

The Beauty of the Human Psyche: The Patterns of the Virtues

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Abstract

The human psyche, or soul, reflects the most beautiful forms of the universe: the human virtues, which are reflections of the attributes of God. It appears that virtues begin with God and in some mysterious way are cast upon the human soul, much as the sun casts its rays upon a mirror. Those divine attributes are then reflected from our soul into our mind and manifested as virtuous thoughts (virtuous cognitions) and spiritual emotions; then the mind interacts with the body, creating patterns of neural activity in our brain. Next, through an act of will, those neuronal patterns are transformed into actual behavior and thus into virtuous deeds. This creates a feedback loop in which those virtuous deeds then influence brain patterns, which then influence cognitions and emotions in the mind, and which then may interact with the soul, burnishing it to reflect more fully and purely God's attributes. This paper combines insights from science and the Bahá'í Writings to outline the "journey" of those virtues.

Resumé

La psyché humaine, ou l'âme, est le reflet des plus belles réalités de l'univers : les vertus humaines, qui elles mêmes reflètent les attributs de Dieu. Il semble que les vertus émanent de Dieu et se projettent, de façon mystérieuse, sur l'âme hu-

maine, à l'instar du soleil projetant ses rayons sur un miroir. Ces attributs divins se réfléchissent alors depuis notre âme jusqu'à notre esprit et s'expriment sous forme de pensées ou d'idées vertueuses et d'émotions spirituelles; l'esprit interagit alors avec le corps, entraînant une activité neurale dans le cerveau. Puis, par un acte de volonté, cette activité neurale se transforme en comportement concret et ainsi en actions vertueuses. Il s'ensuit une boucle de rétroaction par laquelle les actes vertueux influent sur le fonctionnement cérébral qui, à son tour influe sur les pensées et les émotions de l'esprit, lesquelles peuvent ensuite interagir avec l'âme, la purifiant pour qu'elle puisse refléter de façon plus ample et plus pure les attributs de Dieu. L'auteur s'appuie à la fois sur les percées de la science et sur les écrits bahá'ís pour décrire le cheminement de ces vertus.

Resumen

La psique humana, o el alma, refleja las formas más bellas del universo: las virtudes humanas las cuales son reflejos de los atributos de Dios. Aparenta ser que las virtudes comienzan con Dios y de alguna manera misteriosa son arrojadas sobre el alma humana, de manera similar al sol arrojando sus rayos sobre un espejo. Esos atributos divinos luego son reflejados en nuestra mente desde nuestra alma y se manifiestan como pensamientos virtuosos (cogniciones virtuosas) y emociones espirituales; entonces la mente interactúa con el cuerpo, creando patrones de actividad neural en nuestro cerebro. Luego, a través de un acto de voluntad, esos patrones neurales son transformados en comportamiento y así en acciones virtuosas. Esto crea un circuito de retroalimentación en la cual esas acciones virtuosas luego influen-

cian patrones del cerebro, los cuales luego influyen en las cogniciones y emociones de la mente, y las cuales luego pueden interactuar con el alma, puliéndolo para que refleje más completamente y puramente los atributos de Dios. Este ensayo combina ideas de la ciencia y los Escritos Bahá'ís para delinear el "trayecto" de estas virtudes.

Psychologists are confused about the essential nature of the human psyche; it has been called the "mind," or the "brain," or "behavior," or a combination of all three. However, for our purposes we will focus on the original Greek meaning of *psyche*, that is, the "human soul" or "spirit."

From a Bahá'í point of view, the psyche/soul¹ is the fundamental aspect of the human reality; it is non-physical and transcends the death of the human body. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the human soul is a "simple" entity because it is not a composition and is without constituent parts:

Therefore, it is evident that life is the expression of composition, and mortality, or death, is equivalent to decomposition. As the spirit of man is not composed of material elements, it is not subject to decomposition and, therefore, has no death. It is self-evident that the human spirit is simple, single and not composed in order that it may come to immortality. (*Promulgation 306*)

1 For the purpose of this paper I will use these terms interchangeably.

This simple entity has the power of reflecting, like a mirror, the names and attributes of God. Once reflected from the soul, these attributes of God are referred to as the human virtues. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

