

Articulating a Consultative Epistemology: Toward a Reconciliation of Truth and Relativism

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Abstract

The field of epistemology has been characterized by a perennial tension between two broadly contrasting approaches to knowledge—one associated with the search for foundational truth, the other associated with assertions regarding the relativity of truth. This paper resolves this tension within the framework of a *consultative epistemology*. This epistemological framework demonstrates and explores the relativity of the social construction of truth, and in so doing, resolves the paradoxical truth claim, associated with relativist approaches to knowledge, that there are no universally valid truths. The ultimate purpose of the paper is to articulate an epistemology that supports the development of more integrative approaches to knowledge.

Résumé

Le domaine de l'épistémologie a été marqué par une tension continue entre deux approches de la connaissance plutôt divergentes : l'une associée à la recherche de la vérité fondamentale, l'autre affirmant que la vérité est relative. Le présent exposé vise à concilier ces approches dans le cadre d'une épistémologie consultative. L'auteur propose un cadre épistémologique qui démontre et examine la relativité de la construction sociale de la vérité; ce faisant il réconcilie cette notion avec l'affirmation paradoxale associée aux approches relativistes de la connaissance voulant qu'il n'existe pas de vérité universellement valide. L'auteur vise au bout du compte à proposer une épistémologie pouvant mener à l'élaboration d'approches davantage intégrées à l'égard de la connaissance.

Resumen

El campo de la epistemología se ha caracterizado por una tensión perpetua entre dos enfoques al conocimiento generalmente contrastantes: uno asociado con la búsqueda de la verdad fundamental, y el otro asociado con afirmaciones sobre la relatividad de la verdad. Este artículo resuelve esta tensión en el marco de una epistemología consultiva. Este marco epistemológico demuestra y explora la relatividad de la construcción social de la verdad y al hacerlo, resuelve la pretensión de verdad paradójica asociada a los enfoques relativistas al conocimiento, que no hay verdades universalmente válidos. El propósito final del trabajo es articular una epistemología que apoya el desarrollo de enfoques al conocimiento más integrados.

Epistemology is a field of philosophy that is concerned with the nature and generation of knowledge. It is concerned, in other words, with what we can know as well as the methods by which we can know it. The field of epistemology has been characterized by a deep and long-standing tension alluded to in the title of this paper by the terms “truth” and “relativism.” More precisely, this tension exists between two sets of broadly contrasting approaches to knowledge. These approaches can be seen in the opposed categories of objectivism and subjectivism, foundationalism and antifoundationalism, absolutism and relativism, realism and antirealism, essentialism and antiessentialism, modernism and postmodernism, and so forth.¹ In each pair, the former term embodies a variation on the theme that human knowledge, when pursued through the correct methods, can have a direct connection with, or correspondence to, reality or truth. The latter term, on the other hand, embodies a variation on the theme that all human knowledge is socially constructed within diverse interpretive frameworks, meaning that it has no direct connection with, or correspondence to, foundational reality or truth.

To date, this tension has never been effectively resolved. However, we believe that the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, and principles of Bahá'í consultation in particular, contain insights that offer a resolution to this epistemological conflict. Epistemology, however, has received little attention so far within Bahá'í scholarship. Most of what has been written—such as works by Mahmoudi, McLean, Saedi, and Hatcher—has focused either on

the epistemology of mystical knowledge or on the relationship between faith and reason, rather than on the issue of relativism itself.²

Four works of Bahá'í scholarship that touch directly on epistemological relativism are Momen's "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics"; Kluge's "Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance"³ and "Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings"; and Lample's *Revelation and Social Reality*. Momen asserts that Bahá'í epistemology embodies "a cognitive or epistemic relativism" in which comprehension is ultimately limited by cognitive viewpoints or perspectives (207). According to Momen, this means that "we are unable to make any absolute statements about Reality or the structure of being (that is, ontology) because any knowledge or understanding that we have of these is relative" (207). Kluge's first article offers slightly more nuanced conclusions than Momen's. Kluge asserts that Bahá'í epistemology is characterized by a *qualified relativism* in which some truth claims are more epistemologically privileged than others; in which some truth claims are historically contingent while others are not; and in which truth claims pertaining to foundational realities must be distinguished from truth claims pertaining to socially constructed realities. In Kluge's second article, he abandons the term *relativism* altogether because the term is associated with a rejection of three positions that he demonstrates are supported, in some respects, by the Bahá'í writings. These positions are universalism, objectivism, and foundationalism. Kluge then argues that the phrase *evolutionary Platonic perspectivism* is a more accurate way of describing Bahá'í epistemology. Epistemological statements in the Bahá'í writings, according to Kluge,

are "evolutionary" because they see our knowledge of truth advancing in scope, accuracy and effectiveness . . . Platonic because they believe in the existence of universal truths, or 'eternal verities' that do not change . . . 'perspectivist' because humankind's view of the eternal truths may be different according to standpoint and/or evolve through time, though this does not imply that any and all views are necessarily correct. Thus the Bahá'í Writings occupy a middle ground between relativism on the one hand and a static absolutism on the other. (44)

Lample adopts a broadly similar approach to Kluge in that he accepts the existence of underlying truths; he acknowledges the limitations of human knowledge, as well as its perspectivist nature, in relation to underlying truths; and he recognizes the potential evolution or refinement of human knowledge, over time. Lample's focus, however, is primarily on the applied question of how we can translate the transcendent truths that are embedded in religious revelation into practical knowledge, and into corresponding social practices, that contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. In this context, and building on the insights of Richard Bernstein in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, he rejects epistemologies that are characterized by extreme objectivism and extreme relativism, or foundationalism and antifoundationalism. Instead he articulates a "nonfoundational" epistemology that can coexist with a foundational ontology by recognizing, on one hand, that human knowledge of reality is constructed and, on the other hand, that human comprehension can, over time, through the dynamics of consultation, action, and reflection, lead to increased attunement with the truths of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and the nature of reality, as gauged by measures such as the betterment of the world and the prosperity of its peoples.

We agree, in broad terms, with the conclusions of Kluge and Lample above. Our goal, however, is to articulate a set of concepts, and some initial vocabulary for discussing these, that enable us to probe more deeply into the specific ways in which a Bahá'í-inspired epistemology transcends objectivism and relativism, or foundationalism and antifoundationalism. We believe that these efforts may be especially useful to students, scholars, and others who are drawn into prevailing discourses on epistemology, where they encounter polarizing and often highly antagonistic arguments from the seemingly irreconcilable camps of modernist and postmodernist philosophers and social theorists. In this regard, thoughtful individuals can benefit from any insights that help them transcend the false dichotomies that inform both camps.

Toward these ends, in the discussion that follows, we articulate aspects of what we call a *consultative epistemology*. Our specific objectives are three-fold. The first is to further advance inquiry and insight into Bahá'í-inspired epistemology. The second is to use insights from such an epistemology to

explain and demonstrate how the long-standing tension between foundational and relativist approaches to truth can be resolved. The resolution, we argue, involves a justification of the idea that some truth claims are more socially constructed, and thus less attuned to a foundational reality, than other truth claims—a claim advanced by Turner (105), alluded to by Kluge, and more fully conceptualized in this paper. The third objective is to explore the epistemological implications that follow from demonstrating and conceptualizing the relativity of the social construction of truth. In this context, we hope specifically to “contribute to a gradual forging of the more integrative paradigms of scholarship” that the Universal House of Justice has called for (Letter).

THE PERENNIAL TENSION

The epistemological tension alluded to above is referred to by Rorty as an opposition between *vertical* and *horizontal* approaches to knowledge. Vertical approaches are characterized by the assumption that truth has an independent and absolute existence, that human minds are capable of discovering and representing it, and that some methods for accessing it are superior to other methods. Horizontal approaches are characterized by the assumption that truth has no independent existence outside of the human minds and discourses that socially construct it. For horizontalists, a representation or belief about reality is true if it is congruent with the rest of what a community has established as true. As Rorty explains, “The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representation and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally. . . . This tradition does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together” (*Consequences of Pragmatism* 92).

