo are utilized after birth (Fáḍil-i-Mazandarání, *Amr va Khálq* 1:120).

### **The Best of All Possible Worlds?**

In the Bahá'í Faith, physical reality is considered to be a field for the acquisition of perfections. Questions may be asked at this point: Is this the best of all possible worlds? Could God have created a different mechanism for developing virtue? Why is physical reality plagued with earthquakes, disease, famine, suffering, and numerous other hardships? The question that this line of argumentation poses is one of theodicy, i.e., the justice of God.

Bahá'í sacred scripture examines the question of theodicy in substantial detail. For the purposes of this article, a cursory examination of divine justice is imperative. Regarding the design of the universe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that it is perfect:

This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart. . . . (*Some Answered Questions* 3)

This statement is repeated on many occasions by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Early in *Some Answered Questions*, in the argument for the existence of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá poses the following question, "Can the creation be perfect and the creator

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20. The Primal Will is the first emanation from God, as described in Bahá'í writings, which exercises creative powers and begets all that exists. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 203.

imperfect?" (*Some Answered Questions* 5). The passage quoted below is equally emphatic:

For all existing beings, terrestrial and celestial, as well as this limitless space and all that is in it, have been created and organized, composed, arranged and perfected as they ought to be; the universe has no imperfection, so that if all beings became pure intelligence and reflected for ever and ever, it is impossible that they could imagine anything better than that which exists. (*Some Answered Questions* 177)

Admittedly, the most interesting Bahá'í response to the question of theodicy is to be found in what one may consider Bahá'u'lláh's response to a debate that had engaged Muslim theologians for more than nine centuries.<sup>21</sup> The great Abú Ḥámid al-Ghazálí (d. 1111 C.E.) is generally credited with writing a statement that proved very problematic for Islamic theologians. He states, in his best-known book, *Iḥyá ul-'ulúm ud-dín*, as well as in other texts, the following: "There is not in possibility (*imkán*) anything whatever more excellent, more complete, or more perfect than it is" (*Theodicy in Islamic Thought* 37). Bahá'u'lláh acknowledges this debate and responds to the dispute in clear terms. He closely follows al-Ghazálí even in the grammatical structure. He writes that there is nothing in possibility (*imkán*) more wonderful (*abda'*) than that which is.<sup>22</sup> The statement clearly indicates that, according to Bahá'í theology, existence, as it exists, is simply the best contingent possibility.

Neither Bahá'u'lláh nor 'Abdu'l-Bahá is expressing naïveté, nor are they denying the reality of suffering. Both readily acknowledge that the physical world is replete with sorrows, wrongs, and suffering. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes the following to a wife who has lost her husband:

Such is this mortal abode: a storehouse of afflictions and suffering. It is ignorance that binds man to it, for no comfort can be secured by any soul in this world, from monarch down to the most humble commoner. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 200)

According to the Bahá'í Faith, the corporeal world is absolutely real, yet with respect to the spiritual realms and the existence of God, it may be said to be an illusion (*Some Answered Questions* 278). The following passage by Bahá'u'lláh merits close examination with regards to both theodicy and the reality of the physical world:

Follow not, therefore, your earthly desires, and violate not the Covenant of God, nor break your pledge to Him. With firm determination, with the whole affection of your

21. This dispute is comprehensively examined in *Theodicy in Islamic Thought* by Ornsby.

22. See *Ulúhiyyat va Maḡhariyyat* 104. This is the second volume of the collected works of 'Alí-Murad Dávúdi, the late Bahá'í martyr and philosopher.

heart, and with the full force of your words, turn ye unto Him, and walk not in the ways of the foolish. The world is but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality. Set not your affections upon it. Break not the bond that uniteth you with your Creator, and be not of those who have erred and strayed from His ways. Verily I say, the world is like the vapor in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion. . . . Sorrow not if, in these days and on this earthly plane, things contrary to your wishes have been ordained and manifested by God, for days of blissful joy, of heavenly delight, are assuredly in store for you. Worlds, holy and spiritually glorious, will be unveiled to your eyes. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 328–29)