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

These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp. The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror. Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross. It is clear and evident that until a fire is kindled the lamp will never be ignited,

and unless the dross is blotted out from the face of the mirror it can never represent the image of the sun nor reflect its light and glory. (*Gleanings* 65–66)

Metaphorically, the spirit is like light emanating from the soul, refracting into the many beautiful colors we call “virtues,” the attributes of God as manifested in human actions. However, regarding the essential reality of the human being, Bahá’u’lláh observes that “the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel” (*Gleanings* 158–59). With this cautionary observation in mind, we will proceed with care, realizing that any effort we make to discuss the reality of the human soul will necessarily be inadequate and incomplete.

VIRTUES BEGIN WITH GOD
AND ARE REFLECTED BY THE SOUL

The Bahá’í Writings, as well as the sacred texts of several world religions, emphasize that the human soul is created in the image of God: “Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 3).

The Bahá’í Writings also emphasize that God is unknowable, thus implying

that the essence of the human soul is also unknowable. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has noted in *Some Answered Questions* that although we cannot know God’s essence, we can, to some degree, understand God through His attributes (254). This implies that to some degree, we can understand the nature of the human psyche/soul through the virtues reflected by it. As noted earlier, God “hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes [on the human reality] and made it a mirror of His own Self” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 65). Nonetheless, these attributes of God are only partially understood by human beings. Accordingly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality. And even this knowledge of His attributes extends only so far as human power and capacity permit, and remains wholly inadequate” (*Some Answered Questions* 254).

VIRTUES ARE REFLECTED
FROM SOUL TO BRAIN

The human psyche associates with the central nervous system (the brain/body) during our physical existence. It is in this sense that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains how the soul is not in the body yet is connected to the body. In *Some Answered Questions*, He refers to the “common faculty” as the intermediary between our outer senses (such as sight and hearing) and our spiritual powers (such as imagination and comprehension); perhaps it this same

common faculty that “transfers” the spiritual power of the virtues, reflected from the soul, into the brain (243).

The Bahá'í Writings also refer to the mind as being the intermediary between the soul and the body. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi reads: “we have three aspects of our humanness, so to speak, a body, a mind and an immortal identity—soul or spirit. We believe the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact on each other” (*Messages to the Antipodes* 241). Thus it may be that the attributes and virtues of God emanate from God to the mirror of the human soul and are then reflected from the soul to the brain via the mind and common faculty.

VIRTUES REFLECTED AS NEURONAL PATTERNS

Recently, brain researchers have been able to use functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study patterns of neuronal activity. There is emerging evidence of the specific neuronal patterns that represent such virtues as fairness, compassion, trustworthiness, and gratitude.

YOUR BRAIN ON FAIRNESS

Moll et al., in their fMRI exploration of the “human natural sense of fairness,” determined that a particular pattern of neural firing “in the orbital and medial sectors of the prefrontal

cortex and the superior temporal sulcus region, which are critical regions for social behavior and perception, play a central role in moral appraisals” (2730). Their research suggests that the “natural sense of fairness” with which humans are naturally endowed is called into action for the purpose of appraising moral situations, activating a particular pattern of brain regions (2730).

YOUR BRAIN ON GRATITUDE

Zahn et al. used fMRI to examine the neural correlates of the “social values” of pride, guilt, anger, and gratitude. They determined that the neural firing pattern associated with the virtue of gratitude involved the coactivation of three areas of the brain: the superior anterior temporal lobe, the mesolimbic region, and the basal forebrain (276). Moreover, they discovered that “differences in patterns of fronto-mesolimbic activity are associated with different subjective qualities of moral sentiments evoked by the same abstract conceptual content of social values in different contexts of action” (282). Their research showed that acting or seeing other people act in a way that is consistent with our values is tied to feelings of pride and gratitude that activate specific areas of the brain, while behaviors (either performed or observed) that run counter our social values are linked to a different neuronal pattern and to feelings of guilt or indignation.

YOUR BRAIN ON COMPASSION

Using fMRI, Mary Helen Immodino-Yang and her colleagues investigated the neural firing patterns associated with compassion for those suffering psychosocial or physical pain, and with admiration of virtue. They report, in regard to compassion, that “a previously undescribed pattern within the posteromedial cortices” as “an intriguing territory currently known for its involvement in... self-related/consciousness processes” (8021). They also found that the anterior insula showed a distinct pattern of firing shared by both admiration of virtue and compassion for psychosocial suffering.