The terms *vertical* and *horizontal* denote, of course, ideal types. In practice, these approaches sometimes blend together in complex, and often contradictory, ways. Yet these ideal types are worth examining closer because they have heuristic value: they help us understand and explore the perennial tension associated with them.

VERTICAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

The vertical drive to unravel the workings of the universe through sanctioned methods of inquiry and investigation is a powerful force in human societies that has deep historical roots. Plato epitomized it. "The true lover of knowledge," Plato wrote, "naturally strives for truth" and "soars with undimmed and unwearied passion till he grasps the essential nature of things" (490a). For Plato, to grasp this world of essences one must rely upon pure reason because the senses are easily beguiled by the contingent world of ephemeral shadows that shroud the true nature of things.

The history of Western thought is filled with other verticalists who elevate particular methods of inquiry over others in their search for essential truths. Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Bacon are among them. Descartes and Husserl also typify this tradition. In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes applies a method of *radical skepticism* through which he discards anything that can be doubted until he can doubt no further. He thus arrives at the well-known *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am." Upon this foundation he seeks to rebuild the edifice of human knowledge through a series of clear and logically irrefutable assertions. Husserl also seeks certainty. He attempts to create a presuppositionless philosophy through *phenomenal reduction* that aims to pierce through all mental and social constructions to achieve "apodicticity"—the level of absolute truth or reality of objects. His goal, as he states in *The Idea of Phenomenology*, is to reduce every contingent phenomenon to "a pure phenomenon, which exhibits its intrinsic (immanent) essence . . . as an absolute datum" (45).

Though spanning a period of over two millennia, and though committed to divergent methods, all of these individuals exemplify the vertical tradition. Given the assumption that truth is "out there," waiting to be known, they each aim at establishing a hierarchy of approaches to truth, dividing methods of inquiry up into those "which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all" (Rorty, *Philosophy* 3). Plato and Descartes, in their own ways, championed pure reason while rebuffing reliance on sensory perceptions. Their rationalism has been challenged, however, by the empiricism of Locke,

Hume, and Ayer, among others, as well as by the falsificationism of Popper. Both approaches have aimed to lay down criteria that clearly demarcate science from nonscience, and have thereby promoted the rise of science to a position of dominance within the verticalist tradition.

The modern approach of science as the ultimate arbiter of truth is what Sorell calls *scientism*. Scientism has taken basically two forms. Broadly speaking, the first follows the empiricist or *logical positivist* tradition that repudiates the rationalists' search for metaphysical truth. Instead, empiricists focus on observable phenomena that can be directly measured or tested. The second form of scientism embraces *scientific realism*, which expands the empiricist focus to include phenomena that can only be observed indirectly, such as the human mind. Both traditions insist, however, that truths exist, that those truths can be known, and that they can best be discovered through prescribed methods of objective and context-independent scientific inquiry. Thus, like Plato's rationalism or Husserl's phenomenal reductionism, logical positivism and scientific realism are variations on the verticalist theme.

HORIZONTAL EPISTEMOLOGIES

Horizontal approaches to knowledge reject the vertical tendency to exalt certain truths, and the methods for arriving at them, over others. Instead, horizontalists assume either that the truth of things is inaccessible to the human mind or, more radically, that there is not really any truth out there to access. In either case, truths are considered mere social constructs because phenomena have no intrinsic "meaning" or "essence" in the absence of background assumptions, interpretive frameworks, shared discourses, theoretical perspectives, language games, and so forth. Based on this premise, horizontalists reject epistemological hierarchies, totalizing theories, and monopolistic knowledge systems—along with the Enlightenment project that these have been so closely associated with (Benson and Stangroom 18).

Lyotard—a seminal figure in horizontal epistemology—provides a good illustration. For Lyotard, the impulse underlying modernism is the

quest for truth. To advance this quest, modernism privileges some approaches, such as empirical science, over others. These approaches are legitimated, structured, and differentiated from less fruitful approaches by *metanarratives* such as the Enlightenment story of human progress and liberation. But, as far as Lyotard is concerned, we have moved into a post-modern age now that is characterized by a collapse of metanarratives. Thus traditional dividing lines between disciplines are evaporating, knowledge hierarchies are blurring, totalizing theories are crumbling, and in their place diversified, decentralized, fragmented, and competing knowledges are emerging.

Foucault—another seminal figure in horizontal epistemology—proounds the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (81) based on broadly similar assumptions about the social construction of reality. He thus advocates on behalf of marginalized stories and localized knowledges that have been suppressed by totalizing knowledge systems. According to (some readings of) Foucault, truth may exist but we can never know it because we cannot transcend our sociohistorical perspectives to find it. What we can do, however, is unearth the social origins of specific truth claims and examine how they function in society. It is toward this end that Foucault, following Nietzsche, employs his *genealogical* approach to demonstrate the historicity of dominant truth claims in order to expose the power relations embedded in them. This link between power and knowledge is central to many other horizontalists as well, who point out that we are not all equal in our ability to socially construct truths. Some have more say than others because they have greater access to, or control over, the means of cultural production and reproduction, such as the classroom, the lab, the media, the legislature, the courtroom, and the pulpit.

Other versions of horizontalism also exist, but cataloging all of them is beyond the scope of this discussion. It is important to note, however, that some versions are more radical than others. For example, while *social constructionism* (or *social constructivism*) typically limits its concerns to epistemology—or what we can know—*antifoundationalism* extends its concerns to ontology, disavowing any concrete reality outside our social constructions. Some antifoundationalists, like Derrida, claim there is no

independent realm beyond that of language and signification and that the practice of dividing reality up into signifiers and the aspects of reality they signify is fallacious. For Derrida, there is nothing outside of signification, no underlying foundational reality. Signifiers merely lead to other signifiers *ad infinitum*. That is our world. The method that he pioneered therefore involves the semiotic *deconstruction* of texts—the critical analysis of all repositories of meaning in order to reveal, among other things, how meanings have been constructed within them, how contradictory, transitory, and unstable they are, and the temporary purposes they serve.

Antifoundationalists like Derrida therefore agree with Nietzsche when he says, “There are no facts, only interpretations” (qtd. in Ayers and O’Grady 318); or with Rorty when he maintains that truth is not truth because it corresponds to some external reality, but rather because it “just plain enables us to cope” (“Pragmatism and Philosophy” 31). We have only each other, our communities, and the truths we create. Any given paradigm, be it scientific, philosophical, political, economic, social, or religious, is just one more coping strategy, one more tool, one more vocabulary, with temporary practical utility, but with no foundational basis.

Granted, some horizontalists are not this extreme. Many social constructionists acknowledge that a real world exists beyond discourse, signification, or other forms of social construction (Atkinson and Gregory 603). However, while they may avoid antifoundationalism, they agree with Kuhn when he says that data do not simply appear to us as an unmediated presence (as discussed below). Rather, we notice and interpret data in ways that are molded by our paradigmatic expectations. Therefore, for both social constructionists⁴ and more extreme antifoundationalists, the question of whether or not an underlying reality exists ultimately makes little epistemological difference in terms of how we know and interact with the world. In both cases, for all practical purposes, there is no ultimate foundational basis for truth, universal principles, or shared standards, because there is no realm of fixed knowledge or meaning (at least that we can access) from which we can assess the relative merits of any truth claims. This view leads, of course, to postures of extreme cultural

and ethical relativism. It also leads to the central and well-known paradox of horizontal approaches to knowledge: to state that all truths are socially constructed and hence relative, and that universal truths therefore have no foundational basis is, itself, an absolutist universal truth claim.⁵

CONSULTATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY: UNDERLYING PREMISES

Having outlined the vertical and horizontal approaches to knowledge and the unresolved tension between them, we now turn toward the task of articulating a *consultative epistemology* that we claim draws upon valid insights from both approaches, resolves the tension between them, and transcends their respective limitations. Our approach is informed by a number of premises, all of which stem from our understanding of the Bahá'í teachings, especially those related to the practice of Bahá'í consultation and the acquisition of knowledge.

