Discerning a Framework for the Treatment of Animals and the Natural World in the Bahá'í Writings: Ethics, Ontology, and Discourse

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Abstract
Discussions about the proper relationship between humans and animals can easily degenerate into what the Universal House of Justice calls "the all too common tendencies . . . to delineate sharp dichotomies . . . and engage in intractable debate that obstructs the search for viable solutions" (29 November 2017). This paper first uses an exegetical approach to discern a Bahá'í framework governing the treatment of animals, and our relationship to the natural world more broadly. Next, a self-reflexive examination of the author's own relationship with animals is used to demonstrate how such a framework can directly inform the individual's way of being in the world, in a manner that is both faithful to the Bahá'í teachings on the subject, and responsive to differences in individuals' circumstances. Finally, it suggests that by presenting an internally coherent position in which an ethics of kindness and justice flows from underlying ontological principles, this framework hold promise for transcending the dichotomy between domination-themed narratives that assign purely instrumental value to the natural world, and materialistic narratives that deny any unique status to the human being.[1]

Résumé
Les discussions sur la relation appropriée entre les humains et les animaux peuvent facilement dégénérer en ce que la Maison universelle de justice appelle « les tendances beaucoup trop communes [...] à dépeindre des dichotomies tranchées [...] à s'adonner à des débats insolubles, bloquant la recherche de solutions viables » (29 novembre 2017). L'auteur de cet article utilise d'abord une approche exégétique pour dégager un cadre bahá'í du traitement des animaux, et plus largement, de notre rapport au monde naturel. Dans un examen introspectif de sa propre relation avec les animaux, l'auteur démontre ensuite comment un tel cadre peut directement éclairer la façon d'être de l'individu dans le monde, d'une manière à la fois fidèle aux enseignements bahá'ís sur le sujet, et adaptée aux différences de circonstances des individus. Enfin, il suggère qu'en présentant une position intérieurement cohérente dans laquelle une éthique de bienveillance et de justice découle de principes ontologiques sous-jacents, ce cadre bahá'í du traitement des animaux est prometteur pour transcender la dichotomie entre une façon de voir le

1 This paper had its origins in a presentation offered at the 2020 Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, but expands considerably on the arguments in that talk, both in terms of breadth and depth. My thanks to Roshan Danesh, Nilufar Gordon, Mahtab Sabet, and two anonymous reviewers, for their generous feedback and encouragement.

monde naturel selon une thématique de domination, qui lui attribue une valeur purement instrumentale, et une thématique purement matérialiste qui nie tout statut unique à l'être humain.

Resumen
Discusiones acerca de la apropiada relación entre los humanos y los animales pueden fácilmente degenerar en lo que la Casa Universal de Justicia llama "lo de todas tendencias comunes . . . a delinear agudas dicotomías . . . e involucrarse en un incontrolable debate que obstruye la búsqueda de soluciones viables" (29 de noviembre de 2017). Este artículo primero utiliza una metodología exegética para discernir un marco Bahá'í que gobierna el tratamiento de animales, y nuestra relación con el mundo natural en un sentido más amplio. Enseguida, se utiliza una examinación auto-reflexiva de la propia relación del autor (la autora) con los animales para demostrar como dicho marco puede directamente informar la travesía del individuo en el mundo, en una manera fiel a las enseñanzas Bah'ís sobre el tema, y que responda a las diferencias en circunstancias individuales. Finalmente, sugiere que al presentar una posición internamente coherente en la cual la ética de la bondad y la justicia fluye de los subyacentes principios ontológicos, este marco es prometedor para trascender la dicotomía entre las narrativas dominantes que asignan valores puramente instrumentales al mundo natural, y las narrativas materialistas que niegan un estatus único al ser humano.

Introduction

If a Bahá'í—one who believes in Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the bearer of a divine Message, and is thus motivated to grow in their understanding of, and conformity to, His teachings—ever becomes complacent about either their own spiritual progress or the life of their society, they need only remind themselves of the intended goal of the Bahá'í Revelation:

> [I]s not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? (*Kitáb-i-Íqan* 240)

The world we live in today, already so different from that to which Bahá'u'lláh came in the nineteenth century, must change; further, it can, and it will, change. It is in light of this conviction that this paper aims to discern a framework in the Bahá'í Writings for the ethical treatment of animals, an area in which, I will suggest, the Revelation makes it clear that change must come.

Structure and Methodology

My treatment of the topic is divided into three parts. First, I engage in an exegetical exploration of relevant Bahá'í Writings, exploring not only explicit teachings on the treatment of animals, but also passages that illuminate the ontological principles underpinning an ethical orientation towards animals and the natural world. Second, I employ a self-reflexive examination of my own relationship with animals in order to

suggest how the framework presented in the first part can directly inform the individual's way of being in the world, in a manner that is both faithful to the Bahá'í teachings on the subject, and responsive to differences in individuals' circumstances. Finally, I consider how developing a framework for relating to animals and the natural world that is consciously rooted in the Bahá'í Writings might help inform contributions to discourse about this issue. This section will also include some preliminary reflections on how a Bahá'í approach to ethics more generally might situate itself in relation to utilitarian and deontological (duty-based) approaches. While this last question may at first glance appear abstract, it is my hope that concretizing it through the example of the treatment of animals will help convey the great value that a Bahá'í approach can offer to ethical inquiries.

Throughout the paper, the framework for the treatment of animals against which I juxtapose a Bahá'í perspective is that of Western consumer society, broadly speaking—that is, the pattern of social and economic life, originating in the West but increasingly prevalent worldwide, in which the encouragement and glorification of individual consumption structures the social and economic order. This choice requires some justification at the outset, since centering this perspective risks ignoring the resources present in other worldviews (notably including a wide range of Indigenous ones) for a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The choice, in spite of the limitations it entails, is grounded in two considerations.

First, given that I explore the application of the Bahá'í teachings through a methodology of self-reflection, engagement with the Western consumer framework is unavoidable. I have been raised, and continue to live, in a Western consumer society, and it is this society which has primarily informed my attitudes and habits: it is the "hardened clay" of my life against which I hope the "touch of moisture" of the Writings can have some effect (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 7:5).

Second, it is Western consumer culture—the outgrowth of the "cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent"—that is causing such devastating consequences for the natural world today (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 125). Further, as I will argue in the third part of the paper, the ecological damage being wrought by this way of being in the world is not accidental; it is the logical result of a certain philosophical orientation towards reality originating in the European Enlightenment. When it comes to humanity's relationship with nature it is thus this consumerism, and its philosophical underpinnings, for which the remedy of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation may be most needed, and in counteracting which it might be expected to have the greatest effect.

Goals of the Paper

This paper is written with three goals in mind. The first is to suggest that

the Bahá'í standard on how we should treat animals is *clear*, *coherent*, and *demanding*. It is *clear*, from the explicit writings of Bahá'u'lláh and statements and writings by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, that the standard is high; a standard in which pain or harm caused to an animal must be the exception, and never the rule—not the pattern of our lives—and occur only when justified according to stringent criteria. It is *coherent* in that these explicit statements rest upon an underpinning of ontological teachings about the fundamental reality, not only of animals, but of the natural world itself. And it is *demanding* in that it unambiguously asks us to completely alter our predominant relationships with animals and the natural world, relationships that have their roots in the necessities of humanity's infancy, but which, carried forward to the threshold of humanity's maturity, are materially self-destructive and spiritually unbecoming.

The second goal of the paper is to argue that the Bahá'í framework for thinking about this issue has a valuable contribution to make to broader discourses about humans' relations with animals and nature. Bahá'u'lláh's insights into the nature of the human being and the natural world can help us articulate a way of thinking about the human and the animal, and the relationship between them, that breaks down the unhelpful dichotomy that often emerges in discussions of this issue between domination-themed narratives that assign purely instrumental value to the natural world, and materialistic narratives that deny any unique status for the human. This dichotomy, rooted in influential philosophical traditions, has turned the question of our treatment of animals and nature, like so many other questions of our day, into a matter for contention and argument rather than unified action.

The final goal of this paper is to humbly argue that this question, far from being a merely peripheral or incidental aspect of Bahá'í belief and practice, is urgent. Its urgency stems both from the ever-present duty of Bahá'ís to refine their own conduct, and from the increasingly dire consequences of humanity's problematic relationship with animals and the natural world. As an ethical matter, the Bahá'í standard for the treatment of animals makes an immediate claim on us as moral beings whose purpose is to grow spiritually, while as a practical matter, the ecological crisis that is now well underway demands action. "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us (*Tabernacle* 2:7); the need to halt, and reverse, human-driven ecological collapse and climate change is one of the crying needs of our age. I shall make the case that, far from a distraction from the vital work of community building, and the other endeavors Bahá'ís are occupied with, progress in this respect will redound to the greater coherence and efficacy of all our efforts.

In short, then, my hope is that this paper can start to uncover some concepts and language in a Bahá'í framework for the treatment of animals and

the natural world that can advance discourse in this area, by finding points of resonance with often-conflicting mainstream positions, and suggesting a path to reconciliation. Simultaneously, these concepts may help readers reflect on, and discuss, how Bahá'ís, as individuals and communities, can advance in their understanding and operationalization of kindness to animals—a component of living a Bahá'í life stressed by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

In talks by Bahá'í speakers, but less commonly in their academic writing, it is commonplace to find the caveat that their interpretation and application of the Bahá'í Writings is based on their individual understanding, and may thus be wrong, incomplete, or imbalanced. Given that this particular topic inevitably touches on questions of individual action, I foreground it here, to disclaim any desire to tell anyone else how they should act with regard to this issue:

> Believers are free, indeed are encouraged, to study the Writings for themselves and to express their understanding of them. Such personal interpretations can be most illuminating, but all Bahá'ís, including the one expressing the view, however learned he may be, should realize that it is only a personal view and can never be upheld as a standard for others to accept, nor should disputes ever be permitted to arise over differences in such opinions. (Universal House of Justice, 3 January 1982)

A Framework for the Ethical Treatment of Animals that Emerges from the Bahá'í Writings

There are relatively few clear laws and prohibitions dealing with the treatment of animals in the Bahá'í Writings. Instead, a study of the Writings reveals a number of principles that bear on human treatment of animals, leaving those who regard those Writings as the source of divine guidance with the responsibility to reflect on how to apply them.

This section will first explore the implications of the framing of the ethical treatment of animals in the Bahá'í Writings being primarily in terms of principles rather than rules. Next, it will consider Writings that directly address the principle of kindness to animals, and unpack the seeming paradox presented by Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá that appear to differ on whether kindness is owed more to animals or to humans. Once the principles operating in the relevant passages are uncovered, the apparent textual tension reveals itself to be a source of dynamic creativity in actual practice, pointing to a virtuous cycle in which kindness to animals is both an end in itself and a means to greater kindness to humans. The scope and application of the principle of human responsibility to deal with harmful animals will

also be considered, helping to define the limits and parameters of the principle of kindness, followed by a brief review of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings on human diet. This analysis will suggest that, viewed holistically, the Writings present a clear and workable standard for the ethical treatment of animals.

Next, the focus will shift from explicitly ethical principles to an examination of the ontology of animals and humans in the Bahá'í Writings. Here, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of the ideal life of the animal, and this life's inadequacy for human fulfillment, will be explored, with an eye for how this can enrich our understanding of the ethical framework. The implications of the Báb's statements on the elevation of created things into their "paradise" will also be considered. This discussion will highlight the profound coherence between the Bahá'í ontological understanding of animals and the natural world and the ethical framework for the treatment of animals in the Bahá'í Faith.

A Clear Standard

Prioritizing Principles over Rules

In attempting to discover a Bahá'í framework for the treatment of animals, the logical starting place might be to ask whether there are any explicit laws on the subject, an inquiry that would lead us first to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh's "Most Holy Book," which is also His book of laws. The idea of law in the Bahá'í context has to be approached carefully, in order to avoid unconsciously drawing in concepts of law that center on rigid rules and prohibitions, enforced by institutions through punitive measures. As Danesh suggests, in its structure, its use of legal terminology, and even the circumstances of its revelation, dissemination, and gradual coming into effect, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas recasts the idea of legal restrictions: these "are not punishments to be applied by an external force; rather, they delineate the boundaries within which our spiritual health and purpose can best be achieved" (Danesh 14).

Thus, while certain prohibitions in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas do entail specific penalties, most do not, including those pertaining specifically to animals. This in no way diminishes their importance: indeed, far from having revealed a "mere code of laws," Bahá'u'lláh states that He has "unsealed the choice Wine," and that His commandments are "the lamps of my loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶5, 3). Law in this paradigm becomes the unerring guide on the path to spiritual growth, to the attainment of the purpose of the human being's life; its importance is self-evident. Rather than obeying a set of rules out of fear of institutionally-enforced penalties, the individual bears primary responsibility for putting themselves in proper relation to the law, out of the proper motive—love.

We might conclude that the relative paucity of strict requirements and

prohibitions, and the corresponding greater scope for admonitions and counsels, as compared to previous Dispensations, reflects our collective passage into maturity. Bahá'u'lláh, on this reading of the matter, has judged that we are able, either as individuals or through consultation, to figure out part of the path to Him ourselves. There are some clear "dos and donts"—which we might think of as warning signs and barriers indicating where that path runs next to a cliff—but much of the rest we must discover for ourselves, using less of a blueprint and more of a set of guiding principles. The Universal House of Justice reiterates this point in one of its letters: "This is the age in which mankind must attain maturity, and one aspect of this is the assumption by individuals of the responsibility for deciding, with the assistance of consultation, their own course of action in areas which are left open by the law of God" (5 June 1988).

This is both empowering and daunting. Empowering, because it moves us away from what religion often became in the past: a set of practices prescribed by a clerical order that the laypeople blindly follow. Daunting, because the responsibility for discovering and implementing the spiritual practices that conform to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is a weighty one for everyone who recognizes His Station.

With this conception of law in mind, we can consider where in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh may be highlighting how our relationship to animals informs our attainment of the spiritual purpose of our lives.

"Justice and Fairness amidst all Creation"

Two provisions in particular stand out. First, Bahá'u'lláh permits and regulates hunting, specifying (both in the original text of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and in answer to a question on the subject) under what circumstances a hunted animal is lawful for consumption, and counselling the reader to "Take heed, however, that ye hunt not to excess" (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶60; Questions n. 24). We will return to the implications of the regulation of hunting later in considering the application of the ethical framework.

Second, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

> Burden not an animal with more than it can bear. We, truly, have prohibited such treatment through a most binding interdiction in the Book. Be ye the embodiments of justice and fairness amidst all creation. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶187)

The first question we might ask, as we attempt to understand this law, is what the *scope* of this interdiction against overburdening an animal may be. To a nineteenth century Middle Eastern audience, the most obvious application of this passage would be to literal beasts of burden. However, we know that Bahá'u'lláh's Writings are to guide humanity for at least a thousand years from the time of His

declaration in 1863 (see Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 37). Already in much of the world the practice of using animals to carry burdens has all but vanished. We might therefore wonder whether, once we no longer use animals in this way, this law has any further effect.

In considering this question, we can be mindful of the "elliptical" style of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which further suggests an intent to provide a guide to spiritual growth rather than a rigid and comprehensive set of externally enforced regulations. As Danesh states, citing a Memorandum of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre:

> Bahá'u'lláh's language in articulating laws has been referred to as having "a certain fluidity and imprecision inherent in the very language." One reason for this is its "observable tendency to deal with whole areas of legislative concern by reference to a single representative example of illustrative instance." In this "elliptical" model, the statement of rules may be understood as indicating certain themes, directions, and areas that Bahá'u'lláh views as important in future legal development. . . . In other words, the purpose of an apparent "rule," in some cases, may not be to articulate a specific directive but to act as a proxy for drawing out a particular theme, principle, or concept of import. (Danesh 16)

What theme, principle, or concept might this singular prohibition on overburdening an animal be pointing to? It is, of course, not our place to attempt to predict any future legislative elaborations on this provision from the Universal House of Justice, but we can consider what kind of guidance it provides for our own attempts to partake of the "choice Wine."

As in English, the root "*Ḥ m l*" of the Arabic verb "to burden" used here can imply either a physical burden, or some other charge, task, or imposition. There are many kinds of "burdens," of course, beyond those literal loads that might have come to mind most readily for Bahá'u'lláh's contemporaries. Humans inflict physical and emotional burdens on animals, both deliberately and through negligence. Without attempting even a cursory exploration of the ever-growing bodies of research on both the capacity for physical pain of even non-vertebrate animals and animals' emotional life,[2] I will rely on

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2 As will be seen below, 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirms that animals experience pain and suffering; He does not restrict this to any particular type or group of animal. The delimitation in the Bahá'í Writings is instead always between the animal kingdom and the lower, vegetable kingdom. Science has until recently lagged behind this general recognition, possibly the legacy of some pre-scientific thinking (that of Descartes, for instance, discussed later in this paper) that denied that any non-human could experience pain. Assessing another creature's subjective capacity to experience pain is challenging. Nociception, the process by which noxious stimuli are registered in the

the reader's own experience with animals to attest to the fact that some of them, at least, are capable not merely of physical sensation but of emotion, including emotional pain.

This broader reading of the "binding interdiction" on overburdening an animal finds support in Shoghi Effendi's authoritative description of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas in *God Passes By*, where he explains that it "condemns cruelty to animals" (214). I would thus argue that the *scope* of this provision is very broad.

The next question to consider is how *important* it is. To answer this, we can look to the language in which it is framed, where we find two strong indications of the importance of this law.