YOUR BRAIN ON TRUSTWORTHINESS

Giulia Mattavelli and her colleagues used fMRI to investigate neural responses to trustworthiness in the amygdala and face-selective regions in the occipital and temporal lobes (2205). Their results indicated that the brain has a specific pattern of firing when determining whether someone’s face suggests that person is or is not trustworthy (2205).

SUMMARY OF NEURONAL PATTERNS

Brain science is in its infancy. At this point in time, we only have hints about the meanings of specific patterns of neuronal activity. However, there is emerging evidence, as reviewed

above, that each human virtue may be correlated with a specific and unique pattern of brain-region activation. Along the lines of John S. Hatcher’s early work,² I consider such neuronal patterns as physical manifestations of mystical essences (human virtues) that are communicated from the human psyche through the common faculty to the mind and then translated by the brain into behavior.

VIRTUES AT THE LEVEL OF EMOTIONS AND COGNITIONS

Do cognitions and emotions create neuronal patterns, or do neuronal patterns create cognitions and emotions? It is likely that causality is bidirectional and reciprocal, and perhaps simultaneous: neuronal patterns create thoughts and emotional feelings, and thoughts and emotional feelings create neuronal patterns. For example, as the virtue of justice wafts across our brain, coming from the soul and the common faculty, virtuous cognitions and spiritual emotions concerning fairness will be created in our mind and will also be represented as specific neuronal firing patterns in our brain. As mentioned in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, “the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact on each other” (*Antipodes* 241). Logically, then, we can infer from

² See, for instance, Hatcher’s 1977 essay “The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality” and his 1987 book *The Purpose of Physical Reality*.

this observation that the brain's function will influence the mind's cognitions and emotions, as well as the soul, and vice versa—the virtuous powers of the soul will influence the mind and the body.

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the human reality, may be meaningfully categorized into three aspects: 1) the physical or animal aspect, 2) the human or social aspect, and 3) the divine or spiritual aspect (although, of course, the human being may also be viewed as a single unified whole). When the spiritual entity (the soul) interacts with the physical entity (the body), the human mind is created. Julio Savi details 'Abdu'l-Bahá's comments in this regard:

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that in "man, there are deposited three realities . . . an outward or physical reality . . . a second or higher reality which is the intellectual reality . . . a third reality . . . that is the spiritual reality" [from *Star of the West*, vol. 7, 117–18]. So in man there is a threefold reality: a first reality, an expression of the world of creation, related to the senses, common both to men and animals, subject to nature; a second reality, an expression of the world of the Kingdom, which is conscious and spiritual; and lastly an intermediate reality, typical of man, halfway between the other two. This threefold human reality or nature may be viewed also as a threefold (animal, human and

spiritual) potentiality bestowed upon man. (86)

It seems likely that human thoughts and emotions are variously congruent with those three categories. For example, emotions may be primarily 1) physical or neurochemical (brain and nervous system based), 2) human or social (based on the mind), or 3) spiritual (based on the soul). The word "primarily" is important in the above sentence. Psychologist Albert Bandura's characterization of "reciprocal determinism" in *Social Foundations of Thought and Action* reminds us that all emotions and thoughts likely are influenced by physical, social, and spiritual forces but that particular emotional experiences are more heavily laden with one or another of those factors.³ In the following quotation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the phrase "natural emotions" to refer, I believe, either to emotions that are primarily physical or to those at the social/human level (intellectual) that have been corrupted by the body-based emotions (note that the phrase "spiritual susceptibilities" is a translation equivalent to "spiritual emotions"):

[Humanity] possesses two kinds of susceptibilities: *the natural emotions*, which are like dust upon the

3 An example of this might be calling physical happiness "pleasure" while referring to the gladness of the heart and mind as "happiness" and spiritual happiness as "joy." See Diessner, *Psyche*, Ch. 9).

mirror, and spiritual susceptibilities, which are merciful and heavenly characteristics.