Bahá'í consultation is, in brief, an approach to collective inquiry and deliberation that is intended to be unifying rather than divisive. Participants are encouraged to exercise freedom of expression and engage in probing, critical analysis, yet they must strive to express themselves with care and moderation, and remain detached from preconceived opinions and positions. They are to regard diversity of perspective as an asset and actively solicit the views, concerns, insights, and expertise of others. After ideas are expressed, the ideas are no longer bound to the individuals who express them. Instead, ideas become collective resources that can be freely adopted, refined, or discarded, according to the collective wisdom of the group (*Consultation*). Referring to the epistemological function of this model, Bahá'u'lláh writes that

“[c]onsultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.” (*Consultation* no. 3)

There are a number of basic premises that appear to underlie the epistemological function of consultation. These include (but are not limited to) the following:

1. *Reality has a definite and ordered existence outside of human perception or comprehension.*⁶ Bahá'u'lláh writes that God, “out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things” and “hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation. . . .” (*Gleanings* 64–65). “Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing,” Bahá'u'lláh continues, “He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes” (65). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further explains that

nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and a finished design, from which it will never depart—to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart. (*Some Answered Questions* 3)

2. *Human comprehension is limited and finite but still capable, to some degree, of discovering foundational truths.* As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “[T]he human mind, the human intellect, the human thought are limited” (*Promulgation* 421). Or, as Bahá'u'lláh explains, “To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar, however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts” (*Gleanings* 317). Yet, according to the Bahá'í teachings, the pursuit of knowledge is still a valid and important goal. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us that, to some extent at least, humans “can discover the realities of things, comprehend the peculiarities of beings, and

penetrate the mysteries of existence" (*Some Answered Questions* 188). He also states that "[t]he mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation" (*Some Answered Questions* 253). At the same time, there remain "limitations to which man's finite mind hath been strictly subjected" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 317).

3. *Human comprehension is divergent.* The human mind is shaped by the different innate capacities, life experiences, educational training, and so forth, of individuals, resulting in diverse understandings of, or perspectives on, the same phenomena. "[C]onceptions vary," Bahá'u'lláh thus states, "by reason of the divergences in men's thoughts and opinions" (*Tablets* 139). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "[A]lthough the object being viewed is the same, nevertheless the viewpoints and stations of these mystic knowers are different" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, "Commentary").

4. *While we cannot penetrate the ontological essences of phenomena, we can gain knowledge of them by examining their attributes or qualities.* According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Phenomenal, or created, things are known to us only by their attributes. Man discerns only manifestations, or attributes, of objects, while the identity, or reality, of them remains hidden. . . . the realities of material phenomena are impenetrable and unknowable and are only apprehended through their properties or qualities. . . ." (*Promulgation* 421).

5. *Diverse perspectives on complex and multifaceted issues can be complementary.* This is because a given perspective may only "illumine but one aspect of things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy* 186). In our efforts to comprehend the reality or essence of a given phenomenon, our cognitive perspectives cause us to notice different attributes, qualities, or facets of that phenomenon. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has written that "[t]ruth has many aspects" and "there are many roads leading thereto"; and "truth is one, although its manifestations may be very different" (*Paris Talks* 53, 128). This premise appears to underlie 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation, in reference to consultation, that "the views of several individuals are assuredly preferable to one man, even as the power of a number of men is of course greater than the power of one man" (*Consultation* no. 17).

6. *Knowledge of reality can be advanced and refined systematically, over time.* This premise underlies the Bahá'í teachings regarding the complementary roles that science and religion play in carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. Regarding science, the Bahá'í writings are replete with references to “scientific advancement,” such as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s observation that “[i]f comparison be made with the sum total of all former human achievements, it will be found that the discoveries, scientific advancement and material civilization of this present century have equaled, yea far exceeded the progress and outcome of one hundred former centuries” (*Promulgation* 143). Regarding religion, the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation speaks to a parallel process in the advancement of humanity’s collective spiritual insight, as diverse facets of truth are revealed over time. As Shoghi Effendi explains,

The fundamental principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh . . . is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.

In summary, Bahá'í epistemology appears to be based on the following premises (among others). Many phenomena do have an existence that is independent of human thought. Such phenomena can be complex and multifaceted. Human comprehension is finite and limited—as well as divergent—relative to such phenomena. Humans gain knowledge of the manifest aspects of phenomena (that is, their attributes, qualities, properties) rather than of their essences. Knowledge of complex phenomena is maximized when diverse perspectives illuminate multiple aspects of the same phenomena. Knowledge of phenomena can accumulate, and be refined, over time.

CONSULTATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY: DERIVED CONCEPTS

Based on the premises above, we develop a network of concepts below aimed at resolving the perennial tension between vertical and horizontal approaches to knowledge. Our central concern is to reconcile the perceived incompatibility between foundational and relative approaches to truth.

PARADIGMATIC DIVERSITY AND ASPECTS OF PHENOMENA

Paradigmatic Diversity. Our line of reasoning begins with the third premise discussed in the preceding section: that human comprehension is divergent and human conceptions of any given phenomenon often vary. Another way of saying this is that different people often look at reality through different cognitive lenses or interpretive frameworks. Kuhn's concept of a *paradigm* provides a useful model for thinking about these lenses or frameworks. He reminds us that diverse human conceptions are not entirely idiosyncratic. Rather, different conceptual frameworks are often shared by groups of people whose minds have been shaped or trained to see various phenomena in similar ways. A paradigm, in this sense, can be defined as a cognitive lens or, more broadly, an interpretative framework made up of shared ideas, assumptions, metaphysical principles, values, methodological approaches, and instrumental techniques that condition the way we observe, make sense out of, and relate to, specific phenomena.⁷ While some paradigms are more compelling than others, paradigms are not all-encompassing mental cages from which we cannot escape. People can employ multiple paradigms, which can overlap in complex ways, to make sense out of different aspects of reality. Some paradigms are also more encompassing in the range of their views than others. In addition, although it can be dramatic in some cases, people are capable of abandoning familiar paradigms and adopting new ones, or revising existing paradigms, under certain circumstances—as can be seen with revolutions in scientific thought, with conversions in religious belief, or, less momentously, with the consideration a given problem or issue from a substantially different point of view.

Given the above definition of a paradigm, one can say that human comprehension is divergent because it is paradigmatically conditioned. The implications of this statement are twofold. First, any given human mind can employ different paradigms to understand different phenomena. For instance, a person can employ one interpretive framework to explain the motion of a falling object and another interpretive framework to explain the behavior of a crying child, without any cognitive dissonance.⁸ Second, different minds often adopt different paradigms in their attempt to understand the same phenomena. For instance, historically, some physicists studied the behavior of light by employing particle theory while others employed wave theory. Most physicists now understand both theories to be equally legitimate and complementary because they each appear to reveal different aspects of the same phenomenon.

Aspect Selection, Aspect Interpretation, and Aspect Relativism. The last example above helps to reintroduce premises 4 and 5 from the preceding section: we know phenomena by their qualities or aspects, and complex phenomena are multifaceted or have many aspects. Given the multifaceted nature of many phenomena, along with the paradigmatically structured nature of human comprehension, one can say that diverse understandings of a given phenomenon arise for two reasons. First, different people notice different aspects of a given phenomenon depending on the paradigmatic lenses through which they view it. The example from physics cited above, in which one theory suggests the particle-like aspect of light and another theory suggests the wave-like aspect of light, is a good illustration of this. Figure 1, below, provides an even simpler (and widely familiar) illustration of this, as some people are cognitively inclined to notice the duck while others are inclined to notice the rabbit within the illustration. We will refer to this process of noticing different aspects of a phenomenon as *aspect selection*.