First, this provision is framed as a "most binding interdiction." This suggests that avoiding cruelty to animals is not an ancillary principle, to be given attention once more pressing matters have been attended to, but an issue of the first importance. No reason is given for this law's distinctive highlighting in this way; one possibility might be its connection to spiritual search, discussed below in the context of the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Notably, this is the same language Bahá'u'lláh uses in prohibiting the use of opium (a provision that, it must be pointed out, is even more sternly emphasized through additional language):

> It hath been forbidden you to smoke opium. We, truly, have prohibited this practice through a most binding interdiction in the Book. Should anyone partake thereof, assuredly he is not of Me. Fear God, O ye endued with understanding! (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶190)

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nervous system and a reflex action, such as moving away from the stimulus, is enacted, has been found throughout the animal kingdom. Nociceptors—neurons specialized in nociception—of some kind are found in all vertebrates (including fish, the vertebrate group from which we diverged the earliest on the tree of life. See Jabr), and in a wide range of invertebrates, including annelids, molluscs, nematodes, and arthropods. It is conceptually possible for nociception to arise through natural selection, as an adaptation that promotes survival and thus gene propagation, without it being accompanied by a subjective experience of pain, which requires a conscious registering of a stimulus as unpleasant. By this argument, subjective pain would require some kind of emotional life in an animal, or an analogue to it. Given that our ability to identify such a phenomenon in other species, particularly those drastically different from us, will be impaired by our inevitable tendency to look for our particularly human types of evidence for it, the onus would seem to be on those who would argue against its existence. As research accrues, species previously thought to be extremely simple, such as cephalopods (octopus, squid, etc.) have gradually come to be seen as remarkably intelligent and capable of emotion, albeit in a way difficult to recognize at first because of the vast evolutionary difference between us and them. The European Union, for instance, has recognized that "there is scientific evidence of [cephalopods'] ability to experience pain, suffering, distress and lasting harm" ("Directive").

To my knowledge, these are the only two uses of the phrase "a most binding interdiction in the Book" in Bahá'u'lláh's translated Writings.[3]

Second, we see here an important consciousness-expanding principle: "Be ye the embodiments of justice and fairness *amidst all creation*" (emphasis added). In the Bahá'í conception, justice is not merely a social lubricant or organizing principle for groups. As an attribute of the human soul, it must manifest itself in our every interaction. Indeed, the Arabic here uses both words (*'adl* and *insáf*) typically translated as justice in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, and where some scholars may be inclined to read these as respectively referring to the *spiritual quality* and the *social reality* of justice, the presence of both terms here strongly suggests that both are implicated. The possible implications are enormous, not least for how we treat animals and nature. Consider that it is difficult to think of how we would treat something "fairly" without conceiving of it as having rights, legitimate claims to be owed certain things. We will return to this later in considering both 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings on kindness to animals, and the ontological basis of Bahá'í ethics towards animals, but for now it suffices to point out that this signals that our treatment of animals is of spiritual consequence for ourselves (i.e. since justice is a virtue we are called upon to cultivate for our own spiritual progress, a law that help us adhere to it is indeed a "key" to God's mercy) as well as of practical consequence for the animal who is owed justice and fairness, and must therefore be conceived of as a rights-bearing entity.[4]

The Standard of Loving-Kindness

Looking elsewhere in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, we find a remarkable mention of the treatment of animals in that portion of the Kitáb-i-Íqán often referred to as the Tablet of the True Seeker. Here, Bahá'u'lláh sets out the requirements for "a true seeker" who "determineth to take the step of search in the path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days":

> That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the

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3 The original Arabic for "We, truly, have prohibited such treatment / this practice through" is also the same in both verses. The entire identical phrase is "inna nahinákum 'an dhalik nahiyan 'aẓiman fi al-kitáb."

4 This is echoed in a passage by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "The Almighty hath not created in man the claws and teeth of ferocious animals, nay rather hath the human form been fashioned and set with the most comely attributes and adorned with the most perfect virtues. The honor of this creation and the worthiness of this garment therefore require man to have love and affinity for his own kind, nay rather, to act towards *all living creatures with justice and equity*" (*Selections* 225, emphasis added).

> soul. He should be content with little, and be freed from all inordinate desire. He should treasure the companionship of those that have renounced the world, and regard avoidance of boastful and worldly people a precious benefit. At the dawn of every day he should commune with God, and with all his soul persevere in the quest of his Beloved. He should consume every wayward thought with the flame of His loving mention, and, with the swiftness of lightning, pass by all else save Him. He should succor the dispossessed, and never withhold his favor from the destitute. *He should show kindness to animals, how much more unto his fellow man, to him who is endowed with the power of utterance*. (193, emphasis added)

Once again, as with the provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, we see a connection between the treatment of animals and our fulfilment of our spiritual purpose in life. Bahá'ís familiar with the severity of Bahá'u'lláh's condemnation of backbiting,[5] and the importance in the Bahá'í writings of detachment,[6] companionship with the righteous,[7] communion with God and singular focus on Him, and generosity to the poor[8] for our spiritual development—as well as the other central spiritual teachings expressed in the rest of this passage (not cited here)—may find the inclusion of kindness to animals in this list highly suggestive. The context provided by all these other qualities and actions strongly suggests that the station of a "seeker" described here is not one from which we ever graduate. The "path leading to the knowledge of the Ancient of Days" does not end with recognition of His Manifestation; the individual must seek ever greater understanding and love for the Manifestation throughout their whole life. Thus, just as we never reach a stage at which we no longer need to be mindful of backbiting, for instance, the injunction to be kind to animals can be read as a universal prescription to govern our entire span of life in this physical world.

While these selections from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings show that kindness to animals is of great importance, and is not a peripheral matter in Bahá'í ethics, they do not speak explicitly to the reasoning behind the importance of the treatment of animals. An examination of the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this subject helps uncover the reasoning, and further elaborates the standard to which we are called.

Aside from His Writings concerning the human diet, to be considered later, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's clearest admonitions

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5 See for instance Arabic Hidden Words n. 27 and n. 29, and Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 19.

6 See for instance Arabic Hidden Words n.7, 8, and n.15 to 18, and Persian Hidden Word n. 55.

7 See for instance Persian Hidden Words n. 3, and n. 56 to 58.

8 See for instance Arabic Hidden Word n. 57 and Persian Hidden Word n. 54.

with respect to our treatment of animals can perhaps be found in a tablet published in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Apart from the opening paragraph, which specifies the categories of human beings to whom kindness must *not* be shown (the tyrant, deceiver, and thief), the rest of the selection is entirely concerned with the treatment of animals. We can consider all but the last paragraph here, deferring that paragraph to the later discussion of limitations to the principle of kindness:

> Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the *utmost loving-kindness* to every living creature. For in all physical respects, and where the animal spirit is concerned, the selfsame feelings are shared by animal and man. Man hath not grasped this truth, however, and he believeth that physical sensations are confined to human beings, wherefore is he unjust to the animals, and cruel.
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> And yet in truth, what difference is there when it cometh to physical sensations? The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast. There is no difference here whatever. And indeed ye do worse to harm an animal, for man hath a language, he can lodge a complaint, he can cry out and moan; if injured he can have recourse to the authorities and these will protect him from his aggressor. But the hapless beast is mute, able neither to express its hurt nor take its case to the authorities. If a man inflict a thousand ills upon a beast, it can neither ward him off with speech nor hale him into court. Therefore is it essential that ye show forth the utmost consideration to the animal, and that ye be even kinder to him than to your fellow man.
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> Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests. (138, emphasis added)

The first point to note here is that, as in the case of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the language is particularly strong. To show the "utmost loving-kindness" literally means that the kindness we show to "every living creature" must be such that no greater kindness would be possible. The fact that it is not kindness only, but loving-kindness to which we are called, is also suggestive.[9] Whereas kindness might be considered primarily a matter of action, love requires a certain attitude and inner orientation of the heart towards the animal. Without too lengthy a digression into the concept of love in the Bahá'í Writings, we may note that in its highest or most

9 I am indebted to Roshan Danesh for pointing out this distinction.

genuine expression by a human being, love is based in recognition of the divine in the object of love.[10]

'Abdu'l-Bahá provides two reasons for this imperative to loving-kindness. The foundational reason is that animals feel pain in just the same way that we do. This is a point we will return to in considering the historical trajectory of attitudes towards animals in Western philosophy. The subsidiary reason—the reason for which we "do [even] worse to harm an animal" than a human—is the animal's helplessness, specifically its inability to advocate for itself.

The Virtuous Cycle of Kindness within a Dynamic Spiritual Ethics

An interesting tension emerges from the juxtaposition of this passage with that quoted above from Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Íqán. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that we must be "even kinder" to the animal than to our fellow humans. Bahá'u'lláh, conversely, says we must show kindness to animals, but "how much more unto" our fellow humans. Of particular note, the justification in each case is analogous. Bahá'u'lláh notes that humans are endowed with utterance, whereas for 'Abdu'l-Bahá the animal's *inability* to speak and plead its case makes it *more* deserving of kindness—an argument which, contrary to the Enlightenment philosophy of Descartes and Kant, as shall be seen, makes our human uniqueness as reasoning, communicative beings the basis of our duty to be particularly caring towards animals, rather than grounds for denying that we have obligations to them.

What to make of this apparent inconsistency? The matter might be most easily resolved by recourse to the hermeneutical principle that, where a statement from Bahá'u'lláh seems to us to be at odds with one from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá is deferred to, because, as the authorized interpreter of His Father's Words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá knows what Bahá'u'lláh means, and we do not.[11] Thus, kindness to animals would emerge as the stronger duty than kindness to humans.

In this case, however, there may be no need to invoke this hermeneutical principle. Instead, it is possible that the tension between these two statements is deliberate, and *creative*.

Consider that the virtues humans are called upon to develop in this life, such as kindness, are dynamic, not static. We can never attain some final level for

10 See, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* ch. 58 "The Four Kinds of Love.". We will later return to the concept of animals as an expression of divine attributes.

11 "In the Bahá'í Faith there are two authoritative centers appointed to which the believers must turn, for in reality the Interpreter of the Word is an extension of that center which is the Word itself. The Book is the record of the utterance of Bahá'u'lláh, while the divinely inspired Interpreter is the living Mouth of that Book—it is he and he alone who can authoritatively state what the Book means" (Universal House of Justice, 7 December 1969).

any virtue; since none of us knows what our own capacities are, we must never conclude that we have reached the ultimate expression possible for us of any given virtue. In this context of our never-ending journey towards greater development of our spiritual potential, these two passages taken together—and read in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's admonition for us to "bring [ourselves] to account each day" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 31)—can help each of us put a virtuous cycle into effect.

Let us suppose that I am someone for whom kindness to animals comes naturally, but who finds it challenging to act kindly towards the people in my life. Bahá'u'lláh's counsel to the true seeker thus makes a claim on me, and asks me to grow. I am kind to animals; this is wonderful and approved. Now, I must find a way to be *more* kind to humans. And, if I ever achieve this thing that I am called to do, then I can look to the passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and see that my work is not done: now, it is incumbent on me to learn how to be even kinder to animals than my new-found level of kindness to humans. And so on—the cycle can continue for as long as I live, each precept acting in turn as the next rung on the ladder of kindness.

The presence of both of these

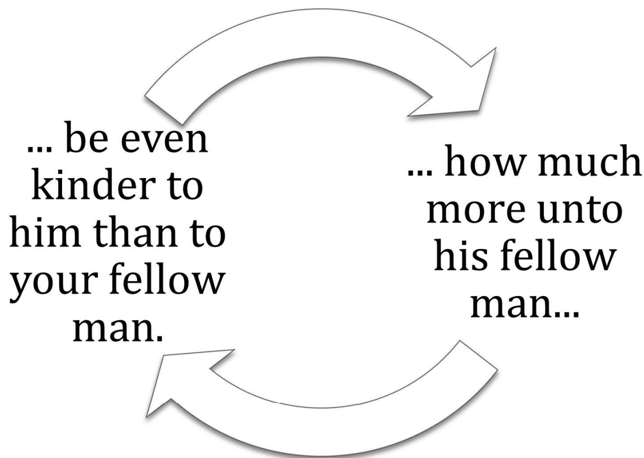

Figure 1: A Virtuous Cycle of Kindness

statements in the Bahá'í Writings might therefore be read as a recognition of the differences between people, and a merciful way of meeting each of us where we are. Some people find that kindness to animals comes to them easily—more easily than kindness to humans. This need not be morally blameworthy in itself, as a starting position, and the person who feels this way might even be able to provide a moral justification for it. Animals, after all, are morally innocent; incapable of deviating from their innate natures, they are perfect

expressions of what they should be. Humans, conversely, routinely choose to be less perfect than they can be, often in atrocious ways. Taken to heart, Bahá'u'lláh's counsel in the Tablet of the True Seeker prevents this line of reasoning from leading us to complacency about our treatment of humans. The human is ontologically superior to the animal—it is endowed with the power of utterance, with all that that implies—and thus merits the greater kindness.

Conversely, some of us may struggle to relate to animals, and may even feel an aversion and antipathy to some types of animals. This, too, can find moral justification: the animal, if not morally blameworthy, is not morally good either,[12] and does not possess the distinctly human spirit that makes the human an obviously worthy object of moral concern. While this argument has some resonance with a Bahá'í position, as shall be discussed below, it reaches an incorrect conclusion. Fortunately, this line of reasoning too is kept from leading us astray, this time by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prescription to treat the *animal* with greater kindness.

A final consideration merits mention with respect to the passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings quoted earlier. The portion beginning with "Train your children . . ." is often discussed in the context of the education of children. It is, without doubt, a great

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12 The following passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá can be taken as support for the idea that the animal, through its innocence, is not a moral actor: "All sin is prompted by the dictates of nature. These dictates of nature, which are among the hallmarks of corporeal existence, are not sins with respect to the animal but are sins with regard to man. The animal is the source of imperfections such as anger, lust, envy, greed, cruelty, and pride. All these blameworthy qualities are found in the nature of the animal, and do not constitute sins with regard to the animal, whereas they are sins with regard to man" (*Some Answered Questions* 29).

Interestingly, in another context, 'Abdu'l-Bahá also points out that the animal can sometimes serve as a moral *example* to the human: "Now, the root cause of these difficulties lies in the law of nature that governs present-day civilization, for it results in a handful of people accumulating vast fortunes that far exceed their needs, while the greater number remain naked, destitute, and helpless. This is at once contrary to justice, to humanity, and to fairness; it is the very height of inequity and runs counter to the good-pleasure of the All-Merciful. This disparity is confined to the human race: Among other creatures, that is, among the animals, a certain kind of justice and equality prevails. Thus there is equality within a shepherd's flock, or within a herd of deer in the wilderness, or among the songbirds that dwell in the mountains, plains, and orchards. The animals of every species enjoy a measure of equality and do not differ greatly from one another in their means of existence, and thus they live in perfect peace and joy" (*Some Answered Questions* 78).

Thus, the virtues that the animal exhibits through innocence and instinct must be learnt—or perhaps relearnt—by human beings, but from a position of conscious knowledge.

benefit to children's development for them to learn to be kind to animals: this can teach them responsibility, and develop in them a capacity for kindness that will be of both spiritual benefit to themselves and practical benefit to others throughout their life. But this injunction should not be thought of in purely instrumental terms: the context of the overall quotation makes it clear that the animal deserves to be treated kindly for its own sake, and not as a means to train children to be kind.[13] Clearly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá does *not* see the animal as a mere means to human ends: it has a moral claim on us, in effect meaning that it has inherent rights, which generate corresponding duties in us. Discussions of ends and means as a whole often lead to false dichotomies, and can tend to reflect either an oversimplified, totalizing view of the world that can only accommodate one "good," or fragmented views that deny any objective goods and allow the individual to choose any end they deem fit and then assign means to that end accordingly.[14] In my view, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement here, taken in the context of the broader Bahá'í understanding of individual human spiritual growth, shows a holistic, harmonious understanding of ethics and ontology that spiritualizes the calculus of ends and means.[15] What is ethical, in other words, is not just good for the one who receives the ethical treatment, but also good for the one who performs the action, because a good action is one aligned with the spiritual reality of the actor. As I shall expand on below, this suggests a level of harmony between ethics and ontology that is difficult to discern without a spiritual worldview.

The holistic character of a Bahá'í approach to ethics also lends a *dynamism* to the human pursuit of an ethical life that is well illustrated by the example of the virtuous cycle given above. Statements of rights and duties in the Bahá'í Writings are embedded within, and harmonized with, a context of virtues ethics in the Aristotelean tradition.[16] The *telic* nature of virtues ethics—i.e. the progressive and unending nature of the human pursuit of virtue as a facet of the human *telos*, or purpose—lends a dynamism to our ethical rights and duties that a pure deontological (duty- or rule-based) approach may lack. The two admonitions to be kind to humans and to animals are clearly *duties* in that they are based on what is owed to humans and animals for their own sake. However, because our

13 As we shall see, this is directly counter to the position of Kant, who believed that we should be kind to animals only to avoid learning to be cruel to humans.

14 For a discussion of these extremes, and the relationships between them, see Smith's "Crisis and the Power of an Inclusive Historical Consciousness: Progressing from Delusional Habits to Dynamic Freedom."

15 Nader Saiedi makes this point in his exploration of the Báb's Writings, as shall be touched on later.

16 See, for instance, Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings."

execution of these duties occurs in the context of the development of our own virtues, the duties are not static: they elicit, indeed demand, growth from the one who performs them. While the discussion later in this paper of the Bahá'í approach in relation to prevalent ethical systems focuses on how Platonic elements in Bahá'í ontology ground an ethics that differs from utilitarian and deontological approaches, we should not lose sight of the strong resonance with Aristotelean virtue ethics.