### **The Purpose of Suffering**

The purpose of suffering lies at the heart of the Bahá'í approach to theodicy. According to Bahá'í theology, suffering is an integral part of corporeal existence, and it is essential to spiritual well-being. Let us consider the statement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá from *Paris Talks* in response to this interesting inquiry: "Does the soul progress more through sorrow or through the joy in this world?":

The mind and the spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. (178)

In fact, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it is impossible to attain true happiness without suffering. He states, "To attain eternal happiness one must suffer" (*Paris Talks* 179). Suffering and pain are an integral part of the journey of the human soul towards its "heavenly homeland" and nearness to the creator as detailed in Bahá'í mystical theory. Bahá'u'lláh explains the role of suffering in the "Valley of Love" as follows:

Now is the traveler unaware of himself, and of aught besides himself. He seeth neither ignorance nor knowledge, neither doubt nor certitude; he knoweth not the morn of guidance from the night of error. He fleeth both from unbelief and faith, and deadly poison is a balm to him. Wherefore 'Aṭṭár saith:

For the infidel, error—for the faithful, faith;

For 'Aṭṭár's heart, an atom of Thy pain.

The steed of this Valley is pain; and if there be no pain this journey will never end. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 8)

The transforming and necessary nature of suffering is a prominent motif in Bahá'í mysticism. They may be harsh and painful, but in fact tests and trials are blessings in disguise:

O SON OF MAN! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 15)

Suffering and hardships are especially necessary for spiritual development, as it is only in this world that we can experience them:

As to the second question: the tests and trials of God take place in this world, not in the world of the Kingdom. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 194)

The Bahá'í Faith teaches that suffering facilitates spiritual development. This essential understanding of suffering, however, does not translate to a disregard for the human body, nor does it imply passive acceptance of an illness. In fact, it is the duty of everyone to try to reduce the suffering of others:

Those souls who during the war have served the poor and have been in the Red Cross Mission work, their services are accepted at the Kingdom of God and are the cause of their everlasting life. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 116)

### Medicine in the Bahá'í Faith

The topic of medicine as seen through Bahá'í scripture is an incredibly intriguing and challenging one. The spectrum is very broad, covering everything from nutrition to future developments in pharmacology. In recent years, Bahá'í scholars have generated a number of very interesting studies in health and healing as taught in the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>23</sup> A thorough examination of medicine and healing in the Bahá'í Faith is yet to be done and is beyond the scope of this article. However, a few general comments are offered.

That medicine is a praiseworthy profession may be gathered in that Bahá'u'lláh most frequently conveyed his relationship to humanity in terms of two worldly occupations: the teacher and the physician. In the *Lawh-i-Ṭibb* (Tablet of Medicine) Bahá'u'lláh writes that medicine is the most exalted of all

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23. See "Health and Healing" by H. Danesh and "International Health Work" by Alfred K. Neumann and Irvin M. Lourie in *World Order* 13.3, as well as "The Application of Bahá'í Teachings on Health" by A. K. Neumann and L. Fernea in the same journal. There have been some attempts to establish dialogue between the Western medical tradition and non-Western traditions, in light of the Bahá'í teachings on the subject. See "Maharishi Ayurveda: A Bahá'í Perspective" by Felicity Rawlings in the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. A relatively recent addition of substantial importance is *Health and Healing* compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.