There is a power which purifies the mirror from dust and transforms its reflection into intense brilliancy and radiance so that spiritual susceptibilities may chasten the hearts and heavenly bestowals sanctify them. What is the dust which obscures the mirror? It is attachment to the world, avarice, envy, love of luxury and comfort, haughtiness and self-desire; this is the dust which prevents reflection of the rays of the Sun of Reality in the mirror. *The natural emotions* are blameworthy and are like rust which deprives the heart of the bounties of God. But sincerity, justice, humility, severance, and love for the believers of God will purify the mirror and make it radiant with reflected rays from the Sun of Truth. (*Promulgation 244*; emphasis added)

Please note that in the above paragraph, emotions are divided into emotions of vice (the “natural emotions” such as attachment, avarice, envy, etc.), and good emotions or, basically, the virtues (sincerity, justice, humility, etc.). The vicious emotions appear to begin in our body/brain and then flow toward the mind, thereby corrupting it. This, in turn, adds dross to the mirror of our soul, whereas each virtue reflected from the mirror of our soul creates beautiful, noble thoughts and

spiritual emotions in the mind that are modeled in patterns of nerve cells firing in the brain.

THOUGHT AND COGNITION

In one of His talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is reported to have said:

The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. The thought force and the animal force are partners. Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings.

If a man’s thought is constantly aspiring towards heavenly subjects then does he become saintly; if on the other hand his thought does not soar, but is directed downwards to centre itself upon the things of this world, he grows more and more material until he arrives at a state little better than that of a mere animal.

Thoughts may be divided into two classes:

(1st) Thought that belongs to the world of thought alone.

(2nd) Thought that expresses itself in action.

Some men and women glory in their exalted thoughts, but if these thoughts never reach the plane of action they remain useless: the power of thought is dependent on its manifestation in deeds. (*Paris Talks 26*)

As a virtue is reflected from God through our soul and into the mind, beautiful, virtuous thoughts are created; and, as noted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such thoughts are the reality of what it means to be human. The above quotation also has two other important elements we will explore: 1) it mentions "aspiring" toward heavenly subjects, which I believe means using the human will and intention to direct our thoughts toward the virtues reflected in our soul; and 2) the importance of manifesting virtuous thoughts in deeds. Transforming the power of thought into deeds may be achieved by creating virtuous neuronal patterns, which, through application of willpower, activate the muscles of the body to perform patterns of virtuous behaviors (good deeds).

THE ROLE OF THE HUMAN WILL AND BEHAVIOR: PATTERNS

The role of the human will (intention) is essential for developing a beautiful mind and for releasing the potentialities of the virtues into thought, emotion, and behavior. The human will (in terms of goodly intention) is, along with knowing and loving, one of the main spiritual powers of the human psyche ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 346–52; Danesh, *The Psychology of Spirituality* 63–73). An example of this power comes from another talk given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed

by a more powerful thought of love. Thoughts of war bring destruction to all harmony, well-being, restfulness and content. Thoughts of love are constructive of brotherhood, peace, friendship, and happiness" (*Paris Talks* 29). Foreshadowing cognitive behavior theory and therapy, 'Abdu'l-Bahá recommends that we use our will to direct our thoughts toward virtues (peace and love) and away from vices (war and hate).

To appreciate the importance of the reciprocal interaction of patterns of deeds/behavior and virtues of the soul, we need to take an excursion into the concept of "pattern." Aristotle referred to that which binds together the parts or constituents of an entity as its "essence," or "formal cause." Julius Moravcsik refers to the formal cause as Aristotle's "structural constituent" (9). The structure of an entity includes its shape, form, organization, or, as emphasized in this paper, its pattern. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, evoking Aristotelian concepts, referred to this concept of pattern or formal cause in Persian as *súrí*, which has been translated as "form" (*Some Answered Questions* 323). Each virtue may be thought of as a specific pattern. For example, the virtue of love has a different pattern and form than the virtue of justice. Love creates a particular pattern of thought and emotion, and a particular pattern of neuronal firing, and a particular pattern of behavior; and these patterns differ from the patterns representing the virtue of justice. Certain patterns of virtuous behavior open wide the

gates to divine assistance, drawing to the human psyche a further measure of God's attributes and perhaps further burnishing the mirror of the soul so that it reflects those attributes more purely. This is an example of a reciprocal feedback loop in which the body, by performing good deeds, has a positive effect on the soul, just as the soul is able to have a positive effect on the body if one chooses to allow the virtues from God to be reflected through the mind, cognitions, and emotions and into human behavior and good deeds.