Not a Standard of Non-interference

In addition to the overarching principle of kindness, a second principle that emerges from the Bahá'í Writings is that kindness is not equated with categorical non-interference with animals and the natural world. Indeed, there are situations in which even the destruction of animals is mandated, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá specifies in the final paragraph of the passage quoted earlier:

> Most human beings are sinners, but the beasts are innocent. Surely those without sin should receive the most kindness and love—all except animals which are harmful, such as bloodthirsty wolves, such as poisonous snakes, and similar pernicious creatures, the reason being that kindness to these is an injustice to human beings and to other animals as well. If, for example, ye be tenderhearted toward a wolf, this is but tyranny to a sheep, for a wolf will destroy a whole flock of sheep. A rabid dog, if given the chance, can kill a thousand animals and men. Therefore, compassion shown to wild and ravening beasts is cruelty to the peaceful ones—and so the harmful must be dealt with. But to blessed animals the utmost kindness must be shown, the more the better. Tenderness and loving-kindness are basic principles of God's heavenly Kingdom. Ye should most carefully bear this matter in mind. (*Selections* 138)

'Abdu'l-Bahá here uses the language of innocence to describe animals generally. Ontologically, this makes sense: in the Bahá'í conception the animal does not have a rational soul, and so its decision-making is blameless. Even "animals which are harmful" are included amongst "those without sin" in the quotation—they are an exception to the treatment owed to that group, not excluded from the group itself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of harmful animals thus cannot be read as ascribing any kind of innate "evil" to these creatures; as He makes clear in *Some Answered Questions*, nothing in creation is inherently evil.[17] How-

17 Note that the example of a poisonous snake, mentioned in the quote above, is also given in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation of the non-existence of positive evil: "Now, a doubt comes to mind: Scorpions and snakes are poisonous—is this good or evil, for they have a positive existence? Yes, it is true that scorpions and

ever, in being "the embodiments of justice and fairness in all of creation" as Bahá'u'lláh admonishes us, human beings must weigh the harms and benefits created by entities within their broader context. Situationally, then, it may sometimes be necessary to destroy an animal in order to prevent a greater harm.[18]

It is clear from the passage quoted earlier that this kind of managed destruction of an individual animal or animal population is the exception, rather than the rule: only where *harm* from an animal is identified is the rule of kindness waived. A cursory glance at our relationships with animals will show that most of our destruction of animals does not occur because the animal is harmful; instead, it is intended to provide a benefit to us (food, clothing, etc.), or occurs out of negligence (due to environmental pollution, etc.). 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not here provide a similar exception for these purposes; we will consider later the extent to which they might situationally be coherent with the Bahá'í ethical framework.

It is also relevant to consider the contexts in which normally innocuous animals can become harmful. In places where human practices, such as shepherding, put humans and their livestock into contact with wild predators, the wolf can be accurately described as harmful. Similarly, as cities expand further into formerly unpopulated areas, wildlife encounters increase; a bear that would be of no harm in the wilderness can become a source of harm when it wanders into a suburb. As will be suggested in the next section, in cases where it is human activity that has placed us in a conflictual relationship with certain species, it will always be pertinent to ask within the Bahá'í framework whether the activity in question can be justified as a worthwhile end.

Consumption of Animals

No discussion of an ethical framework for the treatment of animals can avoid addressing the question of diet. In an

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snakes are evil, but only in relation to us and not to themselves, for their venom is their weapon and their sting their means of defence. But as the constituent elements of their venom are incompatible with those of our bodies—that is, as these constituent elements are mutually opposed—the venom is evil, or rather, those elements are evil in relation to each other, while in their own reality they are both good. To summarize, one thing may be evil in relation to another but not evil within the limits of its own being. It follows therefore that there is no evil in existence: Whatsoever God has created, He has created good" (*Some Answered Questions* 74).

18 Note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the example of a wolf in this excerpt, which would have conveyed His point immediately to the audiences of the time, the wolf being a paradigmatically ravenous animal in many cultural traditions. Today this image of the wolf has been largely dismantled, but examples of harmful animals can still be brought to mind: invasive species that cause serious imbalance and harm to new ecosystems, for instance, should not be left alone out of a sense of kindness.

increasingly urbanized world, the most direct way in which many human beings consciously interact with animals is by consuming them. In addition to the general teachings on kindness to animals discussed above, the Bahá'í Writings speak specifically to this question.

As noted earlier, hunting is permissible and regulated in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. While the ethics surrounding hunting will be considered later, there is an enlightening Tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in response to a question about hunting that helps begin a broader investigation into the question of animal consumption. It is worth quoting in full:

> O thou who art voicing the praises of thy Lord! I have read thy letter, wherein thou didst express astonishment at some of the laws of God, such as that concerning the hunting of innocent animals, creatures who are guilty of no wrong.
>
> Be thou not surprised at this. Reflect upon the inner realities of the universe, the secret wisdoms involved, the enigmas, the interrelationships, the rules that govern all. For every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever. In the physical realm of creation, all things are eaters and eaten: the plant drinketh in the mineral, the animal doth crop and swallow down the plant, man doth feed upon the animal, and the mineral devoureth the body of man. Physical bodies are transferred past one barrier after another, from one life to another, and all things are subject to transformation and change, save only the essence of existence itself—since it is constant and immutable, and upon it is founded the life of every species and kind, of every contingent reality throughout the whole of creation.
>
> Whensoever thou dost examine, through a microscope, the water man drinketh, the air he doth breathe, thou wilt see that with every breath of air, man taketh in an abundance of animal life, and with every draught of water, he also swalloweth down a great variety of animals. How could it ever be possible to put a stop to this process? For all creatures are eaters and eaten, and the very fabric of life is reared upon this fact. Were it not so, the ties that interlace all created things within the universe would be unraveled.
>
> And further, whensoever a thing is destroyed, and decayeth, and is cut off from life, it is promoted into a world that is greater than the world it knew before. It leaveth, for example, the life of the mineral and goeth forward into the life of the plant; then it departeth out of the vegetable life and ascendeth into that of the animal, following which it forsaketh the life of the animal and riseth into the realm of human life, and this is out of the grace of thy Lord, the Merciful,

> the Compassionate. (*Selections* 137)

In this Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses the question of consuming animals from an ontological, rather than an ethical, standpoint. From this perspective, three central points are raised. First, consumption of animals by humans is not objectionable, since it is in accord with the interrelationships governing the kingdoms of creation that beings on one level should consume those on another, contributing to the "ties that interlace all created things." Second, the consumption of organisms is an inevitable, and unintentional, part of the process of drinking and breathing, further reinforcing that this process—being unavoidable—is part of the natural order. Thirdly, from the standpoint of its constituent matter, an animal's consumption by a human results in the elevation of that matter to a higher kingdom. It is part of the structure of creation that matter should cycle through the kingdoms in this manner.

To my knowledge, we do not have the text of the original question 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked. Without knowing how His correspondent's concerns about the hunting laws in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas were framed, it would be mere conjecture to speculate why, in this case, 'Abdu'l-Bahá responded to the question by stressing this ontological dimension of the consumption of animals. We can tentatively note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's second point, about the inevitability of humans consuming some animals inadvertently, would provide a full answer to a question asking why the killing and/or eating of animals is not categorically forbidden in the Bahá'í Faith: such a prohibition would be impossible to fully observe.

In other cases, however, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks specifically to the *ethical* and *practical* dimensions of the question of consuming animals, He makes it clear that human consumption of animals is problematic in both respects. It is to those Writings and statements that we now turn.

We can begin with two Tablets on the question of the human diet:

> Regarding the eating of animal flesh and abstinence therefrom, know thou of a certainty that, in the beginning of creation, God determined the food of every living being, and to eat contrary to that determination is not approved. For instance, beasts of prey, such as the wolf, lion and leopard, are endowed with ferocious, tearing instruments, such as hooked talons and claws. From this it is evident that the food of such beasts is meat. If they were to attempt to graze, their teeth would not cut the grass, neither could they chew the cud, for they do not have molars. Likewise, God hath given to the four-footed grazing animals such teeth as reap the grass like a sickle, and from this we understand that the food of these species of animal is vegetable. They cannot chase and hunt down other animals. The falcon hath a hooked

> beak and sharp talons; the hooked beak preventeth him from grazing, therefore his food is also meat.
>
> But now coming to man, we see he hath neither hooked teeth nor sharp nails or claws, nor teeth like iron sickles. From this it becometh evident and manifest that the food of man is cereals and fruit. Some of the teeth of man are like millstones to grind the grain, and some are sharp to cut the fruit. Therefore he is not in need of meat, nor is he obliged to eat it. Even without eating meat he would live with the utmost vigour and energy. For example, the community of the Brahmins in India do not eat meat; notwithstanding this they are not inferior to other nations in strength, power, vigour, outward senses or intellectual virtues. Truly, the killing of animals and the eating of their meat is somewhat contrary to pity and compassion, and if one can content oneself with cereals, fruit, oil and nuts, such as pistachios, almonds and so on, it would undoubtedly be better and more pleasing. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1006)

> Thou hast written regarding the four canine teeth in man, saying that these teeth, two in the upper jaw and two in the lower, are for the purpose of eating meat. Know thou that these four teeth are not created for meat-eating, although one can eat meat with them. All the teeth of man are made for eating fruit, cereals and vegetables. These four teeth, however, are designed for breaking hard shells, such as those of almonds. But eating meat is not forbidden or unlawful, nay, the point is this, that it is possible for man to live without eating meat and still be strong. Meat is nourishing and containeth the elements of herbs, seeds and fruits; therefore sometimes it is essential for the sick and for the rehabilitation of health. There is no objection in the Law of God to the eating of meat if it is required. So if thy constitution is rather weak and thou findest meat useful, thou mayest eat it. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1007)

Three points emerge from these two Tablets. The first is a practical argument from human physiology. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes that our teeth, and lack of natural offensive armaments, signal that our intended diet consists of plants of various kinds. Modern medical science has caught up with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s insight that the human being does not need to consume animals in order to be physically healthy. The consensus of nutritional experts, such as the American Dietetic Association (ADA), is that animal products are not necessary for human health: “appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain

diseases" ("Position of the American Dietetic Association"). Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence that a relatively unprocessed plant-based diet can help individuals address, or even avoid, many of the main health problems in Western society.[19]

Second, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that killing animals for food is "somewhat contrary to pity and compassion" and that subsisting on plant foods "would undoubtedly be better and more pleasing." He also stresses, somewhat more strongly, that "in the beginning of creation, God determined the food of every living being, and to eat contrary to that determination is not approved." The implication of "not approved" here could be that it is morally wrong, or that it is not in keeping with our nature, or both. We may see in this statement some resonance with the Hidden Word: "O son of Spirit! Ask not of Me that which We desire not for thee; then be thou content with what We have ordained for thy sake, for this is that which profiteth thee if therewith thou dost content thyself" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 18). It is not necessarily that we are externally punished for doing what is not approved, or not ordained for us; it is simply that being content with what is approved or ordained is best for us, because we have been prescribed the things that conform to our nature.

Third, 'Abdu'l-Bahá notes that while our physiology shows that consuming animals is not necessary or intended, this practice is not prohibited—neither "forbidden" nor "unlawful." In elaborating on this point, He notes that meat may be medically helpful in certain cases, and concludes that "[t]here is no objection in the Law of God to the eating of meat *if it is required*. So *if thy constitution is rather weak and thou findest meat useful, thou mayest eat it*" (emphasis added).

This last point merits reflection. On the one hand, it is clear that there is no prohibition on consuming animals. On the other, the only case specifically mentioned where this consumption raises "no objection in the Law of God" is that of medical necessity—or, perhaps more moderately, medical utility, left to the discretion of the individual.[20]

19 A lengthy discussion of the growing scientific literature on this topic is not possible here; it will suffice to note that the ADA position paper from 2009 cited here concluded that a vegetarian diet (broadly speaking) is associated with lower risk of death due to heart disease, lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure, lower rates of hypertension and type 2 diabetes, and lower risk of cancer. These findings continue to be bolstered by ongoing research.

20 There are grounds to believe that 'Abdu'l-Bahá points towards the general utility of *plants* from a medicinal point of view, which might suggest that medical uses for meat are likely to be exceptional, and based on individual characteristics. In a talk specifically on the topic of "Healing by Material Means," He states: "Now, the equilibration of these bodily components can be accomplished by one of two means, either through medicines or with foods, and when the constitution has recovered its equilibrium, the illness is banished. *Since all the constituent elements of the human*

What this non-prohibition implies for our behavior will be considered below, but it is worth noting here another instance where the Writings make clear that there is no categorical rule against consuming animals. In His second Tablet to Napoleon III, Bahá'u'lláh addresses the "concourse of priests and monks" in these terms:

> Say: O concourse of priests and monks! Eat ye of that which God hath made lawful unto you and *do not shun meat*. God hath, as a token of His grace, granted you leave to partake thereof save during a brief period. He, verily, is the Mighty, the Beneficent. Forsake all that ye possess and hold fast unto that which God hath purposed. This is that which profiteth you, if ye be of them that comprehend. *We have ordained a fast of nineteen days in the most temperate of the seasons, and have in this resplendent and luminous Dispensation relieved you from more than this*. Thus have We set forth and made clear unto you that which ye are bidden to observe, that ye may follow the commandments of God and be united in that which the Almighty, the All-Wise, hath appointed unto you. (*Summons* 154, emphasis added)

On my reading, the context of this counsel suggests that Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is to reinforce to the clergy that the religious rules and practices that they have devised can no longer stand, for the Manifestation Himself has revealed a religious law of divine, not human, origin. The emphasis is thus on abandoning monastic practices, created by humans, of abstaining from certain foods and fasting at certain times, and instead adhering to the Fast prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh. Just as it would be incumbent upon any monk who follows Bahá'u'lláh's advice to renounce ascetism and celibacy to then consider whether, and whom, to marry based on the entirety of Bahá'í teachings on marriage, it would presumably behoove any priest or monk who accepts the above call of Bahá'u'lláh to then reformulate his relationship with consuming meat based on the entirety of Bahá'í teachings on this subject. The call, in my opinion, is not to simply begin eating meat; viewed in the whole context of the Writings, the invitation is to set aside human-devised monastic codes, and engage instead with a Bahá'í framework for considering the treatment and consumption of animals—the very framework this paper aspires to elucidate.

This reading is reinforced by further statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on diet. In *Promulgation of Universal Peace*,

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body are also found in plants, if one of these components were to become deficient, and if one were to partake of foods that are rich in that component, then equilibrium would be restored and the cure realized. So long as the aim is the equilibration of the component parts of the body, this can be equally effected through medicines or various foods" (*Some Answered Questions* 73, emphasis added).

'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates the physiological argument for vegetarianism, and draws out an important historical conclusion:

> As humanity progresses, meat will be used less and less, for the teeth of man are not carnivorous. For example, the lion is endowed with carnivorous teeth, which are intended for meat, and if meat be not found, the lion starves. The lion cannot graze; its teeth are of different shape. The digestive system of the lion is such that it cannot receive nourishment save through meat. The eagle has a crooked beak, the lower part shorter than the upper. It cannot pick up grain; it cannot graze; therefore, it is compelled to partake of meat. The domestic animals have herbivorous teeth formed to cut grass, which is their fodder. The human teeth, the molars, are formed to grind grain. The front teeth, the incisors, are for fruits, etc. It is, therefore, quite apparent according to the implements for eating that man's food is intended to be grain and not meat. *When mankind is more fully developed, the eating of meat will gradually cease*. (60, emphasis added)

A similar statement is reported in a pilgrim note by Julia Grundy, who writes that when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked "What will be the food of the future?", He replied:

> Fruits and grains. The time will come when meat will no longer be eaten. Medical science is only in its infancy, yet it has shown that our natural diet is that which grows out of the ground. The people will gradually develop up to the condition of this natural food. (qtd. in Esslemont)

Finally, we have a statement from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

> In regard to the question as to whether people ought to kill animals for food or not, there is no explicit statement in the Bahá'í Sacred Scriptures (as far as I know) in favour or against it. It is certain, however, that if man can live on a purely vegetarian diet and thus avoid killing animals, it would be much preferable. This is, however, a very controversial question and the Bahá'ís are free to express their views on it. (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1010)

So far, then, we have seen very strong language requiring kindness to animals, as well as passages indicating that meat need not be eaten, and that it would be preferable for it not to be, but falling short of a prohibition. Before turning to the question of how this standard might be applied by the individual, it will be helpful to move from these teachings explicitly concerning ethics and behavior, to Writings that speak to the underlying question of

how to properly understand what animals are. This understanding will provide a fuller context for evaluating our ethical duties towards them.

A Coherent Standard: The Ontological Underpinnings of the Ethical Position, and Further Implications

To begin this discussion, it will be helpful to briefly summarize 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations of the distinction between the kingdoms of creation, and in particular the animal and human kingdoms. This topic is addressed in *Some Answered Questions*, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that spirit is "divided into five categories." Beneath the fifth, the Holy Spirit, are the vegetable, animal, and human spirits, and the spirit of faith. The animal and human spirits are described as follows:

> The animal spirit is that all-embracing sensory power which is realized through the composition and combination of the elements. When this composition disintegrates, that spirit likewise perishes and becomes non-existent. . . .
>
> The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one and the same thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is called the rational soul, encompasses all things and as far as human capacity permits, discovers their realities and becomes aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things. . . .
>
> As for the mind, it is the power of the human spirit. The spirit is as the lamp, and the mind as the light that shines from it. The spirit is as the tree, and the mind as the fruit. The mind is the perfection of the spirit and a necessary attribute thereof, even as the rays of the sun are an essential requirement of the sun itself. (55)

Elsewhere in the same work, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that unlike the animal spirit, which appears and disappears with the composition and decomposition of the elements of the individual animal, the human spirit is immortal (60).

Speaking, in answer to another question, of the difference between animal and human, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expands on the qualities of the human spirit specifically. He rejects the view by which the human being is simply an animal with certain faculties—shared in common with animals—developed to a higher degree. Instead, He points out that "in the powers which man and animal share in common, the animal often has the advantage," giving the example of the remarkable power of memory in certain animals. The human, however, has "an extraordinary power of which the animal is deprived," a power that "encompasses all created things, comprehends their realities, unravels their hidden mysteries, and brings them

under its control." Notably, this power can "understand things that have no outward existence, that is, intelligible, imperceptible, and unseen realities such as the mind, the spirit, human attributes and qualities, love and sorrow." It is this power that has enabled humans to make discoveries, develop technologies, subdue nature and make it serve them, and so on. Imbued with this power, the human aspires to "transcendence" and "ever seeks to attain a world surpassing that which he inhabits, and to ascend to a degree above that which he occupies" (*Some Answered Questions* 48).

For the purposes of this discussion, the reasoning behind these claims is less important than 'Abdu'l-Bahá's conclusions. In short, the animal is an animal by virtue of the animating, animal spirit, which does not survive physical death. The human spirit encompasses the powers of the animal (and vegetable) spirit, but possesses unique faculties as a rational soul, and does survive death.

This background helps us consider further what an animal *should* be.