sciences (*Majmú'ih* 225). In that same Tablet, the science of medicine is given priority over all other branches of learning (*ulúm va'l-ḥikam*) (*Majmú'ih* 225). 'Abdu'l-Bahá has also paid high tribute to the science of medicine.<sup>24</sup> Bahá'í history tells us that 'Abdu'l-Bahá would frequently urge his companions to study modern medicine.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of medicine is to alleviate suffering and restore health. The Bahá'í Faith obligates its members to seek medical treatment. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh always sought medical advice when indicated.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the Bahá'í Faith demands that one seek the best possible medical treatment.<sup>27</sup> The following example is of particular interest with regard to this point. Bahá'í historians note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá knew old Oriental medicine and occasionally used to practice medicine as a youth. Later Bahá'u'lláh asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá not to treat the believers so that they would not develop the habit of seeking treatments from other than formally trained physicians.<sup>28</sup> This is in accordance with the explicit text of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*:

Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians; We have not set aside the use of material means, rather have We confirmed it through this Pen, which God hath made to be the Dawning-place of His shining and glorious Cause. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 60, paragraph 113)

'Abdu'l-Bahá has confirmed the same advice in many tablets. It is worth noting that no one is spared this duty:

According to the explicit decree of Bahá'u'lláh one must not turn aside from the advice of a competent doctor. It is imperative to consult one even if the patient himself be a well-known and eminent physician. In short, the point is that you should maintain your health by consulting a highly-skilled physician. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 156)

The obligation to maintain physical health to the extent possible is clearly unequivocal. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the preservation of health is imperative, in part because health is a prerequisite for the application of the laws and ordinances of God (*Fáḍil-i-Mázandarání, Amr va Kḥalq* 3:10–11).<sup>29</sup> The Bahá'í

24. For example, see *Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:23–26. Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments on the following prophetic tradition: Knowledge consists of two sciences, the science of medicine and science of religion.

25. For example, see *Khāṭirat-i-nuh Sālih* (the Nine Year Memoirs) by Afrúkhṭih 435.

26. For an example, see Sulaymání, *Maṣābīh-i-Hidāyat* 1:165.

27. That seeking a skilled physician is necessary may be gleaned from many Bahá'í writings. Of particular interest is the first line of the *Lawḥ-i-Tibb* (the Tablet of Medicine) where it is explicitly stated that the medical advice Bahá'u'lláh provides will suffice in absence (*ghaybat*) of a physician.

28. Afrúkhṭih, *Khāṭirat-i-Nuh Sālih* 327.

29. Also see *Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:23–26.

writings also provide further reasons for the duty to maintain a healthy life.<sup>30</sup> A noteworthy example conveying the importance of life is the response by Bahá'u'lláh to a peculiar request by Jamál-i-Burújirdí. He had written Bahá'u'lláh and asked for one of these three wishes to be granted: permission to return to 'Akká, death, or an alteration in his miserable condition. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in response that it is not becoming for any soul to wish for death in this Day. He elaborates that the concourse on high and the near ones who have passed away are begging to return to the physical realm to serve the Cause and render it victorious, even through the utterance of a single word (Fáḍil-i-Mazandarání, *Amr va Khalq* 3:12). Thus, according to Bahá'u'lláh, it is not acceptable for a Bahá'í to seek an early termination of life.

One last issue must be addressed at this time. The limited resources available to present-day society have led to a highly divisive current debate in biomedical ethics and public policy. The following question lies at the core of this debate: Is healthcare a right, or should it be considered a privilege? The issue is admittedly a highly complex one. However, we hold that in the light of Bahá'í teachings healthcare can be considered to be a right, one to which every human being is entitled.<sup>31</sup> As Bahá'u'lláh has ordained that every sick person must seek medical treatment, it follows that healthcare must be available for all. Certainly the Bahá'í principles concerning justice, mercy, and compassion imply the same:

O SON OF MAN! If thine eyes be turned towards mercy, forsake the things that profit thee and cleave unto that which will profit mankind. And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 64)

The Bahá'í solution, as taught by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to the problem of scarcity of resources is both innovative and challenging. It concerns the establishment of the practice of *muvását* (voluntary sharing) as opposed to forced equality, *musávár*:<sup>32</sup>

To state the matter briefly, the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh advocate voluntary sharing, and this is a greater thing than the equalization of wealth. For equalization must be imposed from without, while sharing is a matter of free choice.

Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally

30. For example, see *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 95.

31. This a point on which Bahá'í scholars generally agree. See for example "Towards a World Economy" by John Huddleston, *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3.3 (1991): 32.

32. For a summary of Bahá'í scripture on this topic, see Fáḍil-i-Mazandarání, *Amr va Khalq* 3:256-58. The *Lawh-i-Muvását* is available in Bahá'u'lláh, *Darýá-i-Dánish* 14046. For a different theoretical and practical approach to the same concept, see Fárábí's *Árá-i-Ahl-i-Madiny-i-Fáḍilih* 331.



chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor . . . but of their own free will, and not because . . . the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace. It lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 115)

### **Life as Seen in Bahá'í Theology**

As physical entities, life and death are at the same time both spiritual and physical realities. According to the Bahá'í teachings, physiological life and death, as physical entities, are natural phenomena:

Nature is that condition, that reality, which in appearance consists in life and death, or, in other words, in the composition and decomposition of all things. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 3)

Bahá'í theology defines physiological life in terms of the association of the human spirit with the physical body. That this association of spirit and body defines life is clearly borne out in the Bahá'í scripture. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the spirit of man is the cause of the life of the body" (*Some Answered Questions* 201). He reiterates the same in the following passage:

The spirit does not need a body, but the body needs spirit, or it cannot live. The soul can live without a body, but the body without the soul dies. (*Paris Talks* 86–87)

In a tablet to be recited at the bedside of the dying person, Bahá'u'lláh confirms that physiological life is of the human spirit.<sup>33</sup> Another notable example is one of the verses in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* that prohibits murder:

What! Would ye kill him whom God hath quickened, whom He hath endowed with spirit through a breath from Him? (46, para. 73)

'Abdu'l-Bahá alternatively defines life in terms of composition. He, for instance, states that life is an "expression of composition":

Life is the expression of composition; and death, the expression of decomposition. In the world or kingdom of the minerals certain materials or elemental substances exist. When through the law of creation they enter into composition, a being or organism comes into existence. For example, certain material atoms are brought together, and man is the result. (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 306)

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33. Ishráq Khávarí, *Tasbîh va Tahlíl* 238.

This seemingly materialistic explanation underlying human life may appear to contradict understanding humans as spiritual beings. However, in *Some Answered Questions* (201) 'Abdu'l-Bahá further elaborates that this composition becomes a "magnet for the [human] spirit." The "noble combination" of the human body is moreover, "compared to a mirror, and the human spirit to the sun" (*Some Answered Questions* 144). Thus, the human spirit becomes associated with the human temple. It must be noted that the creation of life is an act of God, one which humankind can never perform.<sup>34</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the human spirit "can manifest itself in all forms" of the physical frame, and in different stages of development. For instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly argues that the human embryo is endowed with the human spirit:

In the same way, the embryo possesses from the first all perfections, such as the spirit, the mind, the sight, the smell, the taste—in one word, all the powers—but they are not visible and become so only by degrees. (*Some Answered Questions* 199)

The attributes and powers of the spirit are, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in a less developed form in the embryo, that is, potentially (*bi'l-quwah*) present, but not actually. He uses the classic philosophical example of the seed and the tree to differentiate between the potential and the actual. It is in light of the above teachings that the Bahá'í tradition maintains that the human soul appears at conception.<sup>35</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that human beings have five physical (outer) powers and five intellectual (inner) powers.<sup>36</sup> The five outer powers are sight, hearing, smell, taste, and feeling. One can utilize these powers to "perceive outward existences." The five inner powers are imagination, thought, comprehension, memory, and the common faculty. The common faculty is considered to be the interface or intermediary between the inner and outer powers ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 210–11). Life, i.e., the association of the human spirit with the physical frame, results in these ten powers. In the following passage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines death, as a state wherein these powers are absent:

In the time of sleep this body is as though dead; it does not see nor hear; it does not feel; it has no consciousness, no perception—that is to say, the powers of man have become inactive, but the spirit lives and subsists. (*Some Answered Questions* 228)<sup>37</sup>

34. For example, see *Some Answered Questions* 181–82.

35. See *Lights of Guidance* 345. This understanding is clearly rooted in Bahá'í writings. Cf. the *Lawh-i-Rais* cited in Fádíl-i-Mazandarání, *Amr va Khalq* 1:230.