PATTERNS OF THOUGHT, EMOTION,
AND BEHAVIOR THAT DRAW SPIRIT
TO THEM

In one of his talks, Peter Khan discusses at length how in the writings of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the attractive force of a magnet is often employed to describe the manner in which certain human actions attract spiritual empowerment:

certain actions we take attract in a mysterious way great spiritual powers to us. It is not something one can characterize very simply. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá use the analogy of the magnet to describe it. The analogy of the magnet is mentioned in several places by Bahá'u'lláh where He uses [a] word which is translated as "lodestone." [...]you arrange the little elements making up the magnet to conform to a certain

pattern, then that pattern attracts a mysterious power that we call the "force of magnetism." It is mysterious. You can't see it.

So in that sense, the force of magnetism is a mysterious means of representing the analogy to the development of our spiritual awareness. We are told that certain actions attract the spiritual power and these are actions called forth in our Writings. Acts of devotion, the obligatory prayers, the other revealed prayers, the process of fasting for nineteen days each year. Acts of immersing oneself in the Holy Writings. Acts such as sacrificially contributing to the fund, or paying one's Huququ'lláh, participation in one's community life, endeavors to teach the Faith. These and many other things are actions, which we are promised in our Writings will attract great spiritual powers. ("The Needs" 8)⁴

I believe that at a fundamental level, Dr. Khan is referring to how virtuous actions attract a greater measure of God's attributes. Each virtue, when it

4 Transcript of a talk by Dr. Peter Khan in Adelaide, Australia, in August 2002. I received it as a personal communication in an email (and thus accuracy is an open question). Dr. Khan made similar statements in his talk on mental tests in Sydney in September 1995, and that talk may be retrieved at <http://bahai-library.org/talks/mental.tests.html>.

is translated from a reflection in the mirror of the soul into a pattern of behavior, then acts as a magnet to attract more spiritual power; each time the neuronal activity of the brain creates the pattern associated with a virtue it also attracts spiritual power. This is both a linear and a cyclical process. Like a ray of God's sunshine, an attribute of God bounces off the mirror of our soul and goes through the mind, creating a neuronal pattern in our brain. This brain pattern can then be inscribed into our muscles by our will, establishing a pattern of behavior. Both of these patterns (in the brain and in behavior) in turn attract more spirit from God. It is linear in the sense that it moves from God (through God's grace, in the form of a virtue), to the human soul, to the mind, to the brain, and then to behavior; but it is also a cycle, for just as a cleaner mirror reflects a greater amount of sunshine, virtuous behavior attracts a greater degree of the virtues from God. Perhaps the virtuous behavior participates in a feedback loop to the soul, further purifying it so that it can even more potently reflect the attributes of God. This cycle should end in a virtuous ascent. However, if one willfully rejects the virtuous neuronal pattern because of weakness or vice, then a moral descent is equally possible. That is, while the neuronal pattern associated with virtue could light up one's brain, the human will could prevent that neuronal pattern from influencing actual human behavior due to fear, ignorance,

or attachment to the physical world.⁵

It appears that the inspiration for Dr. Khan's observations comes, at least in part, from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk recorded in section 52 of *Some Answered Questions*:

[T]he members, constituent parts, and composition that are found within man attract and act like a magnet for the spirit: The spirit is bound to appear in it. Thus, when a mirror is polished, it is bound to attract the rays of the sun, to be illumined, and to reflect splendid images. That is, when these physical elements are gathered and combined together, according to the natural order and with the utmost perfection, they become a magnet for the spirit, and the spirit will manifest itself therein with all its perfections. (232)

Several other statements by 'Abdu'l-Bahá involving a magnet metaphor emphasize how human behavior—especially in the form of service to humanity—influences the soul to mirror a greater portion of God's virtues. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that “[s]ervice is the magnet which attracts the heavenly strength. I hope thou wilt attain both” (*Tablets* 621) and that “[t]his service of the beloved of the kingdom of ABHA will be the means of great bounty, a magnet