The Ideal Life of the Animal

In *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of the ideal lives of animals:

> Consider ye! No matter how much man gains wealth, riches and opulence in this world, he will not become as independent as a cow. For these fattened cows roam freely over the vast tableland. All the prairies and meadows are theirs for grazing, and all the springs and rivers are theirs for drinking! No matter how much they graze, the fields will not be exhausted! It is evident that they have earned these material bounties with the utmost facility.
>
> Still more ideal than this is the life of a bird. A bird, on the summit of a mountain, on the high, waving branches, has built for itself a nest more beautiful than the palaces of kings! The air is in the utmost purity, the water cool and clear as crystal, the panorama charming and enchanting. In such glorious surroundings, he expends his numbered days. All the harvests of the plain are his possessions, having earned all this wealth without the least labor. Hence, no matter how much man may advance in this world, he shall not attain to the station of this bird!
>
> Thus it becomes evident that in the matters of this world, however much man may strive and work to the point of death, he will be unable to earn the abundance, the freedom and the independent life of a small bird. This proves and establishes the fact that man is not created for the life of this ephemeral world—nay, rather, is he created for the acquirement of infinite perfections, for the attainment to the sublimity of the world of humanity, to be drawn nigh

unto the divine threshold, and to sit on the throne of everlasting sovereignty! (7)

The context of this quote helps us understand why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is invoking the comparison to animals, and helps us think through its implications. In this Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is addressing the North American Bahá’ís, urging them, amongst other things, to pioneer—that is to give up their lives of relative material prosperity and to undertake the difficult, and often uncomfortable, work of helping expand the Bahá’í community in faraway locations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá acknowledges openly that attachment to material comfort will be one of the great barriers that these Bahá’ís will have to overcome in order to pioneer. Thus, He explains a simple truth about material comfort: it’s not really *for* us. We are encouraged to enjoy the things of this world in the Bahá’í Writings, and we are even given the freedom to *pursue* them—if we really wish to—to make them the focus of our lives. But such pursuit is ultimately futile: as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, no matter how hard we work we will “be unable to earn the abundance, the freedom and the independent life of a small bird.” And the implication is that “man is not created for the life of this ephemeral world”—our true home is the world of the spirit. This world of the spirit is the world we should pursue, because it is the only world we will inhabit once our physical bodies inevitably die. To us, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elsewhere makes clear, “this ephemeral world” is no more than a womb.[21]

There is a clear corollary here: the animal *is* created for this ephemeral material world. The animal has a spirit, but not an individual soul that survives death. Thus, this material world is not our paradise; it is the animal’s paradise, indeed the only paradise that each individual, feeling animal—each embodied expression of an attribute of God—will ever know. That this world is intended to be a true paradise for the animal is reflected in the beautiful scenes that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá paints of the pleasant lives of the cows and birds.

This is not to deny that animals experience pain and difficulty in nature. Bahá’u’lláh explains nature in these terms:

> 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, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion. (*Tablets* 9:14)

Whatever measure of suffering animals encounter in the ordinary course of their lives and deaths is thus—absent human interference—presumably acceptable to that Will; so too is the measure of peace, contentment, and joy they encounter. But when humans

21 See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* 81.

contaminate clean, pure animal habitats; when we remove animals from their habitats and confine them in conditions quite the opposite of those described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá—these are the actions of *our* will, not God's Will expressed through nature. Human unkindness towards animals is no more excused by pointing to the pain built into the processes of the natural world than human unkindness to humans would be. Additionally, these activities by which the human will inflicts harm on animals are often undertaken in our pursuit of the things of this world—whether we are destroying a habitat to build a resort, trawling the oceans to feed our appetite for certain fish, or polluting the atmosphere with the chemicals produced in service to an economic system geared towards consumption and distraction. Through these pursuits, then, we might be both depriving ourselves of the spiritual focus that should animate our lives, and depriving the animal of the only paradise it can ever experience.[22]

22 Nader Saiedi highlights this point: "Ironically, when humans forget their spiritual reality and reduce themselves to the level of animals, they also oppress the realm of nature. Since humans are not constrained by instinctual limits, both their desires and their destructive power transcend all bounds. When intelligence becomes a blind tool of material desires, in the context of a worldview glorifying selfishness, consumerism, and struggle for existence, human beings shatter the balance of nature, pollute the earth, and destroy other species" ("From Oppression to Empowerment" 30).

The Standard of Perfection

This question of the intended reality of the animal is further illuminated by the principle of perfection found in the Writings of the Báb.

In *Gate of the Heart*—his exploration of the Báb's Writings—Nader Saiedi highlights this principle of perfection, which is, in his words, "the duty of all human beings to exert their utmost efforts to realize the potentialities of all things in the world" (315). On the one hand, this involves making our own handiwork—the things we create—as perfect as possible, to reflect to the utmost degree the perfection with which God has made His handiwork. On the other hand, this also includes a specific injunction to preserve the purity of the environment. Saiedi translates a passage from the Bayán on this theme:

> Nothing is more beloved before God than to keep water in a state of the utmost purity, to such an extent that if a believer should become aware that the glass of water he holdeth in his hand hath passed through any impure parts of the earth, he would be grieved. (315–16)

Saiedi explains that the implication is that all the lakes, rivers, and seas through which this water may have passed must be kept clean. Thus, in the Báb's worldview, we must avoid as much as possible contaminating the natural world, which God has

made perfect. We may consider how far humanity is currently falling short of this standard, and the magnitude of the change in our collective way of being, and our attitudes and practices towards the natural world, required to bring ourselves into conformity with it.

Elsewhere, Saiedi explores the Báb's teaching that humanity must perfect all things in terms of the context of paradise.

> Paradise is the highest state of perfection and self-actualization that can be attained by a being within its own station. Hell is the state of deprivation of that perfect actualization. Thus not only human beings but all other created things have their own 'heaven' and 'hell.' This new definition has far-reaching implications for the attitude the believer should take toward all things, including the natural world... Human beings are invested with the unique responsibility to ensure, to the limits of their power, that all created things achieve their paradise. . . . The principle is frequently expressed in the later writings of the Báb. In the Persian Bayán, for example, we find:
>
> > [W]hoever possesseth power over anything must elevate it to its uttermost perfection that it not be deprived of its own paradise. (255)

It is interesting to think about the implications of this ethical attitude towards creation—especially in light of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá says about the ideal life of animals, a description that makes it clear that this natural state is the paradise of the animal.

Similarly, the Báb's universal imperative is this: "Be thou for God and for His creatures even as God hath been for God Himself and for His creatures" (qtd. in Saiedi, *Gate* 302). This implies treating all created things as God treats them—in Kantian terms, treating them as ends. As shall be seen below, this is much more expansive than Kant who, as Saiedi points out, applies the categorical imperative to humans only. In the Báb's vision of creation, then, everything has a claim on humanity—the right to be treated as God has treated them, and the right to be perfected.

It is worth a brief aside here to highlight the rich collective experience that humanity can draw on as it explores the implications of this attitude towards the natural world. Whereas Western perspectives on nature can fall into a dichotomy between exploitative interference and conservationist non-interference, North American Indigenous peoples—for example—have long traditions of active stewardship and shaping of the natural world around them, in ways that not only benefit people but contribute to the flourishing of the ecosystem.[23] Such relationships

23 See M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild*, for an exploration of this dynamic amongst Indigenous groups from across California; and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* for an exploration of how Indigenous wisdom and scientific research can mutually reinforce each other in

are premised on the recognition that humanity, whatever its spiritual distinctiveness, is not outside of nature, but a part of it. As we shall see later, a contribution to discourse on this issue inspired by the Bahá'í Writings may be well situated to foster this recognition, without falling into a reductive materialism that denies humanity's spiritual station.

When Can an End Be Made a Means? The Principle of Sacrifice

In a cultural context premised on competition and division, our thinking tends towards dichotomy; we may thus see tension between 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation of the hierarchy of creation, in which the human is of higher value than the animal, and the Báb's characterization of every created thing as an end in itself (or indeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own descriptions of our ethical duties to animals, which imply the same). These truths can be reconciled, and harmonized, through the principle of sacrifice. Bahá'ís often think of the concept of sacrifice, as explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as giving up that which is lower for that which is higher, as when iron sacrifices its qualities of solidity, darkness, and coldness in order to take on the attributes of fire—fluidity, light, and heat (*Promulgation* 133). Bahá'ís understand that the twofold moral purpose of human life—the spiritual advancement of the human soul, and the material and spiritual advancement of human society—constitutes a very high purpose. Thus, if an animal's life must be sacrificed to *these* ends, then this is entirely appropriate. On the other hand, if an animal's life or comfort is taken away for an unworthy purpose, this is not appropriate because, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear (and as will be more fully explored later in juxtaposing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position with Kant), the animal, as a feeling creation of God, is an end unto itself. It can thus only be made a means to a *higher* end than itself.

The Animal as Revelation

A final point bears consideration in relation to the nature of the animal as elaborated in the Bahá'í Writings, connected to the concept of the innate perfection of created things within their proper stations. Bahá'u'lláh explains that every created thing exists by virtue of its innate connection to something of God—expressed as His names and attributes (God's Essence being exalted beyond any connection with any created thing):

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

the stewardship—and perfection—of the natural world.

> that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! (*Gleanings* 90:1)

God is thus the ultimate, and continuous, ground of all being. Without this connection (albeit an indirect one) to God, nothing could exist. Thus, every part of the natural world exists because it represents some divine attribute. Every created thing can thus be understood as a symbol, a representation, a metaphor, or a token of a spiritual reality. Further, there is a principle in the Bahá'í Writings, highlighted by scholars such as Adib Taherzadeh, that "every created thing in this world has counterparts in all the worlds of God" (9).[24]

Viewed in the light of its fundamental ontology as an expression of an underlying name or attribute of God, each animal can be thought of as something like a wave rolling out of the ocean of that spiritual reality. Once the wave recedes, the animating animal spirit of that individual disappears. Did we appreciate the wave while it was here? Did we let it be the full and beautiful representation of the underlying ocean that it was intended to be? If not, was there a good reason for us not to permit this? It strikes me that remembering at all times that the physical entities around us—and most particularly animals, members of the highest kingdom to which we have sensible access apart from our own—exist by virtue of their connection to a divine attribute must give us pause in our treatment of them. We will return to this point later as we consider the two different kinds of materialism that, implicitly or explicitly, inform the prevalent discourse on the treatment of animals.

Consequences: Putting the Ethical Framework into Action

Having outlined an ethical framework for the treatment of animals based in the Bahá'í Writings, we can now consider how this framework might be translated into practice in a contextually appropriate way. I will suggest that the framework is more than an abstract way of thinking about animals—it makes real demands of us to evaluate our behavior.

It is clear that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's counsels about kindness to animals imply a categorical condemnation of wanton cruelty; that is, unkindness to animals without a valid justifying purpose. It would be difficult, in my opinion, for a Bahá'í aware of the Writings that have been reviewed so far to sincerely believe that allowing suffering to befall an animal, intentionally or through negligence, without an identifiable reason does not manifestly contradict the strong counsels of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The cases to consider, then, are those where a reason *can* be given

24 For a discussion of this concept in the Writings, see Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawḥ-i ḥaqq al-nás* (Tablet on the Right of the People).

for harming an animal. Reversing the order of the earlier analysis of the Bahá'í Writings, this discussion will first consider what kinds of human actions and attitudes towards animals are appropriate given the *ontology* of the animal and the natural world—that is, in keeping with the standard of *perfection*—before asking what kinds of actions properly reflect our *ethical duty* towards the animal—the standard of *loving-kindness*. While I believe that the standards that emerge from these two inquiries are coherent with each other, just as the ontological and ethical discussions of animals in the Writings are coherent, treating them separately in this way helps draw out some nuances in the discussion.

Given its importance, the specific context of animal consumption can serve as a useful lens through which to consider both questions.

Applying the Standard of Perfection

It should be noted at the outset that from the perspective of the *meaning* of the action, the consumption of animals is not a monolith. Many readers' frame of reference for eating animals will be similar to mine: animal products, mostly derived from factory-farmed animals, are bought at grocery stores and restaurants, already processed to various degrees. Many readers, conversely, will have completely different frames of reference. Some may raise animals for food on their family property. Others may hunt animals, including within cultural systems in which the animal is understood to be sacred, and its spirit and sacrifice are honored.

The differences in meaning between these contexts are vast. As noted at the outset, consumerism is the principal context to which this paper seeks to apply a Bahá'í framework for the ethical treatment of animals, so it is there that we can begin.

The consumerist ethos and economic model has fostered an intensive—and in many parts of the world, growing—demand for animal products at cheap prices, which can only be satisfied by large-scale industrial animal agriculture. The treatment of animals within this kind of agriculture is not only at stark odds with the concept of their "ideal life" as described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but its impact on the natural world as a whole is strikingly incompatible with the human responsibility, discussed earlier, to maintain the purity of our natural world and raise created things to their acme of perfection. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations found in 2006 that fully 30 percent of the ice-free land surface of our planet is devoted to the production of livestock—either through direct grazing, or feed crop production.[25] The same report pointed

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25 Because only a fraction of the calories any animal consumes go towards building tissue that will ultimately be consumed by a human—the rest being used for metabolic processes—an area of land devoted to growing crops to feed to livestock could, all things being equal, feed a

to the various ways in which much of this land has been degraded through being allocated to livestock-centered agriculture; perhaps most alarmingly, the livestock industry is the leading driver of deforestation in the Amazon, with 70 percent of previously forested land in the Amazon basin now devoted to pastures, and much of the rest given over to feed crop production (Steinfeld et al. xxi). Deforestation is definitionally habitat loss, and leads directly to the extinction of species and the depletion of the planet's biodiversity, with the report concluding that the livestock sector is in fact the single leading contributor to this loss (xxii). This is to say nothing of animal agriculture's intensive demand for fresh water (Steinfeld et al., Pimentel et al., Mekonnen and Hoekstra), the damage caused by run-off from industrial farming into waterways, resulting in ocean deadzones (Steinfeld et al. xxii, Scheer and Moss), and, perhaps most topically, the transmission of novel viruses to humans.[26] Taken as a whole, then, industrialized animal husbandry contributes in numerous ways to degrading the natural perfection of our planet's biosphere.

As to the treatment of animals themselves in industrial farming, the plight of chickens can serve as an illustrative example. In the United States, amongst egg-laying chickens, male chicks, being unable to lay eggs

far greater number of humans directly than will be fed by the livestock in question. It should be noted that some lands used for animal agriculture are marginal, in the sense that their soil is too poor to make crop agriculture economically viable. A distinction—usually absent in discussions of such marginal land—can be made between areas where animals grazing on marginal land are an indispensable part of a human population's food supply, for which no crops are available to be substituted, and marginal lands which are allocated to animal grazing primarily because of the desire or need to derive economic benefit from the land. It is a characteristic of a capitalist consumer global economic order that land—like everything else—is appraised through the primary lens of its capacity to generate revenue.

26 The leading theory as to the origins of the SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for COVID-19, is that it is a zoonotic disease that moved from bats to humans, possibly at a "wet market" in Wuhan, China. In some media, this possibility has been used to attack wet markets as particularly problematic. But lest we forget, viruses in the past have made the leap to humans due to large scale animal agriculture; indeed, the density of animal populations in modern industrial farms makes them a prime site for such zoonotic outbreaks (Jones et al.). It is mere happenstance that no recent strain of swine or bird flu, for instance, to make the leap to humans has had the particular combination of characteristics that make the coronavirus so dangerous.

An independent connection between industrial animal agriculture and disease is the rampant use of antibiotics to promote livestock growth, which in turn contributes to the rise in antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria, with potentially catastrophic implications for human health care. Antibiotic-resistant strains are commonly found in commercially sold meat (Undurraga).

and thus having no commercial value, are culled shortly after birth, usually by asphyxiation or maceration (ie. being fed into a high-speed grinder). A paper published in the journal *Poultry Science* accepts the estimate that 7 billion male chicks are culled annually worldwide—a number roughly equal to the entire human population of the earth (Krautwald-Junghanns et al.). In the United States, most of the 330 million egg-laying hens alive at any one time are confined in battery cages: stacked wire enclosures, with multiple hens packed into each, providing "less floor space per bird than a regular 8½" x 11" sheet of paper" (ASPCA). These confined conditions lead to violent behavior, and even cannibalism; to prevent this, the tip of hens' beaks are typically burnt or cut off. Meanwhile, meat (broiler) chickens are raised in cramped conditions in indoor sheds, where they live in their own waste. Selective breeding has given them disproportionately large breast muscles; many chickens, unable to support their own weight, are condemned to slow suffocation in their own filth (ASPCA).

The story of industrially farmed pigs, cows, and other animals is a variation on this theme: confinement to the point of immobility, lack of stimulation, piglets and calves removed from their mothers, breeding geared towards greater production with little concern for the comfort of the animal—all done to social, intelligent animals (pigs in particular being, on average, smarter than the typical dog).

Clearly, if the life of the wild animal represents its natural perfection—a life that, with its dangers and pain and beauty and simple joys, reflects the Will of God—then these lives of animals farmed on an industrial scale are, again, degraded from that standard.

It would be hard to argue that any of these impacts are coherent with the perfection of created things. If they can be justified, then, they must be justified as advancing some other end—but, as already seen in the statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá cited earlier, the "end" of consuming animals is not an important one in and of itself (absent some specific nutritional or medical need, for instance), and can even be considered unworthy.

A contrast could be drawn here with, for instance, traditional Indigenous hunting practices, in many of which the hunter recognizes the quarry animal as sacred, and honors its spirit and sacrifice. The gulf of difference in meaning between this act and the consumption of factory-farmed animals is obvious.[27] Only those acting within such traditions have the right to assess them in light of the Bahá'í teachings, of course; from my outside perspective, I can only say that it strikes me that this is a relationship with the animal that does honor the concept of the perfection of the animal, whose death is sacralized by

27 See, David Attenborough "The Intense 8 Hour Hunt" for an example of a hunt informed by a spiritual orientation utterly foreign to my own lived experience of animal consumption.

imbuing it with the spiritual qualities of gratitude and reverence for God's bounteous creation. This might not be a complete answer to the question of loving-kindness towards animals (discussed below)—but in all cases, individuals and communities will be best placed to evaluate this for themselves.