36. This classification is foreign to modern Western psychology, however, it closely parallels classical philosophy and psychology. See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, Book 3, and Fárábí, *Ará-i-Ahl-i-Madnīy-i-Fádīlīh* 181–92, for two contrasting classifications. The system presented by 'Abdu'l-Bahá is closest to that of Ibn-i-Khaldún in his *Al-Muqadamīh* 1:178–80.

37. See also 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 415–17.

The human brain is the center to which the five senses relay their output. The mind and the brain then assume a unique function with regard to physical life. In the Bahá'í teachings, the mind is described as such:

But the mind is the power of the human spirit. Spirit is the lamp; mind is the light which shines from the lamp. Spirit is the tree, and the mind is the fruit. Mind is the perfection of the spirit and is its essential quality, as the sun's rays are the essential necessity of the sun. (*Some Answered Questions* 209)

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes the following regarding the unique position of the mind in the human experience:

The mind force. . . doth direct and co-ordinate all the members of the human body, seeing to it that each part or member duly performeth its own special function. If, however, there be some interruption in the power of the mind, all the members will fail to carry out their essential functions, deficiencies will appear in the body and the functioning of its members, and the power will prove ineffective. (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 48)

The mind, however, is not to be found within any of the sense organs. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the mind has no place, but it is connected with the brain" (*Some Answered Questions* 242). According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the mind is connected to the brain, much in the same way that love is connected to the human heart (*Some Answered Questions* 242). In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the brain is the "chief member" of the human body and the cause of its perfection (*Some Answered Questions* 178). It may therefore be suggested that the presence of an intact brain is an integral part of the Bahá'í definition of life.

### **Death as Seen in the Bahá'í Faith**

Death and dying are processes with which both the science of medicine and people in general are uncomfortable. As such, our society permits allocation of vast resources to postpone death. According to the Bahá'í writings, death is an event to be welcomed, not feared. Using the common mystical metaphor of the bird and the cage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that at the moment of death the bird of the human spirit is freed from the cage of the world (*Some Answered Questions* 228). Bahá'u'lláh states that death is the gate through which one may attain the presence of God (*Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 8:95). In another tablet, Bahá'u'lláh refers to death as a gate among the gates of mercy (*Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 8:95). The following well-known example from the *Hidden Words* conveys the same concept:

O SON OF THE SUPREME! I have made death a messenger of joy to thee. Wherefore dost thou grieve? I made the light to shed on thee its splendor. Why dost thou veil thyself therefrom? (11)

'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that physiological death represents the "severance" of the human spirit "of its connection with the body of dust" (*Some Answered Questions* 240). Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates that the human spirit does not enter into the physical frame; rather, it is associated with this physical body. He then defines death as the severance of this association. He adds that this association may be severed gradually, or it may occur suddenly (Fáḍíl-i-Mazandarání, *Amr va Kḥalq* 268). This concept requires careful, more extensive study; however, it may be beneficial here to recall the ten powers that defined life, as mentioned in the preceding section. The complete impairment of those ten faculties may be taken to be a sign of death. The onset of these impairments may be sudden (as in a car accident) or gradual (as in a prolonged death in an intensive care unit setting).