⁵ See, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 29; *Promulgation* 244.

of strength and power attracting assistance and providence in the divine realm” (*Tablets* 664). Elsewhere He writes, “There is no doubt that thou art assiduously engaged in serving the Cause, giving eloquent talks at the meetings of the friends, and elucidating divine mysteries. These exertions will cause the outpourings of His invisible assistance to descend, and, as a magnet, will attract divine bounties” (qtd. in *Compilation* 195–96). In a similar vein, Shoghi Effendi’s secretary writes on his behalf that “[s]ervice is the magnet which draws the divine confirmations” (*Compilation* 543). These remarks appear to emphasize that particular patterns of behavior, which are herein called “service,” influence the soul’s ability to reflect a fuller measure of God’s light, His bounties, and thus His qualities.

VIRTUES ARE PATTERNS
CHARACTERIZED BY
UNITY-IN-DIVERSITY

According to Aristotle, everything has both a material cause and a formal cause (as well as an efficient cause and a final cause). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá illustrates this principle using the example of a chair: the chair is made of various elements (material), and when those elements are brought together in the form (pattern) of a chair, then a chair exists (*Some Answered Questions* 323). The chair is a “unity” of “diverse” elements. I suggest that the same logic applies to virtues, each of them representing a unity of diverse elements.

For example, the virtue of compassion becomes manifest in human behavior when the reflection of God’s own compassion manifests itself through our soul to our mind, unifies the compassionate thoughts and the spiritual emotion of compassion at the level of mind, unifies this with the diverse neuronal pattern in the brain representing compassion, and then unifies that neuronal pattern with the actual physical response that constitutes the good deed of compassionate action. All virtues follow this pattern: a unity of diverse neuronal elements and behavioral elements are unified with virtuous thoughts and emotions, which are in turn unified with the reflective outpouring of the soul.

To conclude this paper, we shall take a tour of one of the most interesting and important moral emotions currently under study by social psychologists. It is highly relevant to the theme of this paper because it is an emotion that arises in the mind and heart whenever a human being notices the beautiful virtues manifested in action by another.

THE MORAL EMOTION OF ELEVATION

In his chapter in the *Handbook of Affective Sciences*, Jonathan Haidt identifies four families of moral emotions: “the other-condemning family (contempt, anger, and disgust), the self-conscious family (shame, embarrassment, and guilt), the other-suffering family (compassion), and the other-praising family (gratitude and elevation)” (852).

I have focused on the positive moral emotions in this paper, already having mentioned compassion and gratitude. However, one of the most interesting and important moral emotions is elevation. Elevation's eliciting condition is the observance of moral beauty—that is to say, one must experience an occurrence of moral beauty, either consciously or unconsciously, in order to feel the emotion of elevation. Moral beauty shines forth from every attribute of God and from every expression of human virtue. Any time we witness another human being expressing a virtue and are emotionally moved by it, we begin experiencing the emotion of elevation.

Every emotion has eliciting conditions, and every emotion creates what are called “action tendencies.” For instance, the action tendency of anger is to strike out verbally or physically, to attack—or, in the best of circumstances, to seek redress. The action tendency of sadness is to weep, or to hold still and be lethargic. The action tendencies for the moral emotion of elevation are as follows: 1) to strive to become a better person, to emulate the actions of the person whose moral beauty one has just witnessed; and 2) the desire to serve others, to help them, to fulfill their needs.

Psychologists have experimentally induced elevation in research participants and shown that it causes prosocial/altruistic behavior. Recent experimental research demonstrates that elevation affects distinct types of prosocial behaviors compared to other