This distinction between contexts in which animals are consumed might be suggested as a way to illuminate a particularly suggestive passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which He both echoes the concept of the felicitous natural state of the animal expounded in *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, and also alludes to the idea of the exaltation of animal matter through incorporation into the human being:

> The exaltation of the animal world is to possess perfect members, organs, and powers, and to have all its needs supplied. This is the height of its glory, honour, and exaltation. So the supreme felicity of an animal resides in a green and verdant meadow, in a flowing stream of the sweetest water, and in a forest brimming with life. If these things are provided, no greater felicity can be imagined for the animal. For example, were a bird to build its nest in a green and verdant forest, in a pleasant height, upon a mighty tree, and atop a lofty branch, and were it to have at its disposal all the seed and water that it requires, then this would constitute its perfect felicity.
>
> But true felicity for the animal consists in passing from the animal world into the human realm, like the microscopic beings that, through the air and the water, enter into the body of man, are assimilated, and replace that which has been consumed in his body. This is the greatest honour and felicity for the animal world, and no greater honour can be conceived for it.
>
> Therefore, it is clear and evident that such material ease, comfort, and abundance are the height of felicity for minerals, plants, and animals. And indeed no wealth, prosperity, comfort, or ease in our material world can equal the wealth of a bird, for it has all the expanse of the fields and mountains for a dwelling place; all the seed and harvests for wealth and sustenance; and all the lands, villages, meadows, pastures, forests, and wilderness for possessions. Now which is the richer—this bird or the wealthiest of men? For no matter how many seeds that bird may gather up or give away, its wealth does not diminish. (*Some Answered Questions* 15)

The language here is quite remarkable. The natural peaceful existence of the animal in uncontaminated nature, with all its needs supplied, is "the height of its glory, honour, and exaltation," and is the "supreme felicity"; "no greater felicity can be imagined"

for it; in the example of the bird, "this would constitute its perfect felicity." In short, "material ease, comfort, and abundance are the height of felicity for . . . animals." And yet, simultaneously, "true felicity for the animal consists in passing from the animal world into the human realm," with the example given of microscopic beings incorporated "through the air and water," likely indicating passive consumption. "This is the greatest honour and felicity for the animal world, and no greater honour can be conceived for it."

What can we make of what on the surface may appear to be two incompatible states for the animal, both being asserted—in almost identical language—as the "height of its glory, honour and exaltation"? Two possible approaches come to mind. One would be to note that, as in His response to a question about hunting cited earlier, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the inevitable consumption of microorganisms as the example of animal matter being elevated to the human realm. We might then conclude that it is within this context specifically that the concept of the elevation of animal matter is meant to operate.

Another view might be to ask whether there are ways and practices through which the animal becomes elevated into the human realm (i.e. through consumption) that are in harmony with its other kind of felicity, that of a peaceful life in nature. Again, it would be up to individuals and communities who favor this interpretation to determine what kinds of consumption permit this "dual" felicity. Given humanity's problematic relationship with nature overall, we might doubt whether we have the wisdom to identify such practices; however, to the extent that we think they may exist, they seem far more likely to be found in sustainable expressions of Indigenous hunting traditions (for instance) than in industrial animal agriculture (I highlight two extremes here for simplicity's sake; there are of course a range of contexts situated between these). And again, the independent question of loving-kindness to animals would remain salient in any activity involving physical harm to them.

The question of how to act in a way that honors the animal's ontology can also be considered through the lens of the concept of the representation of the names and attributes of God in creation. Viewed in this light, how does humanity's treatment of animals and the natural world appear? Take the cow. Whatever attribute or name of God the cow especially represents, that attribute must have its embodiments and representatives in the higher kingdoms of creation as well as our lower kingdoms here on earth. When we encounter those embodiments in subsequent worlds of God, what will be able to say about how we treated their counterparts here on earth? If in humanity's infancy we consumed cows to enable our survival and the growth of our civilization, then this was a good and appropriate act, because it was in service to a high and noble end. But what if we must report that we penned

in the cow, deprived her of access to nature, forced her through an exhausting breeding cycle, extracted her milk for our own ends, and separated her from her calves until, her utility nearly spent, we slaughtered her to squeeze the last bit of profit from her foreshortened life?

Applying the Standard of Loving-Kindness

While the Bahá'í Writings on the ontology of animals and the natural world may help us map out an ethical relationship with them, the existence of Writings that specifically speak to this ethical relationship arguably provides us with such a map ready-made. The ethical standard the Writings call upon us to adopt towards animals seems quite clear: we are enjoined to treat them with the utmost loving kindness. Individuals, communities and institutions may judge at times that certain animals are harmful, in which case the exception outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá would apply, and no kindness would be owed. For many of us—such as myself, living in an urban setting where none of the local wildlife is venomous or carries disease—this exception will not generally be relevant.

Given that it is contrary to kindness to hurt or kill an animal, I do not do this. I also avoid knowingly hurting animals indirectly by consuming or purchasing things for whose creation an animal suffered. As such, I do not eat animal products,[28] buy new clothing items made from animals, or other products made from animal parts. My wife, a vegetarian since age twelve, and I embarked on this lifestyle change together in 2015; our efforts were reinforced by the unity with which we approached this change, and made relatively simple by the growing wealth of online resources to help people move towards a fully plant-based diet.

Living this way has, in my experience, had a simplifying effect on my life. As someone who resents the superfluous number of trivial choices that are thrust on us in a consumer culture, I appreciate being able to ignore large swathes of the products on offer when shopping for food. The simplicity of this approach also makes my spiritual accounting straightforward. By avoiding knowing participation in

28 Some may question whether consuming eggs, milk products, etc. is unkind to animals. Without getting into a detailed exploration of the ways in which it may be possible to harvest these products without causing the animal any suffering, I would simply note that the vast majority of these products available to me are sourced from large-scale agricultural operations, which are run on an industrial model in which animal welfare is at best a secondary concern to productivity. It might be possible, with investigation and effort, to find products that do not present this problem; I haven't missed them enough for this to be worth the effort involved. I would also note that the problem of the environmental impacts of eating high on the food chain remains, in certain respects, no matter in what way the animals are raised.

actions that may have caused pain to animals, I have an easy time bringing myself to account each day on this one area of the Bahá'í teachings at least.

I recognize that I cannot live this standard perfectly. When I use electricity, part of it is likely coming from fossil fuels, for instance, whose extraction may hurt certain ecosystems, and whose burning alters the climate in a way that has cumulative devastating effects for many ecosystems. Beyond looking at ingredient lists, I am not particularly careful about investigating the source of the products I buy, and thus cannot be assured that their production did not involve environmental harm, and thus harm to animals. As I become aware of specific problems in this regard, however, I do alter my consumption habits accordingly.

Applying the Principle of Sacrifice

While I would thus meet the commonly understood definition of a vegan, I do not hold this position in an absolutist way. In other words, I can readily conceive of circumstances under which I would be willing to act in a way that inflicts harm on an animal.

The analysis here might be summarized by Bahá'u'lláh's admonition to "[t]ake from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them" (*Summons* 193). We have already noted that while scientific inquiry has confirmed 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assertion that humans can subsist healthfully on a plant-based diet, there will be situations in which specific medical problems, or scarcity of other food, make consuming animal products necessary. In this context, it is noteworthy that the regulation of hunting in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas is framed in terms of what makes the quarry "lawful" to the hunter—that is, under what conditions is the hunter allowed to *use* what he or she hunts. On my reading, this suggests that the purpose of hunting is primarily envisioned as providing sustenance—food, clothing, and the like.[29] Still today, while agriculture and increased urbanization have drastically reduced the number of people in the world who depend upon hunting for food, many groups continue to rely upon game as part of their necessary sustenance.

If I learned that I had a medical condition that required me to eat animals to preserve my life or health, I would do it. The death of the animal would serve the end of my continued life, which would ideally be centered on my own spiritual development and contribution, however humble, to the advancement of human civilization. Similarly (and at risk of falling into

29 Sport hunting is not explicitly banned, of course; my understanding of the admonition towards kindness would preclude me from hunting for sport, but as in all these matters it is the individual's responsibility to reach their own conclusions, absent any future legislation from the Universal House of Justice, as envisaged in Note 84 to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas on what "hunting to excess" may entail.

the often convoluted and tongue-in-cheek scenarios that friends and acquaintances of vegans sometimes put to them), if I were stranded on the proverbial desert island, where the only food available was animals, I would eat them (or, more realistically, try and fail to catch them before succumbing to starvation and exposure).

This is, of course, far from a hypothetical question for many individuals and communities. From the time of Bahá'u'lláh until today, there have been human populations who do not have a high degree of flexibility in what they can eat. Not every person on earth has access to sufficient affordable plant food to keep them healthy; for some communities, animal calories will remain important just in order to get enough to eat.[30] We know, from medical science as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements, that meat is not necessary for human health, but this clearly does not preclude the possibility that it will be required in circumstances where there is insufficient non-animal food. Individuals and groups in such circumstances can of course rely on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's clear acknowledgement that "[t]here is no objection in the Law of God to the eating of meat if it is required" (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 1007).

On the other hand, the fact that I might enjoy the taste of meat is not a sufficient reason, in my understanding, to justify the death of the animal that provided it. We could think of many other examples. Animal testing for medical purposes is an entire question in its own right; here it might behoove researchers to carefully consider when animal testing that may harm the animal is in fact necessary to make medical progress for humans. Personally, I would not consider testing cosmetic products on animals to be in line with the ethical framework. There will be categories of interactions with animals—Indigenous hunting practices as already mentioned, but also animal husbandry traditions from around the world—on which those not part of the relevant tradition will not be qualified to pronounce (from an ethical standpoint at least; drawing attention to ecological concerns may be justifiable).

A Demanding Standard: Loving-kindness and Anxious Concern

The above is presented as my own attempt to progressively live in greater

30 This reality includes the problem of food deserts. In overall wealthy countries, the existence of food deserts points to structural injustice disproportionately impacting communities of color (Brones). The interconnection between our systems of food production, which cause such suffering to animals, and our social structures, which so pervasively disadvantage certain groups, is increasingly being recognized. While at this moment, therefore, it would be impractical for all people to forgo eating meat, this reality should not lead to complacency about the need to alter the circumstances that lead to it, where those circumstances are the result of fundamental injustices.

coherence with my understanding of the Bahá'í teachings on animals. As stressed at the outset, I do not presume to suggest how anyone else should understand those teachings, or implement them. I will conclude this discussion of the application of the ethical framework, however, by offering my perspective on the urgency of what I understand to be a demanding standard presented in the Bahá'í Writings.

This urgency is both spiritual and practical. It can perhaps be best explored in the context of a possible objection to the argument presented in this paper. Even if we accept in broad terms the framework presented so far for the Bahá'í treatment of animals, the question of whether this issue deserves our attention remains. This can be considered from two perspectives. First, is the issue urgent in the world overall? And second, is it urgent for Bahá'ís specifically?

The Urgency of the Issue

A brief discussion must suffice for the first question. While even a cursory exploration of the ecological crisis facing our planet is beyond the scope of this paper, the topic must at least be alluded to, given Bahá'u'lláh's admonition, cited at the outset, to "[b]e anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." (*Tabernacle* 2.7).

There is a broad scientific consensus that human activity is causing serious damage to our natural environment in a range of ways. Much of this ongoing damage may prove irreversible, and much of it will inevitably have deleterious effects on human welfare. This is not the place to revisit the vast body of evidence underlying this consensus, but one point that deserves mention is that our *deliberate* use of animals for food is an enormous driver of environmental damage. Some discrete types of environmental harm were noted above; the overall picture can perhaps best be painted by focusing on the specific questions of greenhouse gas emissions due to animal farming.[31] As a rule, the higher on a food chain we eat, the more inputs—of fresh water and crops—it takes to create our food. Much of those inputs end up being released into the atmosphere as greenhouse gases, as part of the metabolic processes of livestock. Animal agriculture's percentage of global greenhouse gas emissions, in terms of

31 An equally grim picture could be painted of the impacts of human appetite for fish, which sees between 0.9 and 2.7 trillion fish caught each year—the equivalent of between 1.7 and 5 million every minute (Rowland). At present rates, commercial exploitation of fisheries may simply be impossible by mid-century due to the "global collapse of all taxa [i.e. species] currently fished by . . . the year 2048" (Worm et al. 790); the consequences of such drastic depletion for the ocean's capacity to continue to serve as possibly the Earth's largest carbon sink could be catastrophic ("The Ocean, A Carbon Sink").

carbon dioxide (CO_2) equivalence,[32] is debated, with a low estimate of 14.5% from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization disputed by researchers who challenge the methodology used to derive it; Goodland and Anhang defend a figure of 51% (Rao; Goodland and Anhang "Livestock and Climate Change" and "Livestock Greenhous Gas Emissions"). No matter where within that range the true figure lies, it is enormous for an industry that—if we accept 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that humans are best suited for a diet of plants—produces what can essentially be considered luxury goods. In a world hurtling towards the consequences of anthropogenic climate change, the need to drastically, and swiftly, reduce the enormous contribution of animal agriculture to carbon emissions is undeniably urgent. Questions around our treatment of animals, and whether kindness requires those of us in a material position to do so to rethink whether we should be eating them at all, have never in human history been as timely as now.

The Bahá'í Writings can help us think about this question of the timeliness of prioritizing kindness to animals from another perspective. Human stories about our history, our future, and our relationship to nature inform the way we relate to the world around us. In the next section, I will review the Enlightenment worldview, which accelerated with the Industrial Revolution, that as humanity advanced, it would draw more and more resources from the planet to meet its growing needs. But the model that today comes to us more readily is that of Mother Earth. This model finds strong resonance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation that this physical world is a womb to us, a metaphor that is enriched by considering the implications of the Bahá'í Writings' vision of humanity's progressive maturation. If we think, then, of the development of a child, we recognize that in its infancy, the child is utterly reliant on its mother. It can only take and receive from its mother; and it will take everything that is offered. As it grows, however, the child is expected to both lessen its dependence on its mother, and learn to reciprocate the love she shows it. Eventually, in cultures around the world, the expectation is that the adult child will care for the mother as she ages.

Humanity is now reaching its collective maturity. If in its infancy it took from the Earth, consuming its resources and its animals with thought only for its own needs and wants, this was blameless, and even necessary in order for the human species to survive, spread, and progress. From that perspective, it makes sense that earlier religions provided for how we could lawfully use animals. But the language in today's Revelation about kindness to animals, along with the scientific

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32 Animal agriculture releases not only CO_2, but other greenhouse gases, notably methane and nitrous oxide, which in the short term (twenty years) are respectively eighty-four and 264 times more potent as greenhouse gases than CO_2.

evidence of what our heavy footprint is doing to our mother Earth, signal that it is time to wean ourselves from this dependence, and quickly, transitioning into the adult role of loving caretaker. Though it may be hard to imagine that we would ever move completely beyond reliance on Earth for resources, we are now capable of considering how we can actively repair and care for the planet as well.

Priority and Coherence

Perhaps we might agree, then, that it is timely for the world to rethink its relationship to animals, and move away from exploiting them for food, at least. But does this mean that *Bahá'ís* specifically should be pursuing this line of action? Our understanding, after all, is that those alive to Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity have a particular role to play in helping to bring that vision about. With this as our primary focus, will taking the time and effort to rethink our relationship with animals not distract us? As a related point, we might ask whether 'Abdu'l-Bahá's reported statements about the adoption of a plant-based diet in the "future" suggest that now is not yet the time to worry about this issue.

To deal first with the specific question of time, I would suggest that the language in the Bahá'í Writings about treating animals kindly, and about the natural or proper diet of humans, is not contingent for its truth value on some specific future date. If these are the "intended" foods for humanity, then that is already the case; our physiology already points to a plant-based diet. Further, we *are* in the future, from the point of view of when 'Abdu'l-Bahá made this pronouncement. Finally, and most importantly, we know that Bahá'ís are not supposed to wait for the world to become ideal before making our efforts to bring that world about. As the Báb told the letters of the living, echoing Christ's words: "Ye are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?" (qtd. in Nábil-i-A'zam 92). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh has told His followers that they are "the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent*), while 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stressed that He desires "spiritual distinction" for the Bahá'ís (*Promulgation* 68). Arguably, then, given the clear moral dimension of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's admonitions on the treatment of animals, the Bahá'ís are the very people who should be taking a leading role on this issue. In other words, if any people should be acting today as all people will act in a more enlightened future age, it should be the followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

But what of the concern about distraction? Here it may be helpful to distinguish between the development of our attitudes and inner qualities, and change in our behavior. In terms of the former, any warning against allowing the call for kindness towards animals to distract us from our attempt to cultivate our spiritual qualities generally would be one that misunderstands

the Bahá'í conception of spiritual development. Bahá'u'lláh explains that spiritual powers are not limited; they are not resources to be jealously guarded and cautiously meted out. Instead, they are gems that come to light with education, and qualities that increase *precisely as we use them*. Thus, the individual does not need to choose who to give kindness to. Instead, we have a model of practice, learning, and growth in virtues. This is likely one reason, as suggested earlier, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá particularly tells us to teach children to be kind to animals; it fosters the growth of the quality of kindness, a quality that will then be available in greater abundance to be given to all. Thus, softening our hearts to animals will yield dividends in how we treat humans and serve generally, particularly if we are mindful of the virtuous cycle set out for us by the two passages mentioned earlier on the relative priority of kindness towards humans and animals.

What, then, of change in our behavior? If fostering kind attitudes towards animals harmonizes with our spiritual growth, might the lifestyle alterations required to advance in kindness of *action* towards them not interfere with our other important purposes in life? I would suggest two answers to this question. The first is simply that the language of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the treatment of animals is very strong. The context in which the treatment of animals is brought up by Bahá'u'lláh—a law of the Aqdas, and a spiritual requirement of the true seeker—as well as the language used by both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá—phrases like "most binding interdiction," "the utmost-loving kindness," "Ye should most carefully bear this matter in mind," and so on—these all impress upon us that this is not a tangential or unimportant principle in the Bahá'í ethical framework. It is ultimately up to us to decide what to make of this language; for my part, it suggests that this is not a secondary matter to wait until we have achieved certain other goals in the world.