The severance of the spirit from the body itself appears to be synchronized with another process, which is the dissolution of the physiological body. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes regarding death, "Those souls who are pure and unsullied, upon the dissolution of their elemental frames, hasten away to the world of God, and that world is within this world" (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 195). This dissolution exemplifies the reversal of the process that resulted in life, i.e., composition. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that death is an expression of decomposition (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 306). Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that death is a manifestation of decomposition (*Promulgation* 87).

Currently, three clinical definitions of death prevail.<sup>38</sup> The classical definition of death is the heart-lung definition that has been used for decades.<sup>39</sup> In the 1960s, a number of philosophers and physicians began advocating "whole brain death" as an alternative definition of death.<sup>40</sup> Most recently, there has been a movement to recognize higher-brain death or cortical death as well. This movement has been supported by the growing need for organ transplantation. The definition using the heart-lung criteria is clearly acceptable according to the Bahá'í writings. The whole-brain and the higher-brain definitions are clearly not as straightforward but may also find some justification in the Bahá'í scriptures, as discussed below.

The pivotal position of the mind and brain in the Bahá'í definition of life and death clearly requires further consideration. In a tablet addressed to Dr. Auguste Henri Forel, 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarks that the mind, whose proper functioning is

38. For a concise review of the clinical definitions of death, see *American Journal of Critical Care* 4.6 (Nov. 1995).

39. This definition requires the "cessation of breathing and the absence of an audible heartbeat or a pulse" (Fletcher, *Introduction to Clinical Ethics* 118).

40. In 1968, the Ad Hoc Committee of the Harvard Medical School studied the issue and published a report endorsing whole brain definition of death in *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*. Their criteria included coma, absence of spontaneous breathing, absence of reflexes, and a flat-line electroencephalogram (*Introduction to Clinical Ethics* 119).

associated with the brain, is the "all-unifying agency" necessary for the unity of "all the component parts" of the human body:

Consider the body of man, and let the part be an indication of the whole. Consider how these diverse parts and members of the human body are closely connected and harmoniously united one with the other. Every part is the essential requisite of all other parts and has a function by itself. It is the mind that is the all-unifying agency that so uniteth all the component parts one with the other that each discharge its specific function in perfect order, and thereby co-operation and reaction are made possible. All parts function under certain laws that are essential to existence. Should that all-unifying agency that directeth all these parts be harmed in any way there is no doubt that the constituent parts and members will cease functioning properly. . . . (*Bahá'í World* 15:42)

Therefore, there may be room for inclusion of some brain-death criteria in the Bahá'í definition of death. 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaches that existence is an evolutionary process, and a gradation of life. Bahá'í philosophers have followed this argument closely. A contemporary Bahá'í philosopher suggests that a persistent vegetative state may therefore be considered a form of death:

However, the vegetable has the power of growth, which is absent in the mineral. And the animal is alive, when it is compared to the vegetable, whereas the vegetable is dead, if it is compared to the animal. For example, a human being affected by a deep coma because of a severe trauma is said to live a vegetative life, and by this is meant that his life is quite different from a normal human life. (Savi, *Eternal Quest for God* 59)

The Bahá'í Faith does not permit one to seek an early termination of life. Suicide, for instance, is strongly forbidden.<sup>41</sup> A passage by Bahá'u'lláh addressed to Jamál-i-Burújjirdí was referenced earlier with a similar unequivocal teaching. Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly forbids one from seeking an early termination of life, even when one encounters situations "which one cannot bear" (*má lá yuṭáq*). One is called upon to manifest patience and endure, when encountering situations of unbearable hardship and to exemplify thankfulness (*Fáḍil-i-Mazandarání, Amr va Kḥalq* 3:14).

41. It must be noted that there are cases of early Bahá'ís who had committed acts of self-annihilation during the lifetimes of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and who are mentioned reverently and praised in the corpus of Bahá'í writings. For example, Siyyid Ismá'il-i-Zavárih, entitled *Dḥabíh*, is praised in the *Lawḥ-i-Ráts* as the "beloved of martyrs and their king." The actions of these individuals are generally understood in terms of their mystical relationship to Bahá'u'lláh, considered acts of sacrifice rather than suicide. Therefore, in this context, the statements of praise are not as problematic as they may otherwise appear to be.