The second reason diverse understandings of a given phenomenon arise is that, even when different people notice the same aspect of a given phenomenon, they often interpret that aspect differently because of the different paradigmatic lenses they employ. For instance, one person might

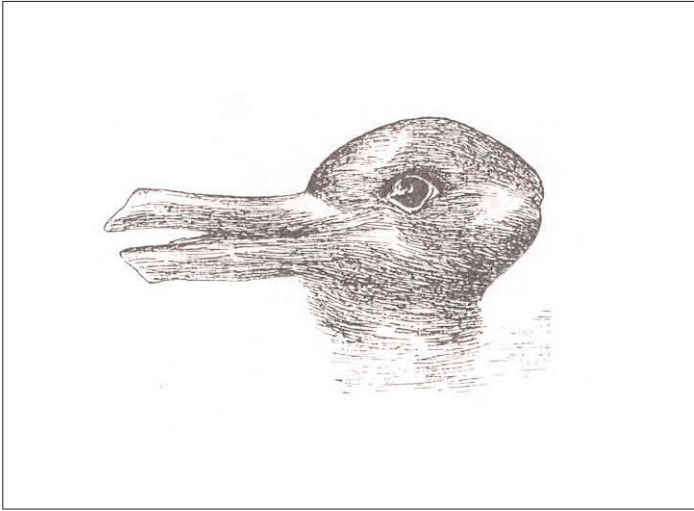


Figure 1. The duck-rabbit.

notice the rabbit in the above illustration and be cognitively inclined to interpret it as a friendly pet. Another person might also notice the rabbit but be inclined to interpret it as a tasty meal. The same process occurs with more complex phenomena as well. For example, some people might notice inner-city poverty among African-Americans in parts of the United States and interpret it primarily as a function of ongoing institutional racism in that country. Other people might notice the same thing but interpret it primarily as a function of rigid class barriers, while others might interpret it as a function of learned cultural patterns, or even inherent biological differences. We will refer to this process of interpreting a phenomenal aspect (whether that interpretation is valid or not) as *aspect interpretation*.

The combination of aspect selection and aspect interpretation results in two forms of *aspect relativism* that we will call *selective relativism* and *interpretative relativism*. In other words, the relativity of truth claims regarding a given phenomenon can result from divergent processes of aspect selection and divergent processes of aspect interpretation. However, as illustrated by the particle theory and wave theory of light

discussed above, divergent truth claims do not necessarily imply the existence of conflict or error in human comprehension. Rather, the concepts of selective relativism and interpretative relativism help us understand the relativity of truth, because the aspects we notice and how we interpret them are, to some extent at least (see below), relative to the paradigms we employ.

In light of the concepts of selective relativism and interpretive relativism, we can also rephrase our initial definition of a paradigm. For our purposes, we can define a paradigm as a cognitive lens or a perceptual framework that influences our selection and interpretation of phenomenal aspects. Paradigms thus enable us, however imperfectly, to approach foundational reality by bringing different aspects of phenomena to our attention and by conditioning our interpretations of those aspects.

Interpretations, it should also be noted, fall into two broad categories that are important to distinguish for analytical purposes. On one hand, some interpretations of phenomena are associated with the assertion of truth claims, or knowledge, regarding those phenomena. The assertion that light acts like a particle and the assertion that light acts like a wave are interpretations of this type. We refer to these as *epistemic interpretations* because they pertain to knowledge claims. On the other hand, some interpretations are associated with the attachment of meanings to phenomena. For instance, some cultures attach a positive connotation to dogs, considering them “man’s best friend” and letting them live inside the home in close and affectionate contact with members of the family, while other cultures attach a more negative connotation to dogs, considering them unclean animals and never allowing them into homes. We refer to these as *semiotic interpretations* because they pertain to meaning. Even though the boundary between knowledge and meaning, or epistemic and semiotic interpretations, is not easily demarcated, and the two can overlap and influence each other in complex ways, this paper, as a study in epistemology, is concerned primarily with the former. Therefore, when we refer to aspect interpretation and interpretive relativism in this paper, we are generally referring to epistemic interpretations.

It is also important to note that the boundary between aspect selection

and aspect interpretation can be equally difficult to demarcate at times because the two processes can impact each other. For example, the process of categorizing distinct, previously selected phenomenal aspects (that is, constructing systems of categorization) is a highly interpretive act that can dramatically affect further aspect selection. In fact, some categorization schemes can even cause us to “perceive” phenomenal aspects that may have little basis in foundational reality. However, if these important qualifications are kept in mind, we believe that the distinction between aspect selection and aspect interpretation is very useful as a heuristic device.

Finally, we should acknowledge that our discussion up to this point merely reaffirms insights that many vertical and horizontal epistemologists have already articulated in various ways. We have simply grounded certain epistemological insights from both traditions in a set of premises found in the Bahá'í writings, and have also provided simple conceptual vocabulary that will make it easier for us to discuss and expand these insights as we take further steps down the path of reconciling truth and relativism.

Summary. To summarize the main insights we have covered so far, we have pointed out that many phenomena are complex and multifaceted, and that human comprehension is limited and divergent in relation to such phenomena. We have noted that human conceptions of a given phenomenon can vary because human thought tends to be paradigmatically conditioned. We have defined a *paradigm* as a cognitive lens, or a perceptual framework, that influences the process of *aspect selection* (that is, which aspects of a phenomenon we notice) as well as the process of *aspect interpretation* (that is, how we understand, explain or make sense of those aspects, and indeed, how we categorize an aspect). Furthermore, we have suggested that these paradigmatically conditioned processes of aspect selection and aspect interpretation results in two forms of *aspect relativism* that we call *selective relativism* and *interpretative relativism*. Or stated another way, we have suggested that the relativity of truth claims regarding a given phenomenon can result from divergent processes of aspect selection and/or divergent processes of aspect interpretation.

THE DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REALITY AND PARADIGMS

Paradigm/Aspect Attunement. The next step down the path of reconciling foundationalist (vertical) and relativist (horizontal) conceptions of truth is to recognize that, although different paradigms may offer complementary insights into reality, this does not imply that all paradigmatic lenses yield equally valid insights regarding a specific phenomenon, or, by extension, that all truth claims are equally valid, as some horizontalists assert. It merely implies that any given paradigmatic lens has the potential to yield valid insights about reality. There are two closely related reasons for this qualification.

First, we believe that some paradigms are more (or less) well-attuned to specific phenomenal aspects than other paradigms are to those same aspects. This is the reason, presumably, that if we have a broken femur, we would turn to an orthopedic surgeon rather than a political economist who studies health care industries; yet if we want to reform our health care industries through public policy measures, we might do well to turn to a political economist for insight and advice. Both paradigms represented by these two individuals, we assume, are (more or less) attuned to different aspects of health care delivery.

Second, we believe that any given paradigm may be more (or less) attuned to one or more specific aspects of a phenomenon than it is to other aspects of that same phenomenon. For instance, assume we are trying to understand and address the conditions that inhibit social and economic development among impoverished communities in a given region. If we examine this complex issue through the lens of feminist development theory, we are likely to find strong empirical evidence that the education and empowerment of females is one of the greatest single determining factors in the social and economic advancement of an entire community. However, feminist development theory may reveal less about other specific aspects of community development that may also require attention, such as technical challenges that may be related to water purification needs in the region, or ecological constraints that may apply to specific agricultural practices in the region. To better understand and address those aspects, we might benefit from turning to other paradigmatic lenses.

In all of the cases described above, we refer to this relationship between a paradigm and a phenomenal aspect as the relative *attunement* between the two. Attunement, as we define the term, refers to the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigm (or specific paradigmatic insight) and a specific phenomenal aspect. For instance, the Ptolemaic paradigm of a geocentric solar system appears to have less attunement to orbital relationships within our solar system than the Copernican paradigm of a heliocentric solar system. As a result of the relative attunement between different paradigms and different phenomenal aspects, some paradigmatic truth claims appear to represent certain features of reality more accurately than do other paradigmatic truth claims.