The second answer is that coherence in our actions is a source of strength, not a distraction. The Bahá'í teachings, as I understand them, are mutually reinforcing. Our efforts to advance in one area help us in other respects. The Universal House of Justice has emphasized this point in its letter regarding economic life:

> Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims. (Letter dated 1 March 2017)

I believe that we are called to the same coherence in our treatment of animals. Further, as awareness of

the ethical and environmental consequences of the way we treat animals spreads and deepens in society, a culture of kindness to animals in the Bahá'í community will doubtless become a point of attraction to many.

Aside from the ways in which the Bahá'í framework for the treatment of animals might play out in our own lives, or in our communities, we can also ask whether, at the level of societal discourses, this framework has a contribution to make. It is this question to which I now turn.

What Can a Bahá'í Understanding of this Issue Contribute to Broader Discourse?

As environmental issues loom ever larger in the public consciousness, discourses about humanity's relationship with the natural world, and those concerning the status of animals, gain in importance. In spite of the urgency of the growing environmental crisis facing our planet, many of these discourses fall prey to the same pattern of division and contest that characterizes so many of humanity's methodologies for evaluating different positions. The Universal House of Justice highlights the prevalence of this phenomenon in the specific context of climate change:

> On the matter of climate change and other vital issues with profound implications for the common good, Bahá'ís have to avoid being drawn into the all too common tendencies evident in contemporary discourse to delineate sharp dichotomies, become ensnared in contests for power, and engage in intractable debate that obstructs the search for viable solutions to the world's problems. Humanity would be best and most effectively served by setting aside partisan disputation, pursuing united action that is informed by the best available scientific evidence and grounded in spiritual principles, and thoughtfully revising action in the light of experience. The incessant focus on generating and magnifying points of difference rather than building upon points of agreement leads to exaggeration that fuels anger and confusion, thereby diminishing the will and capacity to act on matters of vital concern. (Letter dated 29 November 2017)

If this tendency to division is true of the discourse on climate change, it may be even more true of discussions centered on what we owe to animals. In a discussion about the environment broadly speaking, it will often be possible to at least reach agreement on the importance of addressing certain kinds of environmental damage being done by humans, provided the threshold requirement is reached that all discussants agree that such harm is in fact being done (which, admittedly, cannot be taken for granted). Whether out of an ethical commitment to protecting other life forms, or out of

a recognition that human life itself is imperiled by some kinds of environmental degradation, climate change notable amongst them, many people can accept that the issue is an important one (though agreement on what can and should be done about it may be much more elusive).

Conversely, on the question of our treatment of animals, it is not generally possible to appeal to a person's self-interest, or concern for humanity generally, to motivate a change in attitudes. This may be possible at the margins—by suggesting that limiting the consumption of animal products may improve health, or by pointing out that the supply chain for certain of these products involves harms to humans[33]—but if a substitute behavior can address these harms to humans without eliminating the harm to the animal, it is likely to be taken as a less disruptive step.

A discussion between individuals on opposite sides of the question of animal rights, therefore, can often lead to impasse, as one party wonders why the other lacks empathy for sentient beings, while the second wonders why the first attaches so much importance to a non-human entity—particularly given the range and severity of harms being done to humans today, which may simply seem more urgent. These different ethical conclusions rest on foundations, usually implicit and perhaps invisible even to the people who hold them, of ontological assumptions about what animals, and humans, are. When brought to light, these assumptions may simply accelerate the trend towards dichotomous thinking, leaving little middle ground between the position that the natural world is of purely instrumental value to the human (a position that resonates with certain religious worldviews but owes its immense, and often unquestioned, influence in the world today to Enlightenment rationalism) and the view, espoused by increasingly influential strands of the animal liberation movement, that humans are of no greater value than any other animal.

As will be seen, even though the reader may intuitively find one view more appealing than the other on first reading, each view can have detrimental consequences in action, stemming from their connection to distinct kinds of ontological materialism.

I will suggest here that the Bahá'í understanding of the ontology of the animal and the human, and the ethics stemming from that understanding, may contribute to resolving this impasse. In light of both the Bahá'í Writings on the treatment of animals, and those on the respective natures of the

33 Some of which may be unintuitive, such as possible connection between overfishing in waters on the West coast of Africa by foreign boats and the Ebola outbreak of 2013-2016. The growing scarcity of fish for local peoples to harvest led to an increase in the hunting of wild animals, including the bats that are suspected to transmit the disease to humans (Omoleke). Other connections here include the physical and psychological toll on slaughterhouse workers (Dillard).

animal and human, I will suggest that a proper understanding of the ontology of each can allow us to see the inherent value and rights due to the animal, without denying the higher order of being of the human and the privileges thereof. This may offer a bridge between positions that are currently at odds.

Rather than attempt to canvass the entire range of ontological views about animals I will focus here on two important and contrasting philosophical views on the nature of animals, and the question of what we owe them. The first, an essentially Enlightenment view, is chosen because of the influence it has had in structuring our relationship with animals in the modern age. The second, a particular kind of utilitarian view, is chosen because it represents (without encompassing) a category of thinking that is prevalent in the modern age, in which humans and animals are not meaningfully distinguishable. Each of these views derives ethical consequences from a particular ontological view of animals—in other words, what we think an animal *is*, fundamentally, its nature or essence, determines what duties, if any, we owe to it.

The Rationalist Enlightenment View

It should be stated at the outset that a focus on a rationalist Enlightenment view is not meant to dismiss the importance of other positions, as old or much older, on animals, positions that remain influential today. Far from it; indeed, a philosophical view of animals rooted in Vedic religion, or in many of the Indigenous spiritual traditions of the world, would arguably be closer in spirit in important ways to the Bahá'í position that I have already outlined. However, given the close historical connection between Enlightenment philosophy, the scientific and industrial revolutions, and the rise of capitalism as a system of global economic organization, it is the Enlightenment view that, for better or worse, has arguably most shaped the way humanity at a global scale relates to animals.

This Enlightenment view did not mark a complete break with the previous, Christian, understanding of animals that prevailed in medieval Europe. A view of the world that sharply dichotomizes between the human and the natural world can be traced to certain readings of Genesis. While in the initial story of creation in Genesis God gives humans "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28), the subsequent fall of man and the expulsion from Eden was often read in the Christian tradition as the beginning of a state of conflict between humanity and nature. The fall corrupts not only human beings themselves, but the natural world with which they had originally been in harmony. Whereas in the initial creation, God seems to have made humans and all other creatures herbivorous ("And

to every beast of the earth . . . I have given every green herb for meat" [Genesis 1:30]), now carnivory, and the violence it requires, is introduced into a natural world made harsh by humanity's fall. Nature itself has become a realm of violence and suffering, not to be redeemed until the fulfilment of Isaiah's promise that the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together" (Isaiah 65:25). Further, humanity cannot rise above this violence and struggle, but has been drawn into it by its sin. In expelling Adam and Even from the Garden, God tells Adam that he will now survive only through struggle with an unyielding earth, a struggle finding relief only in death:

> In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. (Genesis 3:19)

In the next episode in Genesis, Adam's good son Abel is a shepherd, and his sacrifice to God of a slaughtered lamb is accepted (while his brother Cain's offering of "the fruit of the ground" is not) (Genesis 4:3).

This is not, of course, the only reading possible of Genesis; those familiar with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation in *Some Answered Questions* will see, for instance, that the story need not imply conflict between the human and the external, physical world of nature. Indeed, on its face Genesis also provides the basis for a very different story in Christianity about the natural world, or at least a different emphasis within the same story. The natural world is, explicitly, the expression of God's will to create. He devised each component of the natural world, and at each step "saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:10). And the connection between God and nature is ongoing, even after the fall; while humanity originally, and still, sits at the apex of creation and is of the greatest concern to God, the natural world, including its animals, are also cared for:

> Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them.[34] Are ye not much better than they? (Matthew 6:26)

It is evident that this more harmonious way of thinking about nature did have an impact in the pre-modern Christian world; consider for example the popularity of the legends of St. Francis of Assisi's kindly and often miraculous interactions with animals. Indeed, Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "Laudato Si'," which opens with a prayer by his namesake Saint, persuasively argues that traditional Christian teaching provides a sound foundation for the ethical treatment of

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34 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prayer, in which He says that "The fowls of the air and the beasts of the field receive their meat each day from Thee, and all beings partake of Thy care and loving-kindness," may be deliberately harking back to this biblical verse (*Bahá'í Prayers* 22).

animals, care for the environment, and a rejection of the devaluation of the natural world (Francis). However it is also clear that an idea of nature, and by association the animal, as debased was influential in Christian Europe. The world was, after all, fundamentally corrupted by the fall, and the only thing in it capable of redemption was the human soul. Animals, lacking such a soul, were not inherently objects of concern. While for practical purposes the resulting treatment of animals in medieval Europe may not have been much different from what it had been in the ancient world, the ontological interpretation of the animal was somewhat distinct: the Greeks, for instance, with less of a clear consensus on the distinctiveness and primacy of the human soul, were more inclined to see human beings as part—albeit usually the apex—of an interconnected hierarchy of living creatures in nature.[35]

Of these two stories within Christianity, it is the story of humanity struggling against nature that had the greater influence on Enlightenment thinking. Francis Bacon, for instance, writing at the beginning of the scientific revolution, invokes this predominant medieval Christian view of postlapsarian humanity in an eternal struggle with unyielding nature—and turns it on its head. Bacon believed that the pursuit of scientific knowledge could redeem humanity from the state of toil in nature to which it had been reduced by its fall:

> For *man by the fall fell* at the same time from his state of innocency and *from his dominion over creation*. Both of these losses however can even in this life be in some part repaired: the former by religion and faith, *the latter by arts and sciences*. . . . For creation did not become entirely and utterly rebellious by the curse, but in consequence of the Divine decree, "in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread," she is compelled by our labors... (Bacon II:52, emphasis added)

The path to overcoming the ancient struggle with nature was to be the "arts and sciences." Specifically, Bacon was confident that humanity could extract knowledge from nature through the careful application of the scientific method, and thus improve the life of humanity. It must be noted up front that, without the insistence of thinkers like him on the capacity for

35 See, for example, Aristotle, who, while he concludes that for practical purposes animals exist to serve humans, is also comfortable describing humans as, fundamentally, social (or political, depending on the translation) animals capable of speech (Aristotle 1253a). In other words, every animal can be defined by its characteristic trait, the thing that makes it the animal it is and not some other animal. While the human's distinguishing trait—whether framed in terms of reason, speech, or social/political organization—is certainly a remarkable one, it is not so remarkable as to remove the human from the realm of the animal.

human reason, applied through scientific inquiry, to materially change humanity's fortunes, it is difficult to see how we could have reached the age of humanity's maturity.

Nevertheless, the language with which he describes humanity's new, scientific, relationship to nature is frequently problematic. In *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, a seminal text in ecofeminism, Carolyn Merchant persuasively argues that Bacon's language about nature not only betrays a conception of scientific inquiry as an extractive, often violent enterprise amounting to the exploitation of nature, but also, in its frequent characterization of nature as feminine, highlights the misogynistic cultural context in which modern scientific thought was born.[36] Her reading of Bacon has not been without its critics, but even those who would defend Bacon against the charge of espousing a *consciously* misogynistic agenda cannot deny that the language he uses betrays a certain kind of attitude towards both women and nature that, unquestioned, can lead to deleterious consequences. In defending her thesis, Merchant points to the specifically violent connotations of Bacon's chosen terminology:

> In . . . *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* . . . Bacon writes: "For you have but to follow and as it were hound nature in her wanderings, and you will be able when you like to lead and drive her afterward to the same place again." The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition of the word "hound": "to pursue, chase, or track like a hound, or, as if with hound; esp. to pursue harassingly, to drive as in the chase"; it quotes the phrase from Bacon's 1605 *Advancement of Learning* that I cited earlier . . . as the first example. Other definitions of "hound" are equally violent: "to set (a hound, etc.) at a quarry; to incite or urge on to attack or chase anything" and "to incite or set (a person) at or on another; to incite or urge on." Such meanings are reminiscent of the English foxhunt (outlawed by the British Parliament in 2005 for its excessive cruelty to the hounded and tortured foxes). (528)

And similarly,

> Bacon also used the term "vex" to refer to the interrogation of nature under constraint: "The vexations of art are certainly as the bonds and handcuffs of Proteus,[37] which

36 There are parallel feminist and environmentalist critiques of the older Christian cosmological hierarchy within whose context thinkers like Bacon wrote. For an excellent review of these, of Christian responses to them, and of possible Bahá'í contributions see Michael Sours' "Bahá'í Cosmological Symbolism and the Ecofeminist Critique."

37 The reference is to Proteus, a sea

> betray the ultimate struggles and efforts of matter." Art in this context meant *techne* or the technologies used to "vex" nature. The term "vex," meaning "to shake, agitate, disturb," likewise carried connotations of violence, including to "harass aggressively," to "physically distress," to "twist," "press," and "strain," and to "subject to violence." All these meanings convey force in ways that range from irritation to inflicting physical pain through intentional violence. *All precisely describe much of the early experimentation done on animals and human beings* . . . Bacon himself compares Proteus to nature in the female gender, as was common in the period (translations notwithstanding): "For like as a man's disposition is never well known or proved till he be crossed, nor Proteus ever changed shapes till he was straitened and held fast, so nature exhibits herself more clearly under the trials and vexations of art than when left to herself." The verb "straiten" in the seventeenth century meant "to tighten a knot, cord, or bonds— an act that would hold a body fast as on the rollers and levers of the rack.[38]" (528–29, emphasis added)

In the emphasized portion of the second quotation, Merchant highlights the specific connection between Baconian language and vivisection experiments, which have obvious implications for the question of the treatment of animals. Beyond this, it can readily be seen that a model in which nature is a resisting entity that must be "hounded," "vexed," and "held fast" in order to yield her secrets places humanity in a violent relationship with nature. The old struggle, traceable to Genesis, remains, but now humanity is to have the upper hand. When the question becomes "how can we best extract from nature," the question of whether anything is owed to nature falls by the wayside. Over the past decades, the devastating results—for the natural world, and for us—of an extractive mindset that sees nature's plenty as ours for the taking have become clear.

In spite of his essentially materialist methodology, Bacon, himself devoutly religious, did not see the scientific approach to mastering nature which he advocated as in any way departing from a Christian worldview. Indeed, while pre and early Enlightenment thinkers were fundamentally focused on the possibilities presented by the human faculty of reason, and thus

deity and oracle in Greek myth who, when captured, would change his shape in order to try to escape. Only if the capturer kept hold of him until his transformations were exhausted would he share his prophetic knowledge. Bacon states that, like Proteus, nature must be "straightened and held fast" in order to yield its secrets, and the means to do this are the techniques of scientific inquiry.

38 A torture device.

attempted to adopt a purely rationalist methodology, their conclusions ended up owing much of their content to earlier Christian thought. This can be seen in the way animals are treated by René Descartes, whose position would prove particularly influential. Reasoning from first principles, Descartes arrived at a dualistic understanding of reality, holding that everything in creation is material, except for the human mind, which is non-physical, and is the seat of consciousness. The connection to Christian thinking is clear; Descartes is providing a rational explanation for the intangible part of the human reality which in religious language is called the soul. For Descartes, the human body, including the brain, is matter, just like rocks and plants. Animals, lacking a non-physical mind, were to Descartes nothing more than automata, able to react reflexively to stimuli, but incapable of either thought or suffering because they were fundamentally unaware. In modern scientific terminology, Descartes would agree that animals possess nociception, but deny that there is any corresponding subjective feeling of pain. By thinking of the animal as a mere "machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better arranged, and possesses in itself movements which are much more admirable, than any of those which can be invented by man," Descartes was able to explain away even apparently complex and sophisticated animal behaviors as essentially mechanical:

> it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, just as a clock which is only composed of wheels and weights is able to tell the hours and measure the time more correctly than we can do will all our wisdom. (283)[39]

The cries of an animal in apparent pain were, to Descartes, akin to the screeches of a malfunctioning machine. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we will recall, categorically refutes this position, stressing that "when it cometh to physical sensations . . . [t]he feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast. There is no difference here whatever."

Descartes' view led to the denial of any moral limits on how a human might treat an animal.

The Enlightenment view of animals reached a greater sophistication with Immanuel Kant. Kant believed that our behavior should be governed by universal rules, discoverable by reason, and applicable in any situation. One formulation of Kant's categorical imperative is that you must never act in a way that treats a human—whether yourself, or someone else—as a mere means to an end. A human is always an end unto themselves (though they may simultaneously be a means).

Animals, for Kant, are *not* ends

39 See Descartes' discussion in Part V of *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason* for his full line of reasoning concerning the non-sentience of animals.

in themselves. They are essentially *things* because they lack reason and are unaware of themselves as subjective entities. Thus, it is perfectly permissible to make them means to our ends and "since all animals exist only as means, and not for their own sakes, in that they have no self-consciousness . . . it follows that we have no immediate duties to animals" (Kant 27:459).

For Kant, there is one reason to be kind to animals, but it is purely instrumental to our duties to other humans:

> Since animals are an analogue of humanity, we observe duties to mankind when we observe them as analogues to this, and thus cultivate our duties to humanity. . . . So if a man has his dog shot, because it can no longer earn a living for him, he is by no means in breach of any duty to the dog, since the latter is incapable of judgment, but he thereby damages the kindly and humane qualities in himself, which he ought to exercise in virtue of his duties to mankind. Lest he extinguish such qualities, he must . . . practice a similar kindliness towards animals; for *a person who . . . displays such cruelty to animals is no less hardened towards men*. (27:459, emphasis added)

We can note here the difference with 'Abdu'l-Bahá Who, as shown above, asks us to train children in kindness to animals for the sake of the animal, and not (merely) for the sake of the child's moral development.

Kant and Descartes, then, agreed that the animal isn't owed kindness for its own sake because of its key differences with the human; specifically, the animal is incapable of reason, and thus has no awareness of its self. This argument has been articulated in various ways in philosophy since Kant's time, centering for instance on the idea that while animals can do many things, they are not normative persons because they cannot self-reflect—the animal is not an *I* that can look at itself. In its broad strokes and in its implications, however, the argument is largely unchanged.