## Principles of Bahá'í Bioethics

Moral and ethical dilemmas are inherent to the technological revolution in modern medicine. The remainder of this article elaborates on principles that can guide the decision-making process when one is faced with such dilemmas. Obviously, any such list can only touch on the highpoints and is certainly not intended to be perceived as exhaustive. It must be noted that by "principles" the authors intend teachings gleaned from the Bahá'í writings that may be utilized in bioethical decision-making and not principles along the lines suggested by Beauchamp and Childress.

### 1. Justice

Justice is clearly a preeminent element in any ethical consideration. According to Bahá'u'lláh, justice is "the best beloved of all things . . ." (*Hidden Words* 3). 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "justice is to give to everyone according to his deserts" (*Some Answered Questions* 266). The definition provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is in the context of political philosophy, with significant implications for bioethics:

The second attribute of perfection is justice and impartiality. This means to have no regard for one's own personal benefits and selfish advantages, and to carry out the laws of God without the slightest concern for anything else. . . . It means to consider the welfare of the community as one's own. It means, in brief, to regard humanity as a single individual, and one's own self as a member of that corporeal form, and to know of a certainty that if pain or injury afflicts any member of that body, it must inevitably result in suffering for all the rest. (39)

### 2. Moderation

Moderation is a central theme within the corpus of Bahá'í writings. Bahá'u'lláh has repeatedly emphasized moderation as a guiding principle, as the following text illustrates:

It is incumbent upon them who are in authority to exercise moderation in all things. Whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence. Consider for instance such things as liberty, civilization and the like. However much men of understanding may favourably regard them, they will, if carried to excess, exercise a pernicious influence upon men. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 169)

The Bahá'í understanding of moderation as a virtue closely follows the Aristotelian view of virtues as the mean between two evils:<sup>42</sup>

If haste is harmful, inertness and indolence are a thousand times worse. A middle course is best, as it is written: "It is incumbent upon you to do good between the two evils,"

42. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 3 and 4.

this referring to the mean between the two extremes. "And let not thy hand be tied up to thy neck; nor yet open it with all openness . . . but between these follow a middle way" [Qur'án 17:31; 110]. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret of Divine Civilization* 108-9)

Bahá'u'lláh has obliged Bahá'ís to observe moderation in all things. He especially reiterates this theme with respect to civilization and technology. The following passage is of particular interest with regard to the pivotal role of moderation in the advancement of technology:

In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil. Consider the civilization of the West, how it hath agitated and alarmed the peoples of the world. An infernal engine hath been devised, and hath proved so cruel a weapon of destruction that its like none hath ever witnessed or heard. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 69)

### 3. Truthfulness

Lying is explicitly forbidden according to Bahá'í writings. It is obligatory that a human being should always utter the truth. In fact, it is better to utter a blasphemy than to utter a lie (*Ishráq Khávarí, Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 5:169):

Consider that the worst of qualities and most odious of attributes, which is the foundation of all evil, is lying. No worse or more blameworthy quality than this can be imagined to exist; it is the destroyer of all human perfections and the cause of innumerable vices. There is no worse characteristic than this; it is the foundation of all evils. (*Some Answered Questions* 215)

The Bahá'í Faith thus obligates all to speak the truth. Notably, Bahá'í scripture allows for only one possible exception to this ordinance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the continuation to the above passage writes the following:

Notwithstanding all this, if a doctor consoles a sick man by saying, "Thank God you are better, and there is hope of your recovery," though these words are contrary to the truth, yet they may become the consolation of the patient and the turning point of the illness. This is not blameworthy. (*Some Answered Questions* 215-16)

The ethical component of this teaching needs further analysis. It is clear, however, that an untrue statement may be uttered by a physician as part of medical therapy if said with the intent to cure.