moral emotions, specifically increasing donation behavior (Van de Vyver and Abrams). Elevation increases people's willingness to volunteer to help others (Schnall and Roper; Schnall, Roper, and Fessler) and to increase charitable donation behavior (Aquino et al.; Siegel et al.; Thomson and Siegel). Under the influence of elevation, subjects improve their attitudes toward mentoring and often desire to become a better mentor (Thomson, Nakamura, Siegel, and Csikszentmihalyi). Elevation reduces the negative effect of social dominance orientation, making Whites more likely to donate to a Black-oriented charity (Freeman et al.), and decreases implicit and explicit sexual prejudices against gay men (Lai et al.). It increases sensitivity to moral dilemmas (Strohlinger et al.) and increases cooperative behavior (Pohling et al.). In another study, experimentally-induced elevation boosted spirituality, especially in non-religious participants, by altering basic world assumptions, increasing belief in the meaningfulness of life and the benevolence of others (Van Cappellen et al.). Correlational research found that self-reported elevation in college students reliably predicted their participation in volunteer activities three months later (Cox). Further, self-reported elevation was related to self-reported altruistic behavior (Landis et al.). It has also been experimentally shown that those who are more susceptible to noticing moral beauty are more likely to experience elevation (Diessner et al.).

YOUR BRAIN ON ELEVATION

Using fMRI, Takahashi et al. found that the experience of admiring morally beautiful actions “was associated with activation in the orbitofrontal cortex [OFC],” and Wang et al. also found the OFC implicated in perceptions of moral beauty (Takahashi et al. 1886; Wang et al.). Besides the OFC, the other major location of brain activity when noticing the moral beauty of others is the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), and studies have repeatedly found this region to be activated during elevation (Englander; Piper et al.). It would appear that the brain has a distinct pattern of neural firing that mirrors the experience of noticing the virtues in others, desiring to emulate that virtuous behavior, and then serving the needs of others.

BI-DIRECTIONAL INTERACTION BETWEEN VIRTUOUS BEHAVIOR AND THE VIRTUES OF THE SOUL

As emphasized in this paper, the influence of God’s attributes is directed from God to the soul, to the mind, to the brain, and finally is reflected in behavior. The influence of the virtues may also flow from behavior, to the brain, then to the mind, and then possibly to the soul to further cleanse the mirror of the soul and better reflect God’s light.

As mentioned in the Bahá’í Writings, “the mind forms a link between the soul and the body, and the two interact on each other” (Shoghi Effendi,

Antipodes 241). This seems to imply that not only does the soul reflecting a virtue to the body through the mind affect the human brain (body), but that the brain, through the body taking virtuous action, influences the mind, which in turn interacts with and influences the soul. This notion is further emphasized in the earlier quotations from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in which He notes that service to others (a behavior) is a magnet that draws spiritual forces toward the human. This may mean that service, through the feedback loop from action to brain to mind to soul, burnishes the mirror of the soul in such a manner that enables the soul to reflect a fuller and purer measure of God’s attributes.

On the other hand, Bahá’u’lláh states:

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. Consider the light of the lamp. Though an external object may interfere with its radiance, the light itself continueth to shine with undiminished power. In like manner, every malady afflicting the body of man is an impediment that preventeth the soul from manifesting its inherent might and power. (*Gleanings* 153)

This passage from Bahá'u'lláh indicates, in regard to infirmities, that neither the body/brain, nor the mind, influences the soul. Yet perhaps good deeds, done with pure intention in service to humanity, can influence the development of the soul. As Bahá'u'lláh comments, "We verily behold your actions. If We perceive from them the sweet smelling savor of purity and holiness, We will most certainly bless you" (*Gleanings* 307). Receiving God's bounties and reflecting them through one's soul must be one of the best blessings. Bahá'u'lláh wrote, "We exhort the loved ones of God to perform good deeds that perchance they may be graciously assisted" (*Tablets* 131). It seems that one of the greatest forms of assistance that God offers us is a fuller measure of His attributes, shining through the mirror of our soul. A human "reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 115). Perhaps perfection for a human is to mirror forth the attributes of God as purely as is possible. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "Praised be God, ye two have demonstrated the truth of your words by your deeds, and have won the confirmations of the Lord God" (*Selections* 139). It seems likely that one of the most beautiful confirmations from God is for His Grace to bestow a purity upon our soul that allows an ever greater reflection of His virtues.