This, then, is one view of animals: that the animal is a mere means to human ends and is not owed any moral duties, because it lacks either an immortal soul (in the Christian view) or reason (in the Enlightenment view). To see this view's influence in the modern world, we need only look again at the industrial model of farming. In that model, the animal is conceived of as a machine, requiring inputs to produce outputs. Just as division of labor and the assembly line were developed to increase the efficiency of industrial assembly processes, agricultural processes and methods were developed to increase the efficiency of the animal machine and obtain the greatest outputs for the cheapest inputs. This is not to say that no concern has been given, even in the industrial farm model, for the welfare of animals; but this concern

has mostly come well after the establishment of the industrial process, and has always been a secondary question to that of efficiency.[40]

Utilitarianism (and Animal Rights)

A different view of animals can emerge from the ethics of utilitarianism. In contrast to Kant's categorical imperative, in utilitarianism the consequences of an action determine whether it is ethical or not. In broad terms, utilitarianism holds that the net amount of pain and pleasure created by the action must be weighed: where pleasure outweighs pain, the action is good.

Key questions in utilitarianism include whose pain and pleasure count, and how do you measure them. On the first question, some utilitarian thinkers distinguish clearly between animals and humans. For instance, John Stuart Mill who, with Jeremy Bentham a generation earlier, helped articulate classical utilitarian philosophy, wrote that

> [a] being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy, is capable probably of more acute suffering, and certainly accessible to it at more points, than one of an inferior type; but in spite of these liabilities, he can never really wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence. . . . It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question . . . (Mill 449)

In other words, there is something about the human being that makes his or her pain and pleasure of a different order than that of the animal.

But for some utilitarians, this distinction is untenable. The most influential application of utilitarianism to the question of how we treat animals comes from the Australian philosopher Peter Singer. Singer essentially

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40 Consider that changes that benefit animal welfare are much more likely to be adopted quickly when they also improve efficiency. The insights of researcher Temple Grandin into how environmental stimuli can raise or lower stress levels in livestock were influential in the industry because, as she and her colleagues discovered, calm cattle put on weight faster than stressed ones, thus increasing efficiency (Voisinet et al.). Similarly, her insights into the kinds of stimuli that tend to cause cattle distress in slaughtering plants were used to redesign these plants. While this doubtless resulted in a less stressful leadup to slaughter for the animals, the benefit to the industry was the greater efficiency of the slaughter process. Conversely, changes to the practice of killing male chicks of hen-laying eggs, changes that would reduce the efficiency of the industry, have been discussed in the United States since 2016, but have not materialized due to the failure to find any other "workable, scalable solution" (Shannon; see also Han).

argues that just as we might question who is qualified to say that Socrates' "higher faculties" make his pain and pleasure more important than a fool's, there is similarly no basis for discriminating between species when it comes to weighing their pain and pleasure. Such discrimination is "speciesism," a term popularized by Singer in his book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals*. So, an animal's interests in avoiding pain and suffering must be weighed in our decisions about how to treat them. This view imposes definite limits on how we are permitted to treat animals: in many circumstances a human cannot ethically kill and eat an animal, because the animal's pain will outweigh any benefit the human may derive from eating it. Singer uses this argument chiefly against factory farming, which he argues—and not without reason—imposes a life of suffering on the animal, quite apart from its ultimate death.

It should be noted that there is another position, the Animal Rights argument, that says that all or some animals should have absolute rights that cannot be violated, like humans.[41] According to this view, a utilitarian calculus does not enter into the question. I will not discuss this view at length, but only make two points. First, like Singer's utilitarianism, this view notably creates an equivalency between humans and animals. While for Singer, this rests on the capacity to experience pain and pleasure, the Animal Rights position could find equivalency on any number of bases, including but not limited to the capacity to feel. Second, the Animal Rights position often rests on the same essentially materialist assumptions as Singer's position. This need not inevitably be the case, but where it is, I will argue that it creates an unstable basis for the ethical position it advocates.

To return to Singer; arguing from a materialist ontological framework, as shown in figure 2, Singer says that the distinctions we draw between the human and other animals are arbitrary. Without a spiritual perspective, this is not an unreasonable hypothesis: complex animals like great apes seem to have some version, however rudimentary, of most of the faculties that humans display, and a case can be made for these faculties appearing, in various grades, throughout the animal kingdom. Note the dashed arrow connecting his ontological premises to his ethical consequences; I will later explain why I think the former are a potentially shaky foundation for the latter.

41 This is necessarily a simplification, given that legal systems routinely provide for grounds, albeit narrow ones, on which certain human rights can be justifiably curtailed by the state (see for instance s. 1 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, under which the Canadian courts have developed a legal test for determining when the state's infringement of a right is justified under law).

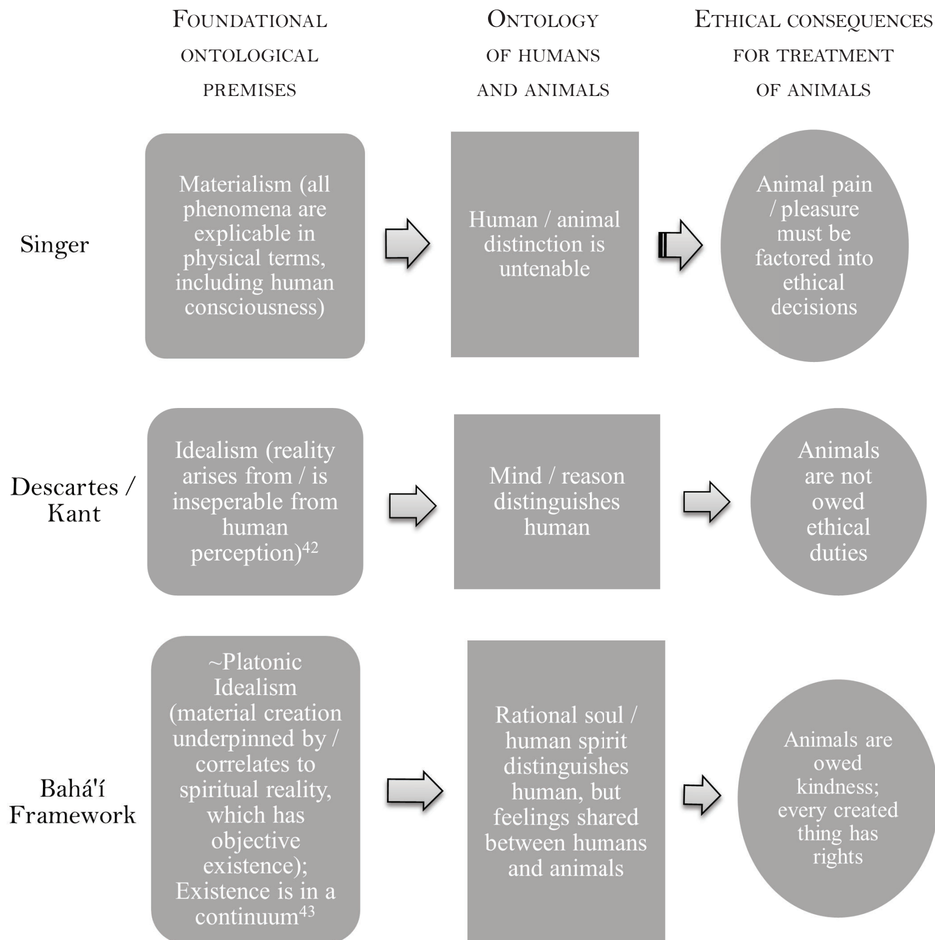

Figure 2: The relationship between ontology and ethics

42 Descartes would be a "subjective idealist," holding that we can only know that our own selves exist (cogito ergo sum), and from this extrapolate the existence of God. Objects may or may not be real. Kant's "transcendental idealism" seems to acknowledge that "things in themselves" or "noumena" have an independent existence, but holds that they are unknowable by us; we only receive the impressions of our own senses ("phenomena"), which relate to the noumena but cannot capture them. Kant is thus strictly speaking more of an epistemological than an ontological idealist.

43 Bahá'í ontology cannot easily be captured in one word or phrase; the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith explain reality—whose totality we are unable to grasp—from different perspectives, depending on which of its features They are attempting to convey. Some descriptions align well with Platonic idealism, as when 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out" (*Selections* 150). The model of successive kingdoms (mineral, vegetable, animal, human,

It may seem that the two positions outlined above are caricatures. After all, most people aren't strict utilitarians in practice, and on the other hand most people also wouldn't say we owe absolutely *no* duty to be kind to *any* animals. But these two views end up being influential because they feed into our tendency to think in terms of dichotomies.

Thus, people who believe that humans are truly unique in creation, whether due to reason or the soul, may be inclined to believe in a soft version of Kant's ideas about animals. "Sure," such a person may say, "we should be nice to animals, I guess, but it doesn't really matter that much because they don't have a soul," or "because they can't think/feel like us."

Conversely, those who do not think that humans are particularly special will often come to this conclusion based on a conscious or unconscious materialistic view of reality. This group might find a kind of utilitarianism attractive because if there is no categorical difference between humans and animals, only a difference of degrees, then a utilitarian approach to weighing our treatment of animals seems fair—or, as Bahá'ís might say, it appeals to their innate spiritual faculty of justice, which exists whether or not someone believes in the spiritual.

It should be clear that the argument between these positions about animals—Singer's utilitarianism and the Cartesian/Kantian view—is intractable, because of their radically different premises. Humans and animals are either so similar that they should be treated the same, or so different that they can be treated differently. The challenge is that, within a solely scientific empirical framework, it will be possible to marshal evidence to support either position, and individuals will likely assign weight to that evidence based on what they are already predisposed to believe. The believer in human exceptionalism, for instance, will point to the *obvious* evidence of all the artistic creations, technological inventions, scientific theories and discoveries, intricate cultural developments, etc., that humans have conceived and animals have never even approached. The believer in human and animal similarity will lean on the *obvious* evidence of animal cognition, emotional range, physical perception, and so on. Advocates of each will have no problem reinforcing their pre-existing opinion, based on

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spirit of faith, and Holy Spirit) suggests a continuum of existence that is better captured by the Aristotelean concept of different types of soul, as well as the Neoplatonic / Islamic concept of the arcs of ascent and descent that absorbs this aspect of Aristotle's thought into Platonic idealism. For a thorough discussion of the ways in which the Bahá'í Writings resonate, confirm, and differ from Aristotelean and Neoplatonic thought see Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings" and "Neoplatonism and the Bahá'í Writings" Parts 1 and 2; for a recent similar discussion with respect to Islamic philosophy that built on these schools, see Joshua Hall, "Bahá'u'lláh and the God of Avicenna."

the biases of their own worldview.

Intractable conflict, of course, does not tend to be productive, and can often be actively harmful. But before considering how the Bahá'í position might contribute to addressing this intractability, it is worth considering whether these two positions might also each lead to deleterious consequences even if they were universally accepted. In each case, the consequences are connected to materialism, albeit of different kinds.

The Shortcomings of Materialist Animal Ethics, and the Value of a Spiritual Perspective

The Enlightenment View and a Materialistic Outlook on Nature

Let us first consider the Enlightenment view. It is not difficult to see how a Baconian understanding of humanity's relationship with nature has contributed to an unsustainable pattern of human life on the planet. The reality of humanity's dependence and interconnectedness with nature has been brought home by the increasing pace of ecological disasters in recent years and their devastating impacts on human beings. In a more subtle way, a Cartesian/Kantian insistence that human reason is the center of objective reality can lead to similar consequences. It is perfectly possible, within this worldview, to retain a spiritual understanding of the human; it is also entirely coherent to retain a belief in God, more or less as traditionally understood in the Abrahamic faiths. The importance placed on reason is also not completely alien to the Bahá'í framework for understanding physical reality, which holds that the human kingdom, defined by the human spirit or rational soul, is in fact higher than the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms that together constitute what we term physical creation. However, the Enlightenment story about physical reality is one-sided in that it easily loses sight of an understanding that the physical world, too, has *spiritual* significance. Its connection to God's Will and its continuance under His care, a theme threaded throughout the Bible, can be hidden by the centering of human reason.

To see how this Enlightenment story risks sliding into a kind of materialism, we can consider it in light of Plato's analogy of the cave.

Plato has provided perhaps the most enduringly productive metaphor for thinking about the nature of reality. In *The Republic*, he has Socrates invite us to imagine a cave, in which people have been chained for their whole lives, able to face only forward. Behind them, objects are paraded in front of a fire, whose light casts their shadows upon the wall in front of the prisoners' faces. The prisoners imagine that the shadows constitute reality. Should a prisoner be freed, however, they would realize not only that the shadows are mere imperfect representations of the real objects, but—upon finally exiting the cave—that even the dim light of the fire in the cave is only a pale imitation of the glory of the sun, which is the

ultimate ordering force of the universe. Armed now with a true understanding of reality, this person, should they return to the cave to attempt to free their fellow prisoners, would be met with ridicule and persecution from the people, unable to believe the fantastical story that there is a reality more real than the shadows (Plato VII 514–17).

The historical utility of this imagery to our understanding of religion is obvious. In the Bahá'í context, for instance, while we might note that the Manifestation is not a human who is somehow freed but is instead an ontologically distinct Creation—an Emissary of the Sun itself—the rest of the story fits quite well. Humans, able in this life only to see physical reality, risk concluding that this is all that there is, even though from the broader perspective of the Manifestation that physical reality pales into unreality. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

> the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye. (*Selections* 150)

Descartes, and in particular Kant, capture part of this understanding quite well: Kant, for instance, fully realizes that what we perceive are *phenomena*—only shadows on the wall. But Kant's further assertion that we will never know anything of the *noumena*, the "things in themselves"—an assumption that makes sense when thinking only of the capacity of human reason to reach understanding—can lead to problems. Yes, from a certain perspective, the shadows are not real; but they *do* have a meaningful connection and correlation to the reality behind them. This nether place is a shadow—but it is the shadow *of something*, namely the higher reality of the Kingdom.

The Bahá'í Writings, conversely, are very clear on this point. In the Bahá'í paradigm, God has provided two sources of knowledge to humans: the Book of Revelation, and the Book of Creation. The Book of Creation is, on its own terms, a potential source for spiritual knowledge, but this requires its relationship to its own underlying spiritual reality to be recognized. As the earlier quote from Bahá'u'lláh's *Gleanings* indicates, not only is "[w]hatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth . . . a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God," without which "no being could ever exist," but because of this connection, material entities when seen in their true light are sources of *spiritual insight*: "[h]ow resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop!" (*Gleanings* 90:1). Aside from being a source of knowledge in its own right, the Book of Creation is used as a reference point in the Book of Revelation. Because human beings only have access to the physical, the Manifestation necessarily

couches the truth they bring in physical terms; even clothing *the Word* in *words* is an accommodation of our embodied existence. Thus we have 'Abdu'l-Bahá explaining that intelligible realities (such as love, and even nature itself) can only be understood by means of sensible imagery: "when you undertake to express these intelligible realities, you have no recourse but to cast them in the mould of the sensible" (*Some Answered Questions* 16). Hence, scripture has always richly drawn on physical metaphor, and made ample use of imagery from the natural world to convey spiritual truth.

This spiritual dimension of material reality can easily be lost within the Enlightenment framework. Without a complementary story about that higher reality of the Kingdom—a story that inevitably will be incomplete based on our limited ability to understand that world for as long as we are chained in the cave (that is, physically alive)—we risk losing sight of what the shadows are meant to tell us. It is as though, when the freed prisoner returns to the cave, his comrades cut him off once he says that the shadows are not real. "Ah, very well," they say, and do not wait to hear what the shadows represent.

Another way to think about how the Platonic and the Enlightenment readings of reality end up differing is to consider what the first source of knowledge is in each. From Descartes' perspective, nothing can be known with certainty empirically, except for the singular fact that the one seeking to know is thinking. From this, it can be determined that the thinker exists—*cogito ergo sum*. The *self* thus becomes the first known thing—the root of epistemology; all else that can be known must be deduced from the self's existence. This is not the case for Plato. His escaped prisoner sees progressively more "real" things—the objects, the fire, the sky, the stars—until finally, once his eyes adjust from the darkness of the cave, he can look at the sun itself:

> Last of all he will be able to see the sun. . . . He will then proceed to argue that this is he who gives the season and the years, and is the guardian of all that is in the visible world, and in a certain way is *the cause of all things* which he and his fellows have been accustomed to behold . . . (VII 516, emphasis added)

For Plato, then, the sun is the ontological cause of all things. He explains that what is meant by this allegorical sun is the "idea of good" (often translated as the "form of good"):

> you will not misapprehend me if you interpret the journey upwards to be the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world . . . my opinion is that in the world of knowledge *the idea of good* appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, *is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and the lord of light in this*

> *visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual*; and *that this is the power upon which he* who would act rationally either in public or in private life *must have his eye fixed*. (VII 517, emphasis added)

Thus the "idea of good," which for religious purposes can be considered God, is the cause of all things, including reason itself. Indeed, while Plato holds that the rational faculty is one of the three components of the human soul, if it is to discern truth it must be trained until it can contemplate the idea of the good. Thus, *contra* Descartes, reason is not the root of epistemology; the idea of the good—which can be understood as God or spiritual reality—is both the ontological ground of all being, *and* the root of epistemology—that is, the root of all knowing. This highest spiritual reality is the source of *all*—of the human, and of the rest of creation. Its grounding relationship with everything is thus stressed. While the human may be higher in certain ways than other aspects of creation, they are also clearly a *part* of creation. Human reason is thus not the unique, first point of analysis—and we avoid the danger of slipping into thinking that everything else in creation must thus be purely instrumental to human ends.

This may seem like metaphysical hair splitting. But the consequences are potentially serious. By denuding the physical world of creation of importance in itself—by arguing that it may have no independent existence outside of our own perception (which Descartes suggests is possible) or that nothing meaningful can be known about it in itself (as Kant suggests)—the Enlightenment view *de-spiritualizes* creation. Consequently, we become cut off from one of the two Books that God has given us. We may still look to the book of Revelation (as many Enlightenment thinkers, devout Christians, did with the Bible), but the book of Creation is closed. Or, more precisely, we only read part of the book of Creation. We still study the shadows to see what they can tell us about themselves *as shadows*—the scientific exercise so vaunted by Bacon—but we ignore the possibility that they might tell us something about the higher reality that they represent.