### 4. Consultation

Bahá'u'lláh states that consultation is a prerequisite for the welfare and well-being of humankind.<sup>43</sup> It would indeed be difficult to overemphasize the role of

43. Cf. *The Prosperity of Humankind*, section 3.

consultation in the development of Bahá'í fundamentals for bioethics. We identify ethics consultation services, ethics committees, and institutional review boards as bodies that will benefit from the Bahá'í perspective on consultation.<sup>44</sup> The following passages serve to convey the necessity for consultation:

The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 168)<sup>45</sup>

And furthermore:

In all things it is necessary to consult. This matter should be forcibly stressed by thee, so that consultation may be observed by all. The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of the Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being. (*Consultation: A Compilation* 1)

### 5. Compassion and Love

According to Bahá'u'lláh, love is the principle underlying creation (*Daryáy-i-Dánish* 154). Both compassion and love are essential ingredients to the Bahá'í approach to any ethical dilemmas. Love is an element that is frequently omitted and often ignored in academic formulations of bioethics. The following passage concerns compassion and consultation:

Not long ago this most sublime Word was revealed in the Crimson Book by the All-Glorious Pen: 'The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with two luminaries: consultation and compassion.' Please God, everyone may be enabled to observe this weighty and blessed word. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 242)

Love may be an overarching principle in Bahá'í bioethics. The following exhortations from the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* indicates the importance of love in the Bahá'í worldview:

O ye beloved of the Lord! Commit not that which defileth the limpid stream of love or destroyeth the sweet fragrance of friendship. By the righteousness of the Lord! Ye were created to show love one to another and not perversity and rancour. Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow-creatures. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 138)

44. Ethics committees and ethics consultation services are relatively recent developments in the clinical setting. In 1991, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) required the establishment of mechanisms that addressed the ethical issues related to patient care (cf. Fletcher and Hoffmann in *Annals*). Institutional review boards, however, deal with the ethical dilemmas pertaining to research.

45. Similar exhortations are found in *Tablets* 126 and 242.



### 6. Good Will

The Bahá'í Faith obligates one to possess a good intention (*niyyat*). Good intentions are to actions, as roots are to the branch. Only actions that are based on good intentions have an everlasting effect in the world (*Badáyi 'ul-Athár* 1:331–32):

The third virtue of humanity is the goodwill which is the basis of good actions. Certain philosophers have considered intention superior to action, for the goodwill is absolute light; it is purified and sanctified from the impurities of selfishness, of enmity, of deception. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 302)

Although good will is “praiseworthy,” it is not complete and perfect in itself. In other words, it is necessary, but not sufficient. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, good will has two prerequisites: the knowledge of God and the love of God (*Some Answered Questions* 302). The agent is obliged to have a pure motive and intention in the Bahá'í bioethics; however, this good intention occurs in a different moral framework than would the good intention of a Kantian agent.<sup>46</sup>

### Conclusion

A comprehensive study of the Bahá'í fundamentals for ethics (*akhláq*) in general, and Bahá'í fundamentals for bioethics in particular, has not as yet been undertaken. It would have been both premature and impossible to examine the whole spectrum in this article. For the purposes of this article, the authors did not discuss Bahá'í fundamentals for ethical theory, but instead presented a metaphysical framework within which bioethical dilemmas can be considered. Relying on primary sources, in Persian, Arabic, and English, the authors examined some major concepts such as life, death, the role of medicine, and the role of suffering, within the Bahá'í religion. A number of principles gleaned from the Bahá'í writings and intended for bioethical problem-solving were offered.

Much work remains to be done. The authors hope that the common ground established in this article will serve to initiate much-needed dialogues in the Bahá'í religion. Many of the issues and questions that were introduced in this article call for further examination. It is the task of Bahá'í bioethicists to introduce the Bahá'í teachings into the current dialogues.

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46. See page 50, above.

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