Reality as Both Enabling and Constraining the Social Construction of Knowledge. Verticalists, of course, will have no problem with the concept of attunement. Horizontalists, however, will find the concept highly problematic. Even horizontalists who acknowledge the possibility of a foundational reality (that is, many social constructionists) tend to dismiss its relevance on the grounds that the human mind does not have access to it. In other words, horizontalists assume that our paradigms can never become attuned with any aspects of phenomena in the sense that they in any way reflect some underlying reality. However, in our view, by making this sweeping assumption horizontalists fail to take seriously the dynamic relationship between foundational reality and the social construction of truth. Our next step down the path of reconciling foundationalist and relativist approaches to truth will therefore be to explore this dynamic relationship.

For reasons that we will elaborate below, we believe that foundational reality imposes constraints on the extent to which it can be socially constructed. In other words, reality sets conditions on the degree to which our truth claims about it can lack correspondence with the way it actually is. Feyerabend provides a clue to understanding why this is so when he says that scientists “are sculptors of reality” (269). Taking this analogy further, we suggest that sculptors need materials with which to work, otherwise they cannot sculpt; those materials must retain properties, otherwise they

would not be materials; those properties must involve conditions, otherwise they would not be properties; those conditions must impose demands, otherwise they would not be conditions; and those demands must constrain, otherwise they would not be demands. Hence, the social construction of truth, like sculpting, is conditioned by the “stuff” with which it works. As Longino explains, “there is ‘something out there’ that imposes limits on what we can say about it” (222).

The sculpting analogy also suggests that because reality constrains, it enables our ability to socially construct it as well. One cannot sculpt unless there is something, with properties and thus constraints, to sculpt. Social construction is impossible in the absence of at least some trace of reality that imposes demands on it. *Reality-as-enabling* and *reality-as-constraining* are thus two sides of the same coin. Moreover, the enabling and constraining nature of reality affirms that it is foundational. It may be, for instance, that some cultural groups categorize a certain combination of light-wave frequencies as the distinct color “green,” while others categorize it simply as a “shade of blue.” However, this combination of light-wave frequencies is less likely to be categorized as a variation of red, and it is even less likely to be categorized as a shape (a triangle?).

The fact that light-wave frequencies permit us to socially construct categories of color from them demonstrates the enabling nature of reality, while the fact that we are unlikely to categorize some colors as others (that is, yellow as blue—although color blindness might lead to this), and even less likely to categorize any color as a shape, demonstrates constraint. As another example, consider the physical death of human beings. The foundational nature of this process has enabled different cultural groups to imbue it with a range of interpretations: the end of life, the beginning of an afterlife, the beginning of a next phase of reincarnation, and so forth. Yet the foundational reality of death simultaneously places some constraints on its interpretation. It is not easy, for instance, to socially construct death as a mere color (green?) or a mere shape (a triangle?), nor can its existence rationally be denied, since everyone has to grapple with it.⁹

Contrary to Rorty, therefore, we conclude that the social construction of

truth cannot enable us to “cope” with the world unless it is in some (direct or indirect) way anchored to a foundational reality. Returning to the sculptor metaphor: the only reason a sculptor can effectively chisel a piece of marble is because the sculptor is addressing, upon impact, some aspect of “the way marble is”—such as the way it breaks. Using a chisel effectively to chip away marble requires some attunement on the part of the sculptor with this quality of the marble. Thus the sculptor does not mistake “the way marble is” with “the way water is” in the process of sculpting. Moreover, why is it that sculptors have, over time, been able to make better chisels (that is, develop better instruments for coping)? Is it not because, upon repeated encounters with marble, some sculptors have become increasingly attuned to certain qualities of the marble and the way it responds to the chisel? Coping entails working within constraints, which entails the possibility of ever-increasing attunement with those constraints, and thus with some aspects of the way things are. However, as the discussion that follows will make clear, some aspects are more enabling than others, resulting in some truth claims being more socially constructed than other truth claims (that is, in the interpretations of some phenomenal aspects corresponding less directly with those aspects than the interpretations of other aspects).

Summary. Before exploring this theme it will help once again to summarize the main insights from the last two sections of our discussion. We have noted in these sections that, although different paradigms may offer complementary insights into reality, this does not imply that all paradigmatic lenses yield equally valid insights regarding a specific phenomenon, or, by extension, that all truth claims are equally valid. It merely implies that any given paradigmatic lens has the potential to yield valid insights about reality. In this regard, some paradigms are more (or less) well-attuned to specific phenomenal aspects than other paradigms are to those same aspects; in addition, any given paradigm may be more (or less) attuned to one or more specific aspects of a phenomenon than it is to other aspects of that same phenomenon. We refer to this relationship between a paradigm and a phenomenal aspect as the relative *attunement* between the

two. Attunement, as we define the term, refers to the goodness-of-fit between a specific paradigmatic interpretation and a specific phenomenal aspect (or aspects). After articulating the concept of attunement, we then began to explore the dynamic relationship between foundational reality and the social construction of truth. In this regard, we noted that foundational reality both enables and constrains the extent to which given phenomenal aspects can be socially constructed—as illustrated by the sculpting analogy.

ASPECT TANGIBILITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Aspect Tangibility. Some phenomenal aspects are more constraining of social construction than others due to a property we call *aspect tangibility*. *Tangibility*, as we are using the term, refers to the degree to which a given phenomenal aspect (a) will be noticed by different paradigmatic lenses and (b) will be interpreted similarly by the different paradigmatic lenses that notice it. In other words, *tangibility* is like an anchor that increases, in proportion to its weight, (a) the possibility that an aspect will be noticed, or selected, by different paradigms (thus reducing selective relativism); and (b) the likelihood that a given aspect will be interpreted in a consistent way by different paradigms (thus reducing interpretive relativism).

The concept of tangibility can be illustrated with the following contrasting examples. On the one hand, the physical pain from a broken bone or a toothache has relatively high tangibility. Such pain is almost impossible not to notice (it exerts highly indiscriminate selective pull across paradigms), and it constrains the degree to which it can be socially constructed by different paradigmatic lenses (it exerts relatively high interpretive constraint). Few people, for instance, would interpret such pain as pleasure, or as a normal state of affairs requiring no attention. On the other hand, the physical attribute of skin color is less tangible than a broken bone or a toothache. Though some people pay little attention to it, everyone with functioning vision can physically see it (like a toothache, it exerts relatively indiscriminate selective pull). Yet skin color is prone to a wide range of interpretations as evidenced by the many ways we have

been paradigmatically conditioned to think about it (it offers low interpretive constraint).

Another illustration of tangibility, which Bahá'ís will be familiar with, pertains to the relative tangibility of different revealed statements. As the Universal House of Justice has explained, "Some sayings of the Manifestation are clear and obvious. Among these are laws of behaviour. Others are elucidations which lead men from their present level of understanding to a new one. Others are pregnant allusions, the significance of which only becomes apparent as the knowledge and understanding of the reader grow" (*Messages* 547). While Bahá'ís accept all revealed statements as truth, our ability to comprehend any given statement (and thus the aspect[s] of reality that the statement refers to) depends on the tangibility of the statement and/or the relative attunement between the statement and the paradigmatic lens through which it is read. In this regard, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, as the authoritative interpreters of the revealed Word, assist us in this process of attunement. Without their help, we would tend to arrive at very divergent (or highly socially constructed) individual interpretations (or truth claims) about the meaning of the less tangible aspects (e.g., the pregnant allusions) of the Revelation.

The Relativity of Social Construction. The concept of tangibility therefore helps us to understand how truth claims regarding some phenomenal aspects tend to be more socially constructed than truth claims regarding other phenomenal aspects. In other words, the social construction of an aspect is directly related to the degree of tangibility of the aspect (assuming we ignore the possibility of an authoritative interpretation, as discussed in the preceding paragraph).