In short, then, in the Enlightenment view the human can potentially remain a spiritual entity, but our ability to see the connections between other created phenomena and their underlying spiritual foundations is lost. Not only does this limit our capacity to learn about this underlying spiritual reality, but it makes us unduly de-value created phenomena. Losing their symbolic value with respect to the spiritual, animals and other natural phenomena become mere things, to be used as such. We look at an animal's evident capacity for affection, and decide that it can't possibly tell us about *actual* love—a spiritual phenomenon. And so we conclude, with Kant, that shooting an old dog does it no wrong, because it cannot know, feel, or *be* anything real.

The Enlightenment view also may present other, more subtle, dangers, particularly as, in its modern form, it becomes increasingly divorced from the Christian position that arguably inspired it. It is possible for a Cartesian/Kantian view of animals to fall into an *entirely* materialistic position that its authors themselves would have denied. The distinguishing feature of the human, no longer the soul as primarily described in Revelation, becomes reason as experienced and studied by humans. And, without a scriptural reason to suppose that the mind has a spiritual basis or component, it becomes possible to hypothesize that it arises purely from the unique physical arrangement of the human brain. The human right to use animals as ends, then, becomes reduced to a simple matter of difference: the animal is *less than* the human in an important way—its brain matter is less perfectly arranged—and so it can be used. One danger of this kind of collapse of Kantian ethics into pure materialism is that, absent a concept of a spiritual reality for humans, it becomes difficult to see on what rational basis *all* humans can be treated equally, given for instance physical and mental impairments that can prevent a quality that distinguishes humanity *generally*—such as speech or reason—from appearing in specific cases. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation of the relationship between the soul and the body using the analogy of the sun and the mirror is a complete answer to this problem (*Some Answered Questions* 61).

Human-Animal Equivalence and Fundamental Ontological Materialism

Where the Enlightenment position risks sliding into materialism—either a materialistic view of creation, or a potentially entirely materialist ontology—the utilitarian view of animal ethics will often begin from an explicitly materialist position, as is the case for Singer. Those who, from a utilitarian perspective or otherwise, believe that humans aren’t particularly special, will often come to this conclusion based on a conscious or unconscious materialistic view of reality.

It is easy to see that utilitarianism has an intuitive appeal: weighing net pleasure and pain, without discriminating based on *whose* pleasure and pain is in question, has a certain fairness to it. Much ink has been spilt arguing over the potential consequences—from the benign to the horrific—of following utilitarianism in practice; this is not the place to review the various iterations of the trolley problem. My qualm about Singer’s utilitarian position on animals is more fundamental: it is not that the position leads to pernicious outcomes, but that the position may be *fragile*. This fragility, I argue, arises because the connection between the ethical conclusions and the materialist ontological premises underlying them can be too easily severed once we move away from armchair philosophizing and into the real world.

Consider ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that “self-love is kneaded into the very

clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good" (*Secret* 96). Many secular people would balk at this, and protest that they can and do sacrifice their own good for worthwhile causes, including the sake of others. The profundity of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, however, comes to light if we consider how a materialist ontology actually relates to an individual's ethics.

We can begin by considering a simplified version of a story about reality, shared across many religious traditions: God, or something equivalent, has purposely (willfully) created (or caused to come into being in some way) both material reality, and spiritual reality, which is often conceived of as underpinning or grounding material reality in some fashion. Both levels of reality have laws. Material laws include the physical and biological laws that govern our material existence; spiritual laws include ethics. In the Bahá'í view, for instance, spiritual laws are statements about the reality of existence, though they are mediated through the Revealed Word, which is written as Bahá'u'lláh reminds us, "in accordance with [human] capacity and understanding, not with My state and the melody of My voice" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 67). Bahá'ís, then, do not believe that through Revelation they, as individuals, have received and understood a *complete* statement about how spiritual reality operates—but we do believe that what we have received is objectively connected to such a complete statement, and that we must thus do our best to carry it out, within the limits of our capacity to understand.

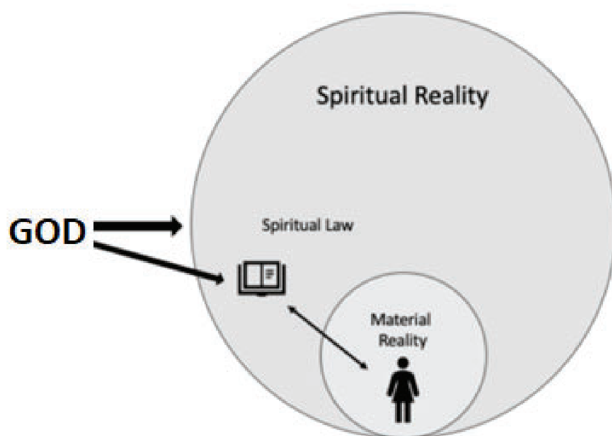

Figure 3: In the Bahá'í paradigm, ethics are rooted in spiritual laws, communicated to us by God, which reflect objective truths about spiritual reality.

An ontological materialist, in contrast, believes that forces of nature, however broadly defined, have created a purely material reality, and that our human self, including our consciousness, has emerged from, and is part of, that material reality. Ethics, as I understand it, requires a being that can make decisions, or at least believes that it can. Thus, ethics can only exist once such a being—a human being—emerges. Where, then, do ethics come from? The only laws and rules to be discovered in the objective reality of a material universe are material laws and rules. Thus, ethical laws cannot be found in, or extrapolated from, the outer world; they have to be formulated by a human consciousness through its capacity to assess the world and create judgments about it. There is no mind of God, in other words, to generate these ethics. In a purely material reality, there is no inbuilt moral order, no spiritual law; so it is not clear how ontology—the nature of things—can make any *necessary* moral claims on us. Thus, when I commit to utilitarianism—or any other ethical system—I am committing to a *subjective reality*—a product of my own thought, or of someone else's that I have chosen to adopt. There is no *meta criteria*—no higher law or rule outside of myself by which to choose an ethical system. I am therefore always free to swap ethical systems. Morality becomes a product of inherited culture and personal choice, something that we design for ourselves collectively and individually.[44]

44 Note that there have been attempts to ground moral realism—a conception of an objective moral order arising

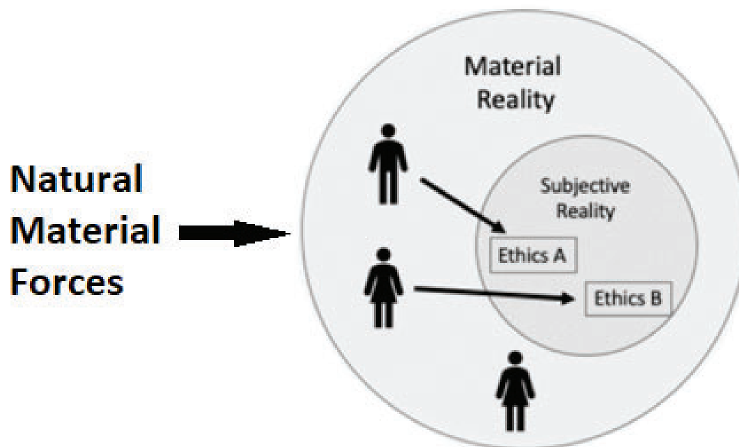

Figure 4: In a materialist framework, ethics are determined by human reason's study of material reality. As people differ, the ethics they derive or choose will differ.

Let us assume, then, that from an ontologically materialist perspective I decide on a utilitarian ethics. While life is not too difficult, I may derive satisfaction from treating animals—or people, for that matter—well. In fact, from a Bahá'í perspective, my inherent spiritual faculties will react positively to treating other beings well, even if I, as a materialist, don't realize this. I may thus look at my life and assert that I do, in fact, sacrifice my own good—my time, my energy, my money—for the good of others, forgoing my "present material good." However, when things are difficult and I have to choose between the welfare of others and myself, my materialist mental construct—my beliefs about the world—always risk tugging me towards selfishness. If I believe that this life is the only life I will get to experience, it will be challenging for me to consistently take the pain and pleasure of other beings into account in my actions, because I would only ever be doing it out of my own *preference*, not out of adherence to an objective truth about reality. It is easy to see how my pain and pleasure can start mattering a lot more to me than those of others. Since I don't believe in an absolute moral order, a higher law, I am always free to decide on my own way of being, and choose a new value system that suits my current desires.

Thus, while at first glance 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement about "future reward" could be read as an affirmation of people's ultimate selfishness, it instead arguably speaks to the human need for *coherence*. Without metaphysical grounding, without the moral realism provided by the metaphysical framework of eternal life and reward, people will struggle to take their own moral values seriously as foundational precepts for how to live.

The Universal House of Justice, citing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement, has succinctly articulated this problem:

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independently of subjective and contingent human assessments—in a non-theistic ontology. Thomas Nagel, for instance, posits that the phenomenon of consciousness has an independent ontological status not reducible to physicalist forces, and that morality is similarly foundational (see Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*). The derision with which his work has been met by materialist philosophers, in spite of its perceptive analysis of the problem confronting efforts to describe (let alone explain) the subjective phenomenon of consciousness from the perspective of objective, physicalist science, is a testament to the general difficulty of imagining moral realism within a materialist framework (see Wieseltier for a review of the reaction to Nagel). Further, if we are positing non-physical entities of consciousness and value which elude any proposal for scientific testing, we are in an epistemological sense talking about something we can comfortably call spiritual reality, even if Nagel, an atheist, would be uncomfortable with this. Nagel also has the disadvantage of not being able to propose, yet, how we would go about determining what morals are "real." Revelation has a clear answer to that: at their core, the prescriptions of the Manifestation are the medicine for the age—representing, if not absolute value, the best relative approximation to it for us at this time.

> Whether as world-view or simple appetite, materialism's effect is to leach out of human motivation—and even interest—the spiritual impulses that distinguish the rational soul. "For self-love," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, "is kneaded into the very clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good." In the absence of conviction about the spiritual nature of reality and the fulfillment it alone offers, it is not surprising to find at the very heart of the current crisis of civilization a cult of individualism that increasingly admits of no restraint and that elevates acquisition and personal advancement to the status of major cultural values. The resulting atomization of society has marked a new stage in the process of disintegration about which the writings of Shoghi Effendi speak so urgently. (*Century of Light* 8:8)

Indeed, it is arguably a testament to the enduring power of the human soul, a power that exists in each of us even if we deny its existence, that in an increasingly materialistic world there has been any brake on this process of disintegration at all.[45]

It should be pointed out that a Kantian approach, in which the individual believes that *reason* properly applied can discern objective ethical principles—which we might consider part of spiritual reality—may risk succumbing to similar selfish impulses. I may genuinely believe that my reason has come up with the objective spiritual law, the true ethics—maybe even that my mind has discerned the intent of God—but can I be sure that my ego hasn't influenced my conclusions? To be fair, this is still a risk in the religious model presented above, but at least in that model there is the Revealed Word as an objective check against such distortions. This check is strengthened in the Bahá'í system by the Covenant.

In short, then, while a utilitarian—or any other—ethical system built on a materialist ontology *can* without doubt point us to some very good ethical behaviors, it will ultimately be fragile. The Bahá'í ethical framework for the treatment of animals, conversely, rests

45 Where sacrifice and selflessness by avowed materialists endure in the face of extreme hardship, we might suspect that they result from a spiritual wisdom deeper than conscious knowledge: the soul's enduring commitment to the idea of something higher than the self—a higher law or truth, in effect, than the material—in spite of one's conscious belief that no such higher law or truth exists. This passage from Bahá'u'lláh seems to confirm that conscious knowledge cannot completely mediate our relationship with the transcendent: "Wert thou to incline thine inner ear unto all created things, thou wouldst hear: 'The Ancient of Days is come in His great glory!' Everything celebrateth the praise of its Lord. *Some have known God and remember Him; others remember Him, yet know Him not*" (*Summons* 132, emphasis added).

on claims about objective ontological truths, the spiritual principles related to us by Bahá'u'lláh. In the Bahá'í framework, ethical action follows from ontological commitment, as expressed in the opening passage of Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Laws:

> The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behooveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration. (Kitáb-i-Aqdas ¶ 1)

Not only, then, do Bahá'í ethics (on animals, as on everything else they address) have a sound ontological foundation, but Bahá'í ontology *demands* effort towards ethical perfection—"Neither is acceptable without the other." Moral perfection is unattainable in this life, and every Bahá'í will fall short in putting the Bahá'í ethical system into practice. However, even when such failures occur, the individual understands that neither ethical apathy, nor flip-flopping between ethical systems, are logically coherent.

A Bahá'í Contribution

The Bahá'í Writings may provide a path not only to shoring up the potential weaknesses of the two views presented above, by grounding the ethical framework for the treatment of animals on an objective ontological basis—the spiritual principles at issue, which have an objective existence independent of humans' opinions about them—but also to bridging the disconnect between them. The potential of a Bahá'í position in this regard lies in its acknowledgement of a measure of validity in both the categorical Kantian perspective and in the utilitarian perspective when it comes to animals. Drawing on the work of Nader Saiedi, I suggest here that it can elevate and reconcile these two positions by infusing both with a spiritual dimension.

Saiedi, in *Gate of the Heart*, proposes that the Báb's ethical writings harmonize utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. In the Báb's Writings, a true utilitarian calculation, one that takes into account spiritual as well as material consequences of actions, becomes, in Saiedi's words, "inseparable from the universal imperatives" of the type advanced by Kant. I believe that we can discern the same dynamic in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on animals, taken as a whole.

Returning to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement on treating animals with the “utmost loving-kindness,” we see that His justification somewhat resembles the utilitarian litmus test: He argues that the animal must be treated kindly because it can feel pain. Bahá’u’lláh, conversely, in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, stresses that the human is owed more kindness than the animal because the human is “endowed with utterance,” an argument that seems more aligned with the Kantian legacy that makes the treatment of humans as ends a categorical imperative based on their capacity to reason.

The Bahá’í standard for ethical treatment of animals may thus be able to bridge the gap between the Kantian or traditional western view and the utilitarian and animal rights positions, because it is able to recognize something unique about humans without using this as a justification for denying any duties owed to animals. Indeed, in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation, it is precisely humans’ privileged position—their power to reason and speak—that makes a demand on them to treat with exceptional kindness and consideration the animal who is devoid of this power. Power and distinction become the grounds for ethical duties, a principle that ties into the broader reconceptualization of power that the Bahá’í Writings make possible. And simultaneously, the unique human *telos* of acquiring spiritual virtues—the Aristotelean dimension of Bahá’í ethics—makes the recognition and carrying out of one’s duties towards animals equally a matter of fulfilling one’s own purpose.

It might be hoped, then, that Bahá’ís will find spaces and opportunities to share, as appropriate, their understanding of the Bahá’í ethical framework for human relations with the animal kingdom, in a spirit of humility and contribution. The fruits of such contribution might be to help those who are committed to bettering the plight of animals speak to those for whom this has not been an important issue in a language that can more easily be heard. The success of these efforts to share a Bahá’í perspective will, as in all areas, depend in large part on “the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá’u’lláh” (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* 66).

Conclusion: The Language of Revelation

> Bahá’u’lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: “I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in Esslemont)

Throughout this paper, I have tried to draw out the theme of *coherence*. The Bahá’í ethical framework for the treatment of animals is, as I see it, profoundly coherent. It is internally coherent in the standard it asks us to uphold, it is

coherent with the ontological premises about the nature of the human and the animal expressed in the Writings, it is coherent with the needs of our age, and it is coherent with the advancement of our purpose as human beings, to know and love God and grow closer to Him through the development of virtue. Further, this framework holds out the possibility of contributing to greater coherence in a discourse that tends towards dichotomy and dispute.

I would close by proposing one more respect in which we may consider the demands of coherence. Spiritual reality, in the Bahá'í view, presents embodied human beings with something of a paradox: it is of the greatest concern, and yet it defies direct intellectual comprehension. We have already examined this concept in the context of the allegory of the cave, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of the need for intelligible realities to be conveyed by means of sensible realities.

We have also considered the fact that the Book of Creation is used as a reference point in the Book of Revelation. This principle is evident throughout scripture, nowhere more so than in the Bahá'í Writings, which are replete with metaphors about the natural world. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá draw unceasingly on natural imagery, presumably because these images are *the best* way to convey certain intangible truths to us. This may be one facet of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "[t]he country is the world of the soul"—immersion in the natural world, and the deeper understanding it brings of natural phenomena, can help us better understand how these phenomena are invoked in Revelation. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the ocean: the ocean of knowledge, the ocean of His presence, the ocean of His utterance, the ocean of search, the ocean of His grace, the ocean of love. He tells us He is the Sun of Wisdom, the Tree beyond which there is no passing, and the Divine-Lote Tree. He speaks of the flower and the rose. And He invokes animals, to help us gain some sensory foothold on the ineffable qualities of His own Self. To help us glimpse His Beauty, He speaks of "the Nightingale of Paradise" (*Gleanings* 61:1). To convey His majesty, He becomes "the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty" (*Tabernacle* 1:14). And to give an inkling of His power, He invokes "the lion of indomitable strength, whose roaring is like unto the peals of thunder reverberating in the mountains" (*Tablets* 13:9).

We are in the midst of what scientists are calling the sixth mass extinction in the history of our planet (Hance; Ceballos et al.). The first five were caused by natural processes, albeit highly disruptive ones which, occurring suddenly, wiped out a majority of extant species because they could not adapt to such abrupt climatic changes. For the last of these, it took a comet tens of kilometers in diameter, slamming into our planet at perhaps 100 times the speed of sound, to wipe out the non-avian dinosaurs along with roughly 75 percent of species on Earth.

The current, sixth mass extinction has been triggered by humans. Under

our watch, species are now disappearing at 100 times the rate found in representative samples of the fossil record (Ceballos and Ehrlich). With entire ecosystems poised on the verge of collapse, the number of species that are vanishing is set to skyrocket.

These animals—the ones imperiled by climate change and habitat loss, no less than the ones caged and used for our own ends—have inherent value as part of God's creation. Beyond that, the richness of our understanding of the spiritual concepts in the Bahá'í Writings, mediated by metaphors of nature and animals, risks being sadly impoverished in a world where nature is devalued and animals removed from their natural conditions.

It would be a great loss if, a century from now, a child picking up Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Ahmad for the first time should wonder what a nightingale was.

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