However, I do not mean to imply that by our good deeds we *cause* God to grant us greater virtues. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes:

man's stillness or motion itself is conditioned upon the aid of God. Should this assistance fail to reach him, he can do neither good nor evil. But when the assistance of the all-bounteous Lord confers existence upon man, he is capable of both good and evil. And that assistance be cut off, he would become absolutely powerless. That is why the aid and assistance of God are mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures. This condition can be likened to that of a ship that moves by the power of wind or steam. Should this power be cut off, the ship would become entirely unable to move. Nevertheless, in whatever direction the rudder is turned, the power of the steam propels the ship in that direction. If the rudder is turned to the east, the ship moves eastward, and if it is directed to the west, the ship moves west. This motion does not arise from the ship itself, but from the wind or steam

Our meaning is that the choice of good and evil belongs to man, but that under all circumstances he is dependent upon the life-sustaining assistance of Divine Providence. The sovereignty of God is great indeed, and all are held captive in the grasp of His Power. The servant can do nothing by his own will alone: God is almighty and all-powerful and bestows His assistance upon all creation. (*Some Answered Questions* 288–90)

CAVEATS AND LIMITATIONS

As I noted earlier, God is essentially unknowable, and, as we were created in God's image, our psyche/soul is essentially unknowable. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have emphasized that the best we can do is know God by His attributes, by the divine qualities. By implication, the best way to know the human soul is through its virtues, the divine attributes that God has radiated "into" our souls. However, "even this knowledge of His attributes extends only so far as human power and capacity permit, and remains wholly inadequate" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 254). Following this logic, then, even our best understanding of the virtues of the human soul will remain inadequate.

This problem of understanding the virtues is longstanding. Plato wrestled with it his entire life, in the context of trying to explicate his theory of forms, against the background of his arguing there is only one God. In my attempt in this paper to reify virtues, or give them an ontological reality, I face the same problems that Plato noted concerning the forms (which are analogous to virtues in many ways):⁶

"[T]hese forms are as it were patterns fixed in the nature of things. The other things are made in their image and are likenesses, and this participation they come

6 I wish to thank Steven Phelps for reminding me of these Platonic issues.

to have in the forms is nothing but their being made in their image." "Well," Parmenides says, "if a thing is made in the image of the form, can that form fail to be like the image of it, in so far as the image was made in its likeness? If a thing is like, must it not be like something that is like it?" "It must," says Socrates. "Will not," Parmenides says, "that in which the like things share, so as to be alike, be just the form itself that you spoke of?" "Certainly," Socrates replies. "If so," Parmenides concludes, "nothing can be like the form, nor can the form be like anything. Otherwise a second form will always make its appearance over and above the first form, and if that second form is like anything, yet a third. And there will be no end to this emergence of fresh forms, if the form is to be like the thing that partakes of it. (*Plato* 930)

I know of no way out of this problem, but it is a cautionary tale as to the limitations of human reason in understanding the divine virtues as reflected in the human reality.

THE UNLIT CANDLE

In the first passage quoted from Bahá'u'lláh in this paper, He uses a light metaphor to depict how God casts His radiance upon the human soul. He then moves to a candle/lamp metaphor to describe the human soul:

Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. . . . These energies with which the Day Star of Divine bounty and Source of heavenly guidance hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp. . . . Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it ever be possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross. It is clear and evident that until a fire is kindled the lamp will never be ignited, and unless the dross is blotted out from the face of the mirror it can never represent the image of the sun nor reflect its light and glory. (*Gleanings* 65–66)

This passage is reminiscent of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s previously mentioned use of the ship metaphor. If we regard the human being as a sailing vessel, then the wind that provides the power to set the ship in motion may be likened to the Holy Spirit or the grace of God. Therefore, while we are utterly dependent on God for our existence, we do have the power of choice in determining which direction we move, even as the rudder steers the boat.

TO CONCLUDE

The human psyche is the most beautiful creation in all the worlds of God because it was created in the image of God. It has the amazing ability to reflect and manifest the most beautiful elements of the universe—the human virtues, which are reflections of the attributes of God. The potentialities of these virtues become manifest as patterns of virtuous cognitions, patterns of spiritual emotion, patterns of neural activity, and patterns of behavior. Patterns may be thought of as designs, structures, essential causes, forms, and, above all, unities-in-diversity. A manifest virtue is a unity of diverse elements: mysterious spiritual potentialities of the soul, virtuous cognitions, spiritual/moral emotions, neural firings, and good deeds/behavior.

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