With this in mind, it would be easy to assume that the likelihood for social construction simply increases as tangibility decreases, in a simple, inverse, linear relationship. Upon closer inspection, however, it appears that this is not in fact the case. Instead, we suggest that the highest degrees of aspect tangibility and the highest degrees of aspect intangibility both constrain the social construction of truth. There appear to be two reasons for this. First, highly tangible phenomena have such strong

interpretive constraint that they leave relatively little latitude for social construction, as illustrated by the examples of the broken bone and the toothache. Second, highly intangible phenomena provide very little to work with, a situation which also constrains the process of social construction. For instance, many of the ephemeral images and feelings that flash through our dreams when we sleep are unlikely candidates to construct viable truths from because most of these images and feelings are so intangible they hardly register in consciousness. In this case, any grounding in the foundational is tenuous, thus providing little of substance to construct.

To grasp the relationship between tangibility and social construction more fully, a simple analogy is again helpful. Consider a sculptor desiring to work with clay. On one occasion, the sculptor comes across a piece of hardened clay that has already been through the kiln. Its hardness—or its complete tangibility—prevents the sculptor from molding it (that is, socially constructing it). On another occasion, the sculptor comes across a bucket of water containing scraps of mostly dissolved clay. This time its liquidity or lack of constraint—its complete intangibility—also prevents the sculptor from molding it. On a third occasion, the sculptor finds a supply of pliant, supple clay. This time its supple plasticity—or its semi-tangibility—allows the sculptor to mold it in creative ways (reflecting his or her paradigmatic expectations and skills).

Thus, the maximum potential for social construction appears to occur somewhere midway between the two extremes of strong tangibility and strong intangibility, with phenomenal aspects that we call *semi-tangible*. *Semi-tangibility* refers to that level of tangibility at which moderate to strong selective pull combines with minimal interpretive constraint. Given that the highest degrees of tangibility and intangibility both constrain the social construction of truth, and that the maximum potential for social construction occurs somewhere midway between the two extremes, there appears to be a bell-shaped relationship between aspect tangibility and the potential for social construction, as illustrated in Figure 2, below. This bell-shaped relationship illustrates two distinct but related points. First, the more semi-tangible any given phenomenal

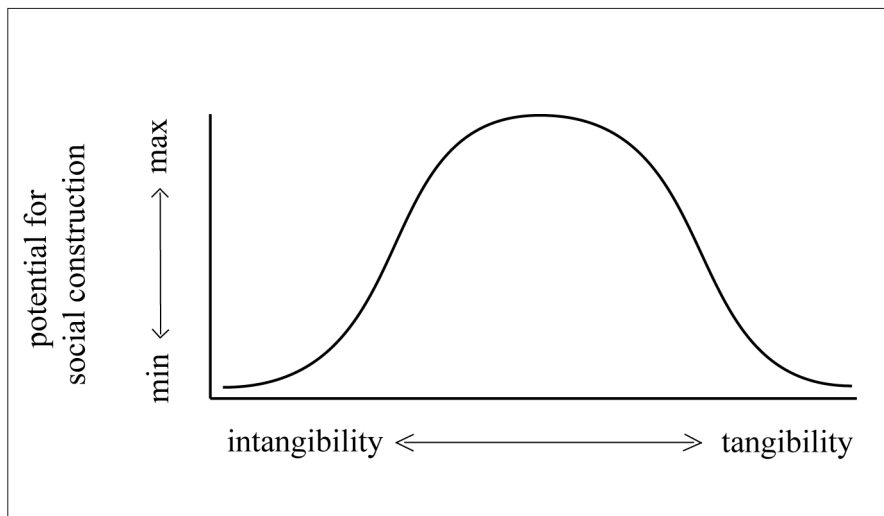


Figure 2. Relationship between the tangibility of a phenomenal aspect and the potential degree to which the truth of that aspect can be socially constructed.

aspect is, the more prone it is to (or, the more it enables) social construction according to the interpretive logic of any given paradigm. From this it follows that truth claims regarding some aspects can be more socially constructed than truth claims regarding other aspects, notwithstanding the paradigm being employed. Second, and consequently, the more semi-tangible any given phenomenal aspect is, the more prone it is to being socially constructed in divergent ways by people employing diverse paradigms. This is a result of the aspect's tendency to be (a) selected by diverse paradigms and (b) socially constructed in accordance with the interpretative logics of those diverse paradigms. Thus the degree of diversity among paradigmatic constructions of any given phenomenal aspect is a function of the degree to which that aspect is semi-tangible. In other words, the relativity among the various social constructions of truth regarding a given phenomenal aspect is, itself, relative to the degree to which the phenomenal aspect is semi-tangible. We refer to this as the relativity of relativity.

The relativity of relativity can be understood by extending the clay

metaphor outlined above using three distinct scenarios. First, imagine a diverse group of potters with different training, assumptions, and techniques (that is, paradigms) who are each given a round piece of clay that has already been fired in a kiln. Despite the diverse paradigmatic expectations each of the potters bring to his or her craft, none of the potters are able to mold this clay because its extreme hardness, or tangibility, is too constraining to work with. Second, imagine the same potters are each given a piece of equally pliable clay. They now create diverse ceramic objects because the clay's pliancy, or semi-tangibility, enables them to mold the clay in different ways in accordance with their divergent expectations and skills. Third, imagine the same potters are given bowls of water containing largely dissolved scraps of clay. None of the potters create anything from this clay because its liquidity, or intangibility, prevents them from working with it at all, regardless of the different training, assumptions, and techniques (that is, paradigms) they bring to it.

As these three scenarios demonstrate, the diversity of constructions the potters produce is a function of the degree of semi-tangibility of the clay.¹⁰ Or stated another way, the relativity among the various constructions is, itself, relative to the degree to which the clay (that is, the phenomenal aspect) is semi-tangible. Hence the relativity of relativity.¹¹

Summary. Given the density of this discussion, and the highly abstract nature of these insights, it will again help to summarize some of our recent points before moving on. In building our argument regarding the relativity of relativity, we suggested that some phenomenal aspects are more constraining than others due to a property we call *aspect tangibility*. *Tangibility*, as we are using the term, refers to the degree to which a given phenomenal aspect (a) will be noticed by different paradigmatic lenses and (b) will be interpreted similarly by the different paradigmatic lenses that notice it. At this point we stated that tangibility thus acts like an anchor that, in proportion to its weight, reduces selective relativism and interpretive relativism. This insight enables us to recognize, in turn, why truth claims regarding some phenomenal aspects might be more socially constructed than truth claims regarding other phenomenal aspects. This

is because the social construction of an aspect is directly related to the tangibility of that aspect. However, we then went on to clarify our statement by arguing that the relationship between tangibility and social construction is not simply an inverse linear one, but is in fact curvilinear. That is, we suggested that high degrees of aspect tangibility and high degrees of aspect intangibility both constrain the social construction of truth. Thus the maximum potential for social construction appears to occur midway between the two extremes of strong tangibility and strong intangibility, with phenomenal aspects that we call *semi-tangible*. *Semi-tangibility* refers to that level of tangibility at which moderate to strong selective pull combines with minimal interpretive constraint. The more semi-tangible any given phenomenal aspect is, the more prone it is to (the more it enables) social construction according to the interpretive logic of any given paradigm. Furthermore, the more semi-tangible any given phenomenal aspect is, the more prone it is to being socially constructed in divergent ways by people employing diverse paradigms. The result is the relativity of relativity.

TYPES OF PARADIGM/ASPECT ATTUNEMENT.

Having explained how some truth claims can be more socially constructed than others, and why some truth claims tend to be socially constructed in more divergent ways than others, we return to our discussion of attunement. In particular, it is important to further probe and elaborate the ways that different paradigms potentially access and represent different aspects of reality. To discuss this relationship we offer a rudimentary schema that enables us to think about four different types of attunement: *general attunement*, *specified attunement*, *anomalous attunement*, and *fabricated attunement*, each of which is described briefly below.

General Attunement. As our discussion of tangibility indicated, some phenomenal aspects are noticed and understood basically (not necessarily completely) for what they are, across a wide variety of paradigmatic lenses (sometimes, perhaps, independently of any paradigmatic lenses).

Such phenomenal aspects radiate tangibility in a strong and indiscriminate manner. “Walls are solid, fire burns, knives cut”; these realities have what Benson and Stangroom call “brute clarity” (41)—or what we call *general aspect clarity*. Notwithstanding our diverse views of the world, we experience such realities quite directly, immediately, in a largely unmediated or transparent manner. They are almost universally manifest, cutting through nearly any paradigmatic fog.

Of course, there are probably no phenomenal aspects or qualities, no matter how tangible, that constrain epistemic interpretation completely. Moreover, some degree of *semiotic* interpretation can always occur, since diverse meanings can be attached to anything. For instance, a naturalist might come across a ten-ton granite boulder and consider it a thing of awe and beauty while a road builder might consider the same boulder a nuisance. This paper, however, is concerned with *epistemic* interpretations. In this regard, every rational person who comes across this boulder should agree that it is too heavy for a single human to pick up. The mass of the boulder, upon experience, constrains epistemic interpretations or truth claims to the contrary. Due to the extreme tangibility of phenomenal aspects such as the mass of the boulder, epistemic interpretation of such an aspect is constrained across paradigms, resulting in minimal epistemic construction and relativism. The result is *general attunement*. Likewise, most people would agree that the sun provides light that is essential to many forms of life. This is another example of general attunement.

Specified Attunement. Other phenomenal aspects appear to be less directly or experientially accessible to human comprehension and are therefore more dependent upon paradigmatically facilitated forms of knowing. Such phenomenal aspects offer the possibility of attunement with some paradigms more than with others—or they offer *specified aspect clarity*. In other words, a specific phenomenal aspect might be noticed and, over time, brought into relatively clear focus, only by a specific paradigm, because of the particular configuration of that paradigm. *Specified attunement* is thus an instance of positive feedback between an aspect and a paradigm. Upon initial investigation, the aspect partially confirms the paradigmatic

probes; the paradigm is in turn refined, through experience, according to demands asserted by the aspect; through further investigation this process continues, in a reiterative manner, resulting in ever-greater levels of specified attunement. Unlike general aspect clarity, therefore, the result is increasing levels of aspect clarity specific to a given paradigm. For instance, consider the study of health and healing. Biomedical sciences have clearly achieved a degree of specified aspect clarity with regard to some aspects of emergency health care. The methods of biomedical science work relatively well with certain conditions, suggesting some grounding in, and at least some specified attunement with, some aspects of reality that other paradigms may not be well attuned to. This is why most of us would turn to medical doctors, rather than sociologists who study the social construction of medicine, in an effort to cope with a brain aneurysm. Yet these social constructionists have arguably (and ironically) achieved a degree of specified aspect clarity regarding the social construction of some illnesses, such as the disease known as “female hysteria” in the nineteenth century and the way this social construct perpetuated gender inequalities.

Anomalous Attunement. Some phenomenal aspects are noticed only by some paradigmatic lenses, but those lenses may still be incapable of yielding valid knowledge about them. Such aspects can present fundamental challenges to a paradigm, appearing as anomalies that defy the paradigm’s internal logic or expectations. At the same time, this defiance of the paradigm’s logic is how such aspects come to be noticed. Anomalous attunement is thus an instance of negative feedback. As Kuhn explains, anomalies present a challenge or a crisis, and thus an opportunity for paradigmatic refinement—or paradigmatic revolution when the anomaly is (or anomalies are) sufficiently persistent and challenging. If such refinement or revolution is successful then the anomalous relationship can potentially become a relationship of specified attunement bringing about aspect clarity.¹²

Fabricated Attunement. On the other hand, if an anomaly presents itself to a given paradigm and the proponents of that paradigm are able to socially

construct an explanation for the anomaly according to the original logic of the paradigm or compatible auxiliary hypotheses/assumptions, the result is fabricated attunement—an invalid truth claim that reflects the relative absence of aspect clarity. For instance, when increasingly accurate methods were developed to measure the movement of celestial bodies across the night sky, and anomalies to the Ptolemaic/geocentric model of the solar system started to emerge, astronomers adhering to the Ptolemaic system attempted to explain away those anomalies by socially constructing elaborate concepts such as “epicycles” and “equant points” that served, for a time, as somewhat plausible explanations. As Kuhn explains, defenders of such a paradigm “will devise numerous articulations and *ad hoc* modifications of their theory in order to eliminate apparent conflict” (140). They will attempt to neutralize anomalies by forcing them to conform to paradigmatic expectations. Moreover, the less challenging the anomalies are to a specific paradigm, or the more semi-tangible they are (that is, amenable to social construction across paradigms), the more they will be conformed. Of course, this need not be an intentional process, but therein lies the problem. Proponents of fabrications generally do not recognize them as such. Rather, these proponents can simply be too attached to their own paradigmatic lenses, and therefore to the fabrications their lenses engender. Fabricated attunement is thus easily mistaken for specified attunement.

Summary. The schema outlined above thus provides additional insight into how some truth claims can be more socially constructed than other truth claims. In summary, *general attunement* results from strong tangibility and thus general (close to universal) aspect clarity. It is associated with phenomenal aspects that exert indiscriminate selective pull (that is, where most, if not all paradigms notice them) along with a high degree of constraint on epistemic interpretation. In cases of general attunement, the social construction of an aspect is limited and relatively homogenous across paradigms. *Specified attunement* is associated with phenomenal aspects that exert more discriminate selective pull across paradigms and strong interpretative constraint. When such aspects are viewed through

well-attuned paradigmatic lenses, the result is aspect clarity, which again limits social construction (by those specific paradigms). *Anomalous attunement*, if it results in successful paradigmatic change, can also lead to specified attunement, and hence minimal social construction. On the other hand, anomalous attunement can lead to *fabricated attunement*, which is associated either with (a) highly semi-tangible aspects that exert relatively indiscriminate selective pull along with minimal interpretive constraint, or with (b) specific paradigms that are poorly attuned to specific aspects. In either case, truth claims about those aspects will be highly socially constructed in paradigmatically determined ways. Moreover, in the case of the most semi-tangible aspects, the diversity among paradigmatic constructions is maximized, resulting in the greatest levels of relativity.

OVERVIEW

Together, the entire network of concepts articulated above helps explain why some truth claims are more socially constructed than other truth claims and, in turn, how the existence of foundational truths can be reconciled with the relativity and social construction of truths. First, the concepts of *selective relativism* and *interpretative relativism* assist us to understand that those aspects of reality we select as significant, and how we interpret them, are largely relative to the *paradigms* we employ. Second, the concept of *attunement* assists us to understand that the validity of a particular paradigmatic truth claim is relative to the goodness-of-fit between the paradigm that is employed and the *phenomenal aspect* that is examined. Third, the concepts of aspect *tangibility*, *semi-tangibility*, and *intangibility* assist us to understand that some phenomenal aspects are more (or less) likely to be noticed or selected through diverse paradigmatic lenses, and then are more (or less) likely to be interpreted or socially constructed in divergent ways through those diverse lenses. Fourth, the schema of *general attunement*, *specified attunement*, *anomalous attunement*, and *fabricated attunement* assists us to better understand

the processes by which any given paradigm can produce a range of social constructions. Specifically, where general attunement and specified attunement occur, aspect clarity results and the social construction of truth is consequently minimized. Alternatively, where fabricated attunement occurs, aspect clarity is negligible and the social construction of truth is consequently maximized.

This network of concepts, and the consultative epistemology it is associated with, thereby reconciles the perennial tension between vertical and horizontal epistemologies while providing a conceptual vocabulary that facilitates further inquiry that transcends these approaches. A consultative epistemology affirms the verticalist position that foundational truths exist, that some truth claims are more valid than others, and that some paradigms are better suited than others for the investigation of specific aspects of reality. A consultative epistemology also appreciates, in general, the horizontalist insight regarding the social construction of truths, and that, in addition to reasons of justice, it is also epistemologically beneficial to engage marginalized or subjugated paradigms to see what they can offer.

However, a consultative epistemology transcends vertical and horizontal approaches by affirming and explaining the relativity of the social construction of different aspects of reality. In the process, it also affirms the possibility that diverse paradigms can yield relatively valid and potentially complementary truths as a result of their potential to achieve specified aspect clarity regarding different aspects of reality. Finally, by affirming and explaining the relativity of the social construction of different aspects of reality, a consultative epistemology resolves the central paradox of horizontal epistemologies: the universal truth claim that all knowledge is socially constructed, and hence relative, and that universal truths therefore have no foundational basis. This paradox dissolves when one is able to explain how and why the relativity of truth is, itself, relative. All truths are, to some degree, socially constructed. Yet some truths are more socially constructed than other truths, including the truth claim that all truths are socially constructed.

CONSULTATIVE EPISTEMOLOGY: APPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The network of concepts articulated above, and the consultative epistemology it is associated with it, have practical applications within all domains of human inquiry, deliberation, and collective decision making: from the generation of knowledge through dynamics of systematic learning to processes of community deliberation, institutional decision making, and public policy formulation. This network of concepts, at a minimum, suggests the need for profound humility regarding our presumed knowledge regarding diverse aspects of reality; selfless detachment from our own paradigmatically conditioned views; and moderation in the ways we set forth our views. These concepts also highlight the need to sincerely value and solicit diverse paradigmatic perspectives in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena through inter-paradigmatic collaboration. In this regard, these concepts remind us that “true consultation is spiritual conference in the attitude and atmosphere of love” (*Promulgation* 72). These concepts also reinforce the imperative of developing more integrative approaches to the acquisition and generation of knowledge, as prescribed by the Universal House of Justice (20 July 1997). In the absence of integrative approaches to knowledge pursued in a mode of spiritual conference, egoistic attachment to specific paradigms tends to result in the fragmentation of knowledge; in the perpetuation of unfounded, misguided, and problematic social constructions; and in the generation of unnecessary conflicts, as diverse paradigmatic insights are assumed to be inherently incommensurable, conflictual, and irreconcilable rather than potentially complementary.

There is much work remaining to be done in the elaboration of a consultative epistemology and the development or refinement of its practical applications. Drawing upon the principles of consultation outlined in the Bahá'í Writings, next steps may include the development of more effective methodologies for inter-paradigmatic collaboration, by which proponents of different paradigmatic perspectives can, with humility and detachment, better learn how to probe and sift through their respective truth claims, assess the relative merits of these claims, retain and inte-

grate that which is relatively true to reality, and discard what is not. Other steps may include closer examination of the social, political, economic, and spiritual conditions that support such integrative methodologies, and that enable all participants to transcend or diffuse the dynamics of power that lead to the subjugation of relevant knowledge. Insights from a consultative epistemology might also be adapted for the purpose of shedding light on contemporary debates regarding cultural relativism, in order to provide a rational basis for distinguishing valuable and enriching forms of cultural diversity from harmful cultural practices that violate fundamental spiritual truths.

Finally, there is much work to be done correlating the conceptual insights articulated in this paper with the practical challenges that Lample addresses regarding learning, practice, and social transformation. Specifically, how can the conceptual insights developed in this paper be applied by an expanding and increasingly diverse global community as it strives to learn how “to translate what is written into reality”? How can these conceptual insights deepen our understanding of, and appreciation for, the systematic processes of consultation, action, and reflection that we are learning to apply in so many of our collective endeavors? One of these endeavors, of course, is our participation in the discourses of society—including our participation in prevailing discourses on epistemology.

NOTES

1. Refer, for example, to discussions in Bernstein; Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*; and Turner.

2. Semple’s “Knowledge and the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh,” which examines challenges associated with the pursuit of contemporary scholarship within the framework of the Bahá’í Covenant, and Khan’s “Some Aspects of Bahá’í Scholarship,” which outlines a series of basic concepts and principles that should guide Bahá’í scholarship, also touch indirectly on the field of epistemology, but they are not immediately relevant to the focus of this paper.

3. In contrast with *epistemology*, which is a branch of philosophy concerned

with how we can *know* reality, *ontology* is a branch of philosophy concerned with the *nature* of reality.

4. The so-called weak (including Mertonian) social constructionists represent an exception to this form of relativism. They include thinkers such as Searle (*Construction*) and Pinker (*The Blank Slate*) who draw a clear distinction between social and “brute” facts. Some of their thinking is integrated in subsequent sections of this paper.

5. William Gairdner, in *The Book of Absolutes: A Critique of Relativism and a Defense of Universals*, articulates a strong critique of this self-contradictory truth claim, while establishing a compelling argument for the existence of universal, foundational truths.

6. Kluge offers other compelling arguments in support of this premise, derived from the Bahá'í writings, in his “Bahá'í Ontology: An Initial Reconnaissance;” “Further Explorations in Bahá'í Ontology,” and “Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings.”

7. Although Kuhn used the term *paradigm* in a number of ways, we have adopted his broadest use of the term, which has taken off within the philosophy of science, where it has proven compatible with many horizontal epistemologies. The *paradigm*, in this sense, has similarities with Wittgenstein's *language games* and Foucault's *discourses*, as frameworks that influence human perception, understanding, and action.

8. It is important to point out that many paradigms share common underlying assumptions and other elements that can bring some level of coherence and mutual reinforcement across paradigms, thus making some paradigms more mutually compatible than others. For example, many of the dominant paradigms that are employed in Western liberal cultures to understand and organize key social institutions (e.g., political, legal, economic, and educational institutions) are informed by an underlying social contest schema that creates a level of mutual compatibility, and mutual reinforcement, across these paradigms. Refer to Karlberg for a discussion of this theme.

9. In emphasizing the impact of the foundational, Bryan S. Turner explains, “[I]t's obvious that people are born into different cultures in which processes of sexuality, ageing, death, and dying are already schematized, elaborated and

symbolized in cultural terms. But I want to say just two things. One is a lot of current theorizing entirely emphasizes classificatory processes, but classification of what?" (255). In other words, classification must invariably be tied to something foundational. As Turner goes on to explain in relationship to sex differences: "Conventional distinctions between male and female have been made very problematic by both anthropology and sociology. But even if sexuality is produced by classificatory systems, it still seems to me that male and female bodies are organically, physiologically, biochemically different phenomena. I know there are problems with classifying biological sex differences. Biological difference is socially produced by the endless reproduction of human beings, but the classificatory systems can be seen as reflections upon differences in natural phenomena" (256).

10. The diversity of social constructions is also a function of other factors, such as motivation, which is not addressed in the preceding analogy and is, in general, beyond the scope of this paper. Many horizontalists have already generated considerable insight into the role of motivation in processes of social construction. Reconciling their work more fully with the conceptual framework developed in this paper is a project that will need to be undertaken in the future. Along the same lines, humanity's response to the Revelation of God, notwithstanding how tangible it is, also warrants particular attention. As Bahá'u'lláh explains: "The Day-Star of certitude is shining resplendent but the people of the world are holding fast unto vain imaginings. The Ocean of divine knowledge hath risen high whilst the children of men are clinging to the hem of the foolish" (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 252).

11. It is important to acknowledge that many phenomena are constructed through paradigmatic interaction with different constellations of aspects that are themselves constructed to varying degrees and combined in complex ways. Again, elaborating these complex interactions is a project that is beyond the scope of this paper and will need to be undertaken in the future.

12. An example would be Einstein's general theory of relativity, which was able to explain the particular orbit of Mars, which could not be accommodated by Newtonian theory (see Chalmers 70